**Key Messages**

**Key Message:** Our federal agencies, tribal, state and local partners stand together, ready to respond to wildfire during the 2021 fire year. We are adjusting how we fight fire in response to the ongoing pandemic and as vaccines become more widely available as part of our commitment to protect the American people and our lands.

Talking Points:

* USDA Forest Service wildland firefighters are incredibly proficient in emergency response and work in close coordination with other federal, state, local, and tribal partners.
* Wildland fire personnel are emergency responders are quickly able to adapt to changing situations, for which their training prepares them.
* We will continue our focus on rapid initial attack where we can be most successful in protecting life and property, while adequately assessing risk for responders. Our goal is fast containment to minimize the number of large fires during the year.
* We will respond to every wildfire with the safety of the public and our firefighters as our highest priority.
* Preventing the spread of COVID-19 is still one of our highest priorities among our first responders and communities we serve.
* 2020 Fire Year successful COVID-19 mitigation practices will serve as the base for our mitigation plans for 2021. These include social distancing among firefighters wherever possible, dispersing fire camps, issuing personal protective equipment such as masks and gloves, continuing to provide COVID-19 screening and testing of firefighters, and enhanced safety protocol’s in our logistical support contracts.
* With a focus on health and safety, preventing the spread of COVID-19 is still our number one priority among our first responders and communities we serve. The 2020 Fire Year provided many learning opportunities. We’ll continue to employ those successful practices in our firefighting plans for 2021.
* Our agencies are working together with our state, local and tribal partners to be ready to respond to wildfires wherever they occur.
* We are implementing plans to have a robust capacity of aviation assets including airtankers and helicopters available to support wildfire operations.

**Topic: FIRE YEAR OUTLOOK**

**Key Message:** Above normal fire activity is expected at the outset of the 2021 Fire Year for portions of the South and Southwestern US. This expected above normal fire activity is primarily due to drought conditions persisting in these areas of the country.

**Talking Points:**

* Oklahoma, Texas, and parts of the Southwest are forecast to have an active spring fire season and by May, much of the Southwest, Florida and portions of Southern Great Basin are likely to have above normal fire activity.
* Portions of the Rocky Mountains and southern Colorado may experience above normal fire activity through April and could have an early start to the core western fire season.
* Most of the country will remain out of high fire danger through May as wintry weather prevails, the exceptions being Southern California and the Northern Plains.

**Topic: APPROACH TO FIGHTING FIRE**

**Key Message:** The safety of the public, communities and all front-line responders remains our highest priority. The primary response strategy for 2021 will be to continue using local area resources from all partners to achieve rapid containment of fires when they are small, helping reduce the number of large wildfires.

Talking Points:

* Rapid wildfire responses, supported by available airtankers and helicopters, will be used wherever possible to contain wildfires quickly, minimizing the need to bring large numbers of firefighters together.
* For extended attack “campaign” fires, gathering and supporting large numbers of firefighters into compact fire camps will not be practical again this fire year.
* The way firefighters are mobilized and supported will continue to be different this year.
* Large fire camps will not be the norm. Most firefighting efforts will be in small, dispersed groups. Isolated camps will be utilized to provide our firefighters and the public better social distancing and safety from the spread of COVID-19.
* Wildland fire agencies had great success in transitioning to virtual support functions in 2020. We will continue this best practice and to identify new opportunities to better maintain social distancing and provide for firefighter health and safety.
* We remain focused on firefighter safety and wellbeing; ensuring the have the needed Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), and that they are prioritized for vaccines.
* The 2020 Fire Year provided many learning opportunities. We’ll continue to employ those successful practices in our firefighting plans for 2021 and many of these best practices will be incorporated into wildland firefighting into the future Examples of these practices include dispersing firefighters into smaller camps, utilizing incident resources through virtual platforms, increased emphasis on hygiene, and greater reliance on more efficient virtual mobilization and demobilization processes.
* A positive, unintended outcome of virtual support was firefighter health, as crews reported that due to these new virtual support practices, smaller fire camps, and shorter drive times, crews were much healthier and better rested throughout the 2020 fire season.
* We will work with our interagency partners to determine when and how to bring in resources from outside the local area when a fire escapes initial attack.
* Depending on a variety of factors including the probability of operational success, where resources are coming from, and COVID-19 activity in the area of the wildfire at the time, our mobilization strategies will look different across the country.

**Key Message:** The USDA Forest Service is committed to frequent communication with the public and will work with local communities to ensure their values and concerns are reflected in response plans and the management of fires in their area.

Talking Points:

* Agencies will continue to emphasize greater use of both traditional and social media, and -app-based technologies to provide consistent communication with the public on wildfire issues, as social distancing may limit in person communication.
* When large fires require firefighters to travel from outside of the local area, crews will be mobilized and supported in a manner that ensures social distancing and protection for local communities from the spread of COVID-19.
* We will continue to monitor the medical capacity of local communities before establishing a large presence in rural communities.
* We will work with community leaders and local law enforcement, ensuring that community needs are being met, and wildfire threats and capacity are clearly understood when planning firefighting strategies.

**Topic: AGENCY READINESS**

**Key Message:** The USDA Forest Service is working in close coordination with tribal, state and local partners and is ready to deploy wildland firefighting resources.

Talking Points:

* We are using all available tools to bring on additional capacity to help reduce wildland fire risk.
* Just as in any fire year, we are not in this alone. Responding to wildland fires is a partnership – across all levels of government.
* Aircraft contracts are being negotiated to ensure availability when needed most, and fire managers are focusing aircraft deployment to support rapid containment of fires.
* Similar to 2020 incident response strategies and tactics, we will have up to 18 exclusive use airtankers and up to 17 call-when-needed aircraft to boost our initial and extended attack capabilities. Additional airtankers will also be utilized through agreements with state governments.
* We also recently added four new water scoopers to our firefighting fleet.
* We continue to use virtual training platforms to ensure employees receive vital firefighting training. We are confident that our firefighters will receive all training necessary to respond to wildfires and emergencies safely and effectively.
* The wildland fire agencies will use the [*Infectious Disease Guidelines for Wildland Fire Incident Management Teams*](https://gcc02.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.nwcg.gov%2Fcommittees%2Femergency-medical-committee%2Finfectious-disease-guidance&data=04%7C01%7C%7C3431af1d97aa4aff9d8708d8c93cf8bc%7Ced5b36e701ee4ebc867ee03cfa0d4697%7C0%7C0%7C637480610988858482%7CUnknown%7CTWFpbGZsb3d8eyJWIjoiMC4wLjAwMDAiLCJQIjoiV2luMzIiLCJBTiI6Ik1haWwiLCJXVCI6Mn0%3D%7C1000&sdata=kCUrcKkzG5oM2dMdMsHRlEqrEfNHc9qLVbJixEb7h1w%3D&reserved=0)plan, developed by the National Wildfire Coordinating Group’s Emergency Medical Committee. This plan includes recommended guidelines to be followed by an Incident Management Team when confronted with a potential infectious disease outbreak during a wildland fire response.

**Key Message:** With wildfires, comes wildfire smoke. Fire managers understand the potential complications wildfire smoke may cause for COVID-19 patients and others with respiratory issues. We will work closely with communities to assist with forecasting and preparation for wildfire smoke.

Talking Points:

* We are concerned about the potential health impacts of smoke on both the public and our responders.
* The Interagency Wildland Fire Air Quality Response Program is developing approaches for early warning of wildfire smoke impacts through efforts at the Pacific Northwest Research Station and partner agencies.
* A community that may be impacted by wildfire smoke can plan in advance and be “Smoke Ready” so those at greater risk of experiencing health effects can plan for and reduce potential impacts.
* Being “Smoke Ready” will help communities prepare for wildfire smoke, allowing public health officials to be aware and prepare for effects on individuals and facilities vulnerable to smoke impacts.

**Key Message:** The use of Unmanned Aerial Systems (UAS) is being increased to support wildland fire operations.

Talking Points:

* Unmanned Aerial Surveillance missions in support of wildfire response include color video and infrared situational awareness, mapping, and aerial ignition.
* Unmanned Aerial Surveillance will provide remote ability to scout and patrol wildfires, reducing risks to firefighters and improving situational awareness.

**Topic: National COVID Vaccine Campaign and State COVID Vaccination Support**

**Key Message:** The USDA Forest Service, through Emergency Support Function #4 (“ESF #4”), is supporting FEMA and several states by providing personnel, equipment, and incident management teams to support established vaccination locations to assist, augment and expedite COVID-19 vaccinations in the United States.

Talking Points:

* More than 200 USDA Forest Service employees have been assigned to ESF #4 missions across the United States.
* These USDA Forest Service employees are performing a variety of duties, including administering vaccinations, at more than a dozen sites across several states.
* This is the largest mobilization of USDA Forest Service personnel for a non-fire incident since Hurricane Katrina in 2005.
* Plans are underway to transition employees back to their home units in preparation for wildfire activity during the 2021 Fire Year.

**Topic: CLIMATE CHANGE**

**Key Message:** Managing wildfires is inherently complex and challenging and compounded by climate change. Climate change has brought longer fire seasons; wildfires occurring outside of historic fire seasons in different parts of the country; wildfires burning more land on average each year; more extreme fire behavior; and the increased frequency of wildfires in the Wildland Urban Interface (WUI) impacting more homes and communities.

Talking Points:

**Topic: RESILIENT LANDSCAPES**

**Key Message:** Healthy, thriving forests and grasslands are less vulnerable to extreme wildfires that can devastate watersheds, destroy wildlife habitat, and risk lives. Healthy landscapes can more easily adapt to environmental change, invasive species, and insect infestations. Unfortunately, keeping fire out of these lands has left forests and grasslands crowded with flammable vegetation, resulting in longer fire seasons, droughts and insect infestations. Whole landscapes are now more vulnerable to devastating, extreme wildfires.

Talking Points:

* The USDA Forest Service realizes the need to increase the treatments across the landscape, strategically focusing on areas at the highest risk of unwanted fires and to protect our communities. The USDA Forest Service, with its partners, plans to increase the scale of treatments to by two to four times what we do now across all landscapes for ecosystem resiliency.
* The USDA Forest Service is capitalizing on authorities provided in the 2018 Omnibus Bill and using all available tools to improve forest conditions, reducing fire risk through our national forests and grasslands. We also assist our state and local partners. Our tools include mechanical thinning, prescribed fire, and allowing naturally occurring or unplanned fire to occur in the right place at the right time under the right conditions to restore ecosystems to their natural conditions.
* The USDA Forest Service works closely with states and other stakeholders to implement USDA’s Shared Stewardship Strategy by enhancing efforts to reduce wildfire risk to communities and landscapes. The agency and its partners use the most advanced science to identify and reduce fire risk across all jurisdictional boundaries over the long term.
* The USDA Forest Service prioritizes hazardous fuels reduction treatments to be executed when conditions permit. The agency and its partners plan to take advantage of favorable conditions to conduct as many hazardous fuel treatments as possible.
* Many forests and grasslands require fire to remain healthy, productive, and to have a functioning ecosystem. Historically on forested lands, wildfire was a frequent, natural process, especially in the west.
* To return the fire-adapted forests to their historic conditions and thereby mitigate unplanned wildfire risk, the USDA Forest Service and partners are stepping up the use of prescribed fires in concert with mechanical treatments.
* Working with partners and stakeholders, the USDA Forest Service finds opportunities in fire-adapted forests to reintroduce the right kind of fire at the right time in the right places. This helps achieve desired ecological conditions and reduce future wildfire risk.
* The USDA Forest Service has and continues to make significant investments in hazardous fuels reduction, wildfire response, wildfire prevention, and community mitigation including teaching property owners how to landscape and build homes to be more fire-resistant. These and other efforts not only protect our nation’s forests but also help our partners from other federal, state, tribal, and local governments achieve our common goals. These goals include creating communities and landscapes that can better withstand wildfire and provide safer, more effective wildfire response that results in fewer damages and losses from wildfire, regardless of where those fires might occur.
* Years of monitoring and numerous research efforts confirms that hazardous fuel reduction treatments are effective in reducing extreme fire behavior. The reduction of hazardous fuel loads will increase public safety, allow for better fire control options for firefighters, and reduced damages and losses from wildfires.
* Prescribed fires have short-term impacts to air quality but are always planned in coordination with state air quality regulations. This planning helps avoid smoke levels that would be considered harmful to smoke-sensitive populations.
* Regular prescribed burning can help prevent future severe wildfires and the associated smoke that may pose significant risks to public health and safety.

**Topic: FIRE ADAPTED COMMUNITIES**

**Key Message:** Wildfires do not stop at property boundaries. Communities and residents must take responsibility to prepare for wildfire. The USDA Forest Service works in partnership with national, regional, state, tribal, and local government and non-government organizations to reduce the risk of cross-boundary wildfires. The biggest challenge to wildfire risk reduction is local capacity to promote and accomplish risk reduction projects on the ground.

Talking Points

* The USDA Forest Service helps communities reduce community wildfire risk within the Wildland Urban Interface. This work happens before large scale fire events occur, preparing our public and working together for a more collaborative response.
* Wildfires destroyed a total of 17,904 structures (includes homes and out-buildings) in 2020. Research has shown that reducing a structure’s vulnerability to ember intrusion , known as “structure hardening,” is the most effective way to reduce risk to structures.
* Reducing the loss of lives, property, infrastructure, and natural and cultural resources from wildfires depends on long-term, sustainable, collaborative community actions for fire adaptation. These can include structure hardening and defensible space, local fire protection resources, prevention education, safe zones, as well as hazardous fuels reduction in and near communities through collaborative partnerships.
* Forest Service Community Mitigation Assistance Teams (CMAT) work locally with cross-boundary partners to build sustainable mitigation efforts at times when awareness of the need for mitigation is high.
* Nationally, nearly nine out of ten wildfires are human-caused through debris burning, equipment sparks, campfires, and other means. Information about preventing human caused wildfires is available at: [www.smokeybear.com](http://www.smokeybear.com).

**Topic: FIRE PREVENTION**

**Key Message:** The most important thing members of the public can do to help during the 2021 fire year is to do their part to prevent human-caused fires. As we continue through the fire year, land managers are constantly assessing fire conditions and risk factors, including COVID-19, that may impact our ability to respond to wildfires. In some cases, fire restrictions may be implemented to reduce the likelihood of human-caused fires.

Talking Points:

* Wildland fire agencies may implement fire restrictions earlier than usual this year to reduce the number of human-caused fires and reduce firefighter exposure during the current pandemic.
* Criteria for determining when an area should be placed under fire restriction is determined locally with the input of partnering agencies and communities. Criteria include fire danger, preparedness levels and local risk factors.
* These difficult decisions are not taken lightly. Implementing fire restrictions or associated closures is a particularly difficult decision, and based on established local criteria, agencies will seek to lift restrictions and reopen at the earliest opportunity.