



Bureau of Land Management

Pre-Season Talking Points

Fire and Aviation

March 2014

2014 Pre-Season Talking Points

Budget

- In January, Congress and President Obama enacted what amounts to a 2-year hiatus of Sequestration. This decision restores government funding to pre-sequestration levels in Fire. That means funding for Preparation and Fuels programs has been boosted by 5-7% over last year's sequestration level.
- Thanks to this relief, F&A's budget shop has been distributing one-time funds in Prep and Fuels to States. It's welcome relief, but this doesn't solve our long term organizational and budget issues.
- Regions with large amounts of greater sage-grouse habitat will get extra funding proportionate to the amount of GSG habitat they manage. We need to pay careful attention to managing habitat for this increasingly important species.
- The FY2015 President's Budget (released on March 14) proposes to fund a portion of Suppression from outside of the Wildland Fire Management appropriation, which would free up some Fire funding for other purposes.
- The President's Budget suggests using these savings to fund Preparedness and a new subactivity called Resilient Landscapes. The Resilient Landscapes funding would "target specific landscapes, including areas outside the WUI, and enhance integration of these activities between fire and non-fire programs toward shared restoration and ecological objectives." The proposed subactivity funding is \$30 million at the DOI level.
- HFR is renamed Fuels Management in the President's Budget, and it is maintained at current levels, though \$10 million is directed to the BIA to "fulfill trust responsibilities on reserved treaty rights lands."
- In recent years, Fuels Management has been the program most affected by budget reductions. Despite Fuels Management being spared this year from even deeper cuts, the program is not back on its feet. BLM HFR funding has dropped from \$95 million in 2010 to \$68 million in 2014. The BLM is still struggling to meet an appropriate base program to project dollar ratio. It should be 50-50 or better.
- Preparedness is increased \$37 million in the President's 2015 Budget, with specific increases directed towards the DOI SEAT fleet of 33 exclusive use aircraft and the BLM's existing Veterans fire crews.
- Sequestration will be revisited leading up to FY16. By that point, Congress and the Administration may well have solved the longer term issues created by Sequestration. We'll have to wait and see.
- Fire and Aviation understands the times. We realize budget cuts and reorganization efforts affect what actually gets done on the ground. We are trying to keep dollars going to the field.

- Given our circumstances, it is more important than ever that we carefully watch our expenditures. The entire fire and aviation community will continue to be scrutinized for waste, fraud, abuse and just plain poor decision-making. This is a message that everyone at every level needs to understand, starting at the national office and through the state, district and field offices. We don't want headlines written about our misuse of government funding. We need to honor the trust the public has placed in us.

Safety

- It is imperative that everyone update their emergency contact cards as soon as possible and certainly before the season gets underway. Managers are encouraged to make this update part of the process as seasonal firefighters come on board. Having current emergency contact information on file is critical for all firefighter and support personnel.
- 2014 is a year of anniversaries, marking three of the historically worst fire seasons in terms of fireline fatalities. June 30 will mark one year since 19 members of the 20-person Granite Mountain Hotshots perished in a burnover at the Yarnell Hill Fire in Arizona (*see Yarnell Follow-up, page 7*). July 6 will mark the 20-year anniversary of the day 14 firefighters lost their lives on Storm King Mountain in Colorado while battling the South Canyon Fire. August 5 will be the 65th anniversary of the 13 firefighters who perished on the Mann Gulch Fire in Montana.
- Although fire-line fatalities occur every year and far more often than anyone would like, the magnitude of the Yarnell, South Canyon and Mann Gulch incidents serves as a solemn reminder of the hazards firefighters face. As every firefighting agency at every level continuously strives to improve safety, the goal remains having every firefighter return home safely.
- Much has changed over the years as a result of these and other lives lost to wildfire. Fire shelters have been developed and improved; policy and tactical approaches to fireline management have evolved; communications tools have improved; and there is a strong emphasis on lessons learned. However, human factors and an increasingly complex fire environment continue to challenge fire personnel and the precepts of risk management.
- Driving is and continues to be one of the most hazardous exposures to wildland firefighters. Within the DOI fire program alone, there were two serious vehicles accidents that occurred within the past twelve months. One of them resulting in a fatality and the other resulting in serious injuries.
 - Fire program managers should be diligent in assuring firefighters behind the wheel are experienced and prepared for the driving conditions they may face.
 - For inexperienced drivers, ensure mentors are assigned and close supervision is provided.

- Drivers should practice good defensive driving and always realize the true risks of driving; even though it becomes second nature (the margin to correct a driving error may be very slim).
 - Seat belts are required at all times when the vehicles is in motion – becoming complacent with seat belt use can cost firefighters their lives in case of an accident.
- In an effort to continue to highlight principles of High Reliability Organizing (HRO), we want to emphasize the importance of reporting and reacting to small failure and indicators and utilize reporting tools like SAFENET (wildland fire ground operations safety reporting system) and SAFECOM (aviation mishap reporting system) to raise awareness of safety issues and identifying corrective actions/mitigations.
 - Last year BLM experienced a high tempo fire season and had a number of significant events (accidents, injuries, and near misses). Overall, these events were minimized by decisive actions made by firefighters and fire leaders. With that, we want to emphasize that good risk management (RM) is continually practiced at all level within the fire and aviation program. Key points to remind ourselves during high tempo periods:
 - Pace yourself and those you supervise.
 - Stick to the basics (adequate briefings, ensure LCES is in place, take tactical pauses and re-evaluate RM—risk vs. gain).
 - Recognize distractions and focus on the mission at hand.
 - Although critical incidents are rare and we all work hard to prevent serious accidents, it is still important to ensure we are prepared when they do occur. Every field unit should ensure their local emergency medical plans and Agency Administrator’s Guides to Critical Incident Management (PMS 926) are updated. It is also critical that offices ensure that every employee’s Personal Emergency Information Cards (BLM Form 1400-71) are updated annually and that every new employee completes form.

Aviation

- The BLM will have the first jet aircraft on contract this year to be used as a lead-plane and Aerial Supervision Module platform. The additional speed of the Cessna Citation CE-525 will facilitate more effectively working with the newer and larger jet-powered air tankers. The BLM plans to have two additional jets as lead-plane/ASM platforms next year.
- Additional aircraft the BLM will have available for the 2014 season include 17 Type 3 helicopters, 6 Type 2 helicopters, 2 CL-215 water-scooper air tankers, 7 smokejumper aircraft, 9 air tactical platforms and 4 other fixed-wing aircraft capable of a variety of missions.
- As of March 3, contracts for Single Engine Air Tankers had not been finalized.

- Technology, in the form of small light-weight cameras, combined with remote-controlled aircraft, including civilian Unmanned Aerial Systems (UASs), are creating concern for fire and aviation officials. Such aircraft were reported over and around fires in southern California earlier this year and they have turned up over other disaster-type incidents at the hands of journalists and citizens.
- Federal Aviation Administration regulations have not caught up with this growing trend and because there are no pilot requirements to operate these small camera-equipped aircraft or other means to regulate their use over incidents there is likelihood they will turn up over fires this coming season. The potential for a collision with fire aircraft is likely to increase.

Fire Planning and Fuels Management

- The BLM Fuels Management program continues to play a key role in the conservation, maintenance and restoration of sagebrush landscapes, as a primary means of eliminating the need for the FWS to list the Greater Sage-Grouse as an endangered species.
- In Fiscal Year 2013, the BLM hazardous fuels reduction program treated 247,000 acres.
- In FY 2014 BLM received \$68 million, an increase of \$8 million from 2013 with 445,000 acres planned accomplishments.
 - 62 percent of our Fuels Program project capacity is going toward sage-grouse habitat conservation, protection and restoration treatments. This amounts to \$28 million in project funding and approximately 290,000 acres of treatment.
- The program most affected by budget reductions has been hazardous fuels. While not as dire as originally proposed in the President's FY2014 Budget, The BLM Fuels funding has dropped from \$95 million in 2010 to \$67 million in 2014. To better position itself for future budget fluctuations, states need to work towards a 50-50 labor to operations ratio.
- FY2015 is encouraging for Fuels Management as the President's Budget is one of the more positive budgets the program has seen with similar numbers to FY2014. In addition a new Landscape Resiliency Treatments Program within the Wildland Fire Management Program is proposed for \$30 million. The new program recognizes the importance of treating fire adapted ecosystems for land health benefits, including area outside of the Wildland Urban Interface. Land resiliency requires both the fire program and resource management to work together and the program places prioritization on a match from bureau base funds.
- The DOI continues work on an initiative to revise the DOI fuels management program. The revision is in response to concerns and questions from the Administration and Congress about the scope, purpose, and effectiveness of the program, and to support the goals of the national Cohesive Strategy.

- BLM continues to require a fuels treatment effectiveness report anytime a wildfire intersects an area treated using a fuels reduction project. FTEM reports completed to date demonstrate the value of fuels treatments, with over 135 intersections reported in 2013 (57 of these came from Oregon).
- Principal Deputy Director Neil Kornze has stated BLM will continue to manage land for multiple-uses while minimizing impacts to the Greater Sage-Grouse in an effort to avoid listing in 2015. To aid these efforts, BLM Fire Planning and Fuels Management has:
 - Issued Instruction Memorandum No. 2013-128 (May 23, 2013) regarding Sage-Grouse conservation related to wildland fire and fuels management.
 - Refined fire and fuels Best Management Practices for Sage-Grouse conservation, which were included in IM 2013-128.
 - Inaugurated numerous working groups and task teams to specifically address Sage-Grouse conservation related to wildland fire and invasive species issues.
 - Proposed site-specific habitat assessments in key Sage-Grouse habitat to prioritize treatments in high risk fire prone areas.
- BLM veterans crews continue to show success. Originally funded through Fuels, starting in FY2014 BLM veterans crews will have base funding provided. Veterans crews will continue to implement a number of fuels projects in 2014.

Mitigation/Prevention/Education/ Investigation & Trespass

- BLM Mitigation & Education Specialists continue to provide funding and assistance to build and sustain Fire Adapted Communities. Each State puts a minimum of 3 percent of their fuels project dollars towards Community Assistance activities including education, planning (CWPPs) and incentive programs to get hazardous fuels reduction projects going on adjacent non-federal land.
- A report with recommendations on the future role, purpose and approach for Community Assistance for DOI agencies is due out in March, 2014. Fire Directors will look at the recommendations in this report and make decisions on recommended funding levels and priorities for the CA program in FY 15 and beyond.
- Four new subcommittees were established under the new Fuels, Mitigation and Planning Group (FMPG) that is chartered under the FLT. Among them are the Mitigation, Education and Prevention Sub-Committee (MEPSC) and the Fire Investigation and Trespass Sub-Committee (FITSC).
- The Fire Investigation and Trespass Program continues to bring in hundreds of thousands of dollars each year that can be used to support each state's fire program. Aggressive investigation and cost recovery programs in each state are critical to deter future fires and offset suppression costs on fires where there is evidence of negligence or intent.

- The Community Assistance and Fire Investigation & Trespass programs are always looking for fire and MLR participation. If someone has an interest in working with communities and the public or to investigate wildfires, please contact your state lead for those programs.
- In FY 13, Community Assistance efforts accomplished, among other things, the following:
 - **711 WUI fire education events** that have reached over **70,000** people
 - **528 Fire Prevention events** that have reached over **107,000** people
 - **Treated 11,008 acres of adjacent non-federal land** through Assistance Agreements
 - **Assisted 1,548 Communities at Risk** with education, planning and HFR treatments
 - **Reduced the fire risk to over 11,000 homes** as a result of those HFR treatments
 - **Completed 3,361 “firewise” home assessments** in high risk WUI areas
 - Provided funding and/or assistance to **complete 45 CWPPs & update 72 others**
 - **Launched over 500 Mass Media Initiatives** to educate the public on wildfire risk reduction

Predictive Services

- It is still early in the year to predict how 2014 will unfold regarding fire conditions and fire activity potential. Although warmer temperatures are expected through the spring in parts of Alaska and the western states, California - and southern California in particular - is the only state where above normal potential is forecast for the spring months.
- While California received some much needed moisture as winter transitioned to spring, it is providing only some short-term relief. The snowpack in the Sierras and other high elevations is still low and it will melt quickly with a return to higher fire potential in much of the state.
- Recent drought and winter precipitation deficits across several portions of the western U.S. are having a major impact on fuels. Similar to California, February precipitation improved conditions somewhat in other areas but was not enough to mitigate the drought, particularly in the Southwest.
- Although there are signs of an El Nino developing, conditions may be setting up for a variation on typically dry conditions in the Southwest. There is a potential for that variation to bring more moisture to the region through the spring that would benefit those southwestern states. There is much uncertainty, however, which will remain until the weather trends become more fully developed as we move further into the spring.
- Overall, based on current information, much of the West may have a normal fire season. The eastern states, following a record-setting winter for moisture and cold, are expected to remain with a below normal potential for fire activity at least through the spring.

IT Transformation in General

- The Department and its bureaus continue to implement plans associated with the DOI Information Technology Transformation (ITT) initiative as outlined in Secretarial Order 3309.
 - IT Transformation is an effort to align BLM's IT functions with IT changes within the Department of Interior. The realignments will result in a more efficient and less costly IT program. To date, the BLM's internal ITT efforts have achieved approximately \$18 million in total savings toward our \$30 million objective.
 - The overriding concept for ITT is based on the implementation of new technology and processes resulting in "as good or better services" at lower cost to the Department.
 - The changes in the IT program will be seen throughout the Department, bureaus, states and district; and it will change the look and number of employees of the IT program at the National Interagency Fire Center.
 - IT Transformation affects the management, support and operation of all forms of technology used by the BLM, including individual computers, networks, databases, radios, voice and video telecommunications, copiers, fax machines, and wireless devices.
 - IT Transformation will consolidate most IT personnel and other technology specialists at the National Operations Center in Denver, CO. However, some employees will remain under the supervision of states and centers. Of those employees who are switching to working for the NOC, many will work remotely from their current location.
 - Between February 10 and March 7, the Bureau will offer Phase 3 VERA and VSIP authority to eligible IT employees; as well as to IT service and support employees engaged in supporting the Bureau's national IT operations at the BLM Headquarters and National Operations Center (NOC).
 - Phase 3 VERA and VSIP eligibility **does not** include employees whose primary duties involve support services for radio communications and critical infrastructure used by wildland fire, law enforcement, and emergency services.

IT Transformation Effect on BLM Radio Program

- The National Radio Operations Branch (NROB) at NIFC has not been significantly affected by IT Transformation yet, because the DOI is still in the process of determining what changes (if any) to implement in the management of the radio program.
- Four State radio programs (CO, ID, MT, and OR/WA) have moved their programs under State-level Fire and Aviation or Engineering programs as an effect of IT Transformation. This step became necessary when the supervision of those programs was moved into the National Operations Center organization. Leadership in those four states determined that, due to their particular needs and issues, it was important to retain management of the radio program at the state-level.

- Similarly, some of the States have had to take on more Telecom (specifically phone) duties due to IT transformation.
- The effect of IT Transformation on radio programs is a fluid situation. These talking points will be updated when announcements are made that affect the NROB and/or State radio programs.

Yarnell Hill Tragedy Follow-up

Following the investigation into the Yarnell Hill tragedy in 2013 which took the lives of 19 members of the Granite Mountain Hotshots, the National Association of State Foresters requested assistance from the National Wildfire Coordinating Group (NWCG) with four tasks: 1) to review current technology that could increase real-time resource tracking, weather and communications; 2) provide an analysis of human factors and their role in the Yarnell incident; 3) identify a point when it is necessary to separate the ASM and Air Attack roles; and 4) provide technical direction on the effective use of Very Large Air Tankers (VLATs).

- **Task 1:** The review of technology available for real-time resource tracking and other elements has been assigned to a task group and a report from their work is due May 1.
- **Task 2:** The analysis of human factors is expected to be a longer-term process with no due date assigned.

Task 3: Separating the Aerial Supervision Module and Air Attack roles

- One of four requests to the National Wildfire Coordinating Group from the National Association of State Foresters following the investigation of the Yarnell tragedy last year was to help identify a point at which it is necessary to separate the Aerial Supervision Module and Air Attack roles. The ASM was designed primarily for initial attack operations and reduces the number of aircraft at an emerging incident by having both lead-plane pilot and Air

Tactical Group Supervisor (Air Attack) on board the same aircraft, but maintaining separate mission-related duties.

- The ASM concept is increasingly being used during large fire operations due to resource and relief availability of aerial assets and is also driven by tactical objectives determined by ground personnel, complexity of an incident, and the incident management teams' needs.
- The federally-adopted Interagency Aerial Supervision Guide specifies aerial supervision requirements (e.g. when an air attack, lead-plane or ASM are required), which are largely based on the complexity of an incident and the type and number of aircraft being used.

- Given that terrain, fire location, fuels, weather, resources at risk, incident complexity and other variables result in a nearly infinite variety of situations, NWCG maintains that flexibility in implementing aerial supervision, be it an ASM or separate lead-plane and ATGS aircraft, is key to providing a safe and effective operating environment.

Task 4: Effective use of Very Large Air Tankers (VLATs)

- The investigation of the Yarnell incident also led the National Association of State Foresters to seek assistance from the National Wildfire Coordinating Group in developing technical guidance on the effective use of Very Large Air Tankers (VLATs).
- Although VLATs are generally faster, heavier and have a significantly greater load capacity than other air tankers, those benefits come with unique considerations that must be addressed. Given their size and weight, VLATs are less maneuverable in steep, rugged terrain; they require landing and reload bases designed for heavier aircraft; and they require additional low-level planning and aerial supervision. Additionally, while they can be a very effective tool in the right circumstances, the ordering system in some jurisdictions could be streamlined to facilitate obtaining VLAT response.

Related: Fire Shelter Review Accelerated

- Due in part to the tragic events at the Yarnell Hill Fire, resulting in the loss of 19 firefighters, a planned periodic review of fire shelters was moved up from 2015 to this year. This review will consider new materials, weight and performance factors and more. The review may or may not recommend changes to the current fire shelters. In either case, the goal for firefighters is to never have to use their fire shelter.

Rangeland Fire Protections Associations

- Rangeland Fire Protection Associations (RFPAs) are gaining attention from several governors in western states with large amounts of greater sage-grouse habitat. BLM expects to see increased interest from state fire agencies in “sage grouse states” on the formation of new RFPAs.
- Rangeland Fire Protection Associations are state chartered, nonprofit organizations established to prevent and suppress range fires. They are operated by their members (who are typically ranchers, farmers and rangeland permittees) and are funded primarily by grants and fees set by the local RFPA board.
- RFPAs are successfully operating in Oregon and Idaho. These firefighting organizations are patterned after Timber Fire Protection Associations created decades ago in northern Idaho and other places.

- RFPAs do not provide structural fire protection; they are created to protect improvements private landowners have made on rangelands; assist adjoining cooperators with suppression if asked; and keep fires small through safe, aggressive initial attack.
- RFPAs fire training is typically provided by the BLM. The sponsoring state usually provides communication equipment, vehicles and other forms of support.
- RFPAs give trained members the legal authority to fight fires—primarily fires occurring on private lands, public lands leased or allotted to rangeland users, or public lands adjacent to private rangelands.
- RFPAs are an important part of protecting sage-grouse habitat, as rapid response times help keep fires in sage brush ecosystems small. Their work also helps protect recreation areas, cultural sites, watersheds and other values at risk from rangeland fires.

Cohesive Strategy Update

- *The National Strategy*: The Final Phase of the Development of the National Cohesive Wildland Fire Management Strategy and National Action Plan is being released this spring.
- The National Strategy explores four broad challenges: managing vegetation and fuels; protecting homes, communities, and other values at risk; managing human-caused ignitions; and effectively and efficiently responding to wildfire.
- The National Strategy also identifies potential management options and associated trade-offs, it lays out a process for federal agencies, states, and stakeholders to collaboratively improve decision-making in a manner customized to unique regional needs.
- Concurrently, a National Action Plan is being developed to detail the next steps necessary to effectively implement the Cohesive Strategy.
 - National actions will create an overriding framework from which detailed implementation plans will be developed by agencies and organizations which be coordinated with stakeholders.

National Multiagency Coordinating Group (NMAC)

General Themes and Associated Q and As

The national themes are designed to be broad in scope so communicators can tailor the message to meet the needs of the local situation. Be sure to check out the wildland fire questions and answers section located at http://www.nifc.gov/PIO_bb/messages.html on the PIO Bulletin Board for more targeted points.

1. Our top priority is to keep the public and firefighters safe.

- No structure, natural resource, or cultural resource, is worth the loss of human life.
- Reducing risk to firefighters and the public is the first priority in every fire management activity.

2. Teamwork, partnerships and cooperation are essential in managing wildfires.

- Wildfire knows no boundaries. Local, state, tribal and federal agencies support one another in wildfire response, planning and decision making.
- Working together keeps our responsiveness up and costs down. Together, we can share limited resources, whether they are firefighters, equipment or other services.

3. Wildfires are managed in different ways.

- The same fire may have several objectives, which can be modified as the fire moves across the landscape.
- Fires that threaten life, property and important natural and cultural resources will be put out as safely and quickly as possible.
- Many landscapes are out of ecological balance. When the conditions are right, fire is one way to help restore ecological balance across the landscape so the area becomes more resilient to threats.

4. A community that has adapted to wildfire is a better-protected community.

- Citizens, firefighters, homes and other structures are always safer when residents work to protect their own property by clearing brush, trimming trees and removing flammable materials away from their homes and buildings.
- Firefighters appreciate the help given to them by residents who are willing to do their part on private property to reduce risk prior to a fire incident.

5. Long term drought, changing fuel conditions and the resulting unpredictable fire behavior, combined with increased human activity all suggest that 2014 will be a busy fire year.

- Conditions change; for your safety, stay informed on current and predicted conditions in your community, and when you are enjoying the outdoors.

Q and As

1. Our top priority is to keep the public and firefighters safe.

Q: Why do firefighters and citizens continue to be killed and injured each fire season?

A: Despite sophisticated tools for predicting fire behavior, there is inherent risk in managing wildland fires. This risk cannot be totally mitigated. Machines break, weather changes, and unexpected human factors occur—leading to tragic outcomes. The wildland fire community emphasizes and practices safety in every fire management activity, knowing that even one tragedy is too many.

Q: What are state and federal agencies doing this year in response to the numerous firefighter tragedies that happened last year?

A: Federal, state, local, tribal agencies, and other organizations will continue to train firefighters to their highest safety standards, including placing emphasis on understanding and safely responding to the dynamics of highly complex and hazardous situations. Accidents happen when unexpected events occur. As a result, firefighters, fireline leaders, and the public all need to understand and act on signals that point to potential and unexpected risks.

Q: How can the public help reduce the risk to themselves and firefighters?

A: It is critically important for landowners and communities to recognize the dangers of an approaching wildfire.

Before a wildfire even starts, landowners must understand the defensibility of their property and do their part to make it as safe as possible for firefighters if they need to protect it.

Have a plan and know when to act. If a wildfire does occur and you are asked to evacuate, know your life and others will be kept safer by your decisive actions. Develop a plan in case you are asked to leave, which includes where to go, what to take, and what needs to be done quickly to protect your belongings. Do not risk a life for material possessions. If an evacuation is imminent, be ready and leave when recommended.

2. Teamwork, partnerships and cooperation are essential in managing wildfires.

Q: Why are teamwork, partnerships and cooperation essential in managing wildfires?

A: Large wildfires almost always present a much bigger challenge than a single state, tribal, local or federal agency can address on their own. As wildfires evolve, working together enables partners to share critical information and resources, and meet common objectives. Ultimately, working together keeps people safer and landscapes healthier.

Q: How does working together keep costs down?

A: Each agency and land management entity has its own mission. Working together reduces expensive duplication of services and allows better management of resources. By working together, finite resources can be allocated and shared fairly and to best meet the needs of all partners. No single agency can afford to maintain the number of firefighters, aircraft, equipment and training needed to manage multiple complex wildfires and other natural disasters. That's why fire agencies, departments and tribes share resources.

3. Wildfires are managed in different ways.

Q: What is meant by “objectives?” Isn't the objective to put the fire out?

A: Objectives are the broad purposes of a fire management strategy. To determine the strategy, wildland fire managers evaluate and respond to the situation based on what is at risk, potential impacts to the land and communities, and the resources available to them. As wildfires move across landscapes, different areas will have unique and specific response plans adapted to meet the needs of the community and landscape. The goal is to have the right response at the right time for the right reasons.

Q. Are wildfires allowed to burn freely?

A. No, wildfires are always managed, which can include actions ranging from monitoring to putting the fire completely out. Management actions are based upon pre-established fire and land management plans. To remove the natural role of fire is to increase the danger of future wildfires. That is why communities must adapt to wildfire where possible and prepare in advance, in case they are unable to be put out.

4. A community that has adapted to wildfire is a better-protected community.

Q: What is meant exactly by being “fire adapted?”

A: Being fire adapted means an individual landowner or a community understands that fire and people can co-exist. Fire happens. It is not “if” but “when” a fire is going to burn in a location. Taking steps to prepare for a wildfire in your community is critical to keeping you, your family and firefighters safe.

Q: How does clearing away brush relate to a community or a single structure being “fire adapted”?

A: Clearing away excess vegetation will deprive the fire of the raw materials it needs to burn at a high intensity. When brush, small trees, thick grasses and other fuels are thinned, mowed or removed, the fire has less fuel to burn. Fuel-starved fires burn at a lower intensity, are easier to contain, and are much less likely to cause damage when they burn on the ground.

Q: Will firefighters protect my house?

A: Wildland firefighters are neither trained nor equipped to fight structure fires. Through a risk analysis, wildland firefighter crews determine whether or not they can safely protect any structure from an approaching wildfire.

Safety, for wildland firefighters and the public, is always the first and foremost concern.

5. Long term drought, changing fuel conditions and the resulting unpredictable fire behavior, combined with increased human activity all suggest that 2014 will be a busy fire year.

Q: It seems the country never has enough firefighters, trucks, aircraft and equipment when fire seasons get really bad. How do agencies and fire departments plan to have adequate resources?

A: Federal fire agencies hire firefighting crews based on appropriated budgets. These budgets are developed over a cycle lasting several years, so the appropriated budgets cannot react rapidly to changing conditions.

However, in periods of particularly extreme fire danger, Congress can appropriate extra fire suppression funding on an emergency basis. These funds, called severity funds, are distributed using a process which responds to the greatest immediate need.

Q: How are firefighting agencies preparing for the 2014 fire season? Are more firefighters being hired and trained?

A: The number of wildland firefighters in 2014 will remain essentially the same as the force employed in 2013. The five federal agencies together employ around 13,000 people whose primary job is fire suppression.

Approximately another 7,000 federal agency employees have firefighting qualifications, though fire management is not their primary job.

Q. How bad is the drought affecting the western U.S. this year?

A: The lack of winter precipitation is starting to paint a grim picture for the upcoming fire season. Much of Texas, portions of the Southwest, large parts of the southern plains states, large portions of the Great Basin and virtually the entire state of Oregon are experiencing moderate to severe droughts this year. Most of California is in an extreme drought, and the Central Valley is facing exceptional drought conditions. Precipitation in February provided some improvement to the situation, however, the drought remains. Without additional rain and snow, these areas could be facing a severe and earlier-than-normal fire season.