

BLM Director Bob Abbey's Video Message 2010 BLM High Reliability Organizing Workshop (March 9-11, 2010 ~ Phoenix, AZ)



"We cannot afford to be complacent." ~ Bob Abbey

Good morning. I'm pleased to kick off BLM's fire management conference focusing on High Reliability Organizations. I've not had the chance to talk with all the leaders of our Fire and Aviation program, so my purpose today is two-fold. First, to offer my views about fire and aviation and where the program needs to head; and second, express my strong support for making BLM a High Reliability Organization particularly in fire and aviation where the risk is high and the work is crucial to protect life, property, and vital natural resources.

Although the 2009 fire season was light in most of the West, I know the complexities of what you do and the issues that you face on a consistent basis don't change. We also know that 2009 was an aberration, and history shows us that widespread and severe wildland fire activity will return. The northern tier of states already seems to have a bull's-eye painted on it. Let's make sure that we're ready for whatever comes our way.

We cannot afford to be complacent. When things go right for a long period of time, it's all the more signal that we need to be more aware, more prepared, more able to respond appropriately to whatever the situation demands.

My view of this is straightforward—it is an integral part of resource management. We're long past the days when fire was on one side of the yard separated from everyone else. Fire needs to be at the table. Nothing affects our resources faster for both good and ill than does fire. The Great Basin is a prime example of where fire and fire management has a crucial role as we manage the delicate balance of wildlife habitat, noxious/invasive species, grazing management, protection of cultural resources, and many other uses and the needs of the rangeland ecosystem.

As you position the fire program for the future, you face a number of difficult but doable tasks related to further integrating fire and resource management—achieving and communicating steps underway to accomplish new fire policy implementation strategies, continuing your cost management efforts, and more. I am confident, however, that you have the knowledge and experience to manage these challenges in a positive manner.

Fire and Aviation is the largest single program in the Bureau of Land Management and one of the most visible. Because of that, I expect nothing but the highest standards of integrity, conduct, and performance. The "Do What's Right" training is much more than a yearly reminder to make good choices. In my view, it gives guidance about how firefighters from a rookie on an engine crew to a state fire management officer should act. Nothing will get my attention faster than ethical breaches. Nothing will change a career faster than the failure to simply do what is right when the choice is obvious.

Another high priority is workforce planning. We're not seeing enough of our young and talented employees moving to the top of the fire funnel. You know better than I do that we are increasingly relying on retired employees to fill key positions on teams. You understand better than I do that IMTs as they are now configured may not be sustainable. We must take the opportunity to strengthen our Fire and Aviation program by attracting a diversity of candidates.

So, your challenge is clear as leaders in the fire program—you must keep one eye on the present and one eye on the future and take the steps now to recruit, *train*, and retain a new generation of capable and qualified fire and aviation managers and leaders. If we do not act now, the future may be bleak.

In terms of a High Reliability Organization, the future is now. Let me say right at the top, I'm a firm believer in HRO principles; and I believe they need to be adopted and practiced throughout our agency. Safety is of critical importance in every area of BLM fire operations. We are constantly seeking operational improvements that will improve our safety practices and reduce our risk exposure. However, wildland firefighting is an inherently dangerous undertaking.

The "Redbook"—one of our primary fire policy documents—states, "Our safety philosophy acknowledges that while the ideal level of risk may be zero, a hazard-free work environment is not a reasonable or achievable goal in fire operations." For this reason, we're never satisfied. We are driven to improve. Even when we perform exceptionally well for long periods of time, we are uneasy. We know a mistake, an oversight, or a short lapse of attention might just be around the corner. We know we can do better. These very characteristics, our constant drive to improve, our refusal to be complacent, our perpetual uneasiness even when things are going well, our ability to recover quickly are characteristics common to High Reliability Organizations. This conference on HROs is part of our unending effort to improve. Thank you for being here.

Let me tell you what my expectations are for this week. I do not expect that you will sit passively and jot down occasional notes. I expect that you will actively engage in this learning and sharing opportunity. I expect that you will debate and discuss new and old ideas, concepts, and theories. And I expect that you will do this in a positive and constructive manner with a desire to learn, to improve, and to help your colleagues do the same.

Finally, I hope you leave this conference with a better understanding of High Reliability Organization theory, of the history, research and theory behind it, and of its relationship with various other organizational concepts, ideas, and practices. Most importantly, I hope you leave with an idea of how you might develop or improve HRO practices in your organization. Then my expectation is that you will go home; and armed with what you've learned this week, you will begin to make the needed changes in your area of responsibility.

I have long admired and supported the Fire and Aviation program in the Bureau of Land Management. You are people who know how to work, how to take on challenges, and get things done. We need more of that kind of example and leadership in every office of the agency. Please know that you have my support and backing.

Again, I appreciate for your willingness to come to Phoenix this week and to take the BLM another step forward in our desire to become a true High Reliability Organization. Have a great week, listen, learn, and prepare for a better future beginning today.