



2014 National Fire Season Themes

Supplemental Q&A's

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 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.

When accidents occur, it affects the wildland fire community in deeply personal ways, which inspire individuals to take responsibility for their own actions.

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.

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