

Fire Management Workshop, Catalonia, Spain February 2-11, 2001

Eric Hagen

Participants

Eric Hagen, Fire Management Officer, Salmon Field Office, Bureau of Land Management The rest of the U.S. group consisted of John Szymoniak and Dave Lukens, both from the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest.

Dates/locations of travel

I departed Salmon on 2/2 for Boise, flying out of Boise to Barcelona on 2/3. I departed Barcelona for Boise on 2/10, arriving back in Salmon on 2/11. Travel within Idaho was covered by the International Program, international travel, lodging and meals were covered by the Government of the province of Catalonia.

Purpose and Background

The purpose of the visit was two-fold: to trade information on challenges and accomplishments of the 2000 fire season (a very difficult one both here in the interior west and in Catalonia), and to assist Catalonia in their efforts to develop a more pro-active fire management program, particularly in the arena of fuels management.

In the spring of 1997, while I was assigned as Fire Management Officer for the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service in Othello, Washington, I brought Marc Castellnou, a young firefighter and forester from Catalonia, to the Columbia National Wildlife Refuge as a volunteer. He had a strong desire to learn about prescribed fire, a practice not in use in his country. He worked as a member of our prescribed fire staff for three months, also taking some time to tour other locations in the west to observe fuels management programs and challenges of other federal agencies. He returned to Catalonia and introduced a philosophy of fuels treatments to pro-actively deal with an increasingly more difficult fire suppression mandate, complicated by increasing fuel loads, demographic changes and population pressures. Largely at his instigation, Catalonia hosted an international fire management conference in the spring of 1999. Participants included representatives from Spain, Portugal, France, Italy, the Netherlands, Greece, Australia, Canada, Tasmania and various federal and state agencies from different locations in the U.S. I participated in this conference as the representative from BLM.

Two things were evident at this conference: that all the Mediterranean fire managers present felt that they could deal with a worsening catastrophic fire situation by the direct application of more money and suppression resources, and that the representatives from the western countries were advocates of aggressive fuels management programs. Castellnou anticipated this, and hoped that the opinions of the western representatives (who, due to the size, history, development and visibility of their fire management challenges and programs, are generally respected by their European counterparts) might be persuasive to his government in initiating their own fuels management program. Apparently this was an accurate perception, as, immediately following the conference, the Catalonian Government initiated funding for such a program. I have continued a dialogue with Castellnou since 1997 to assist in the program's development.

Itinerary

2/3: Arrive in Barcelona.

2/4: Drive from Barcelona to Cadi National Park to evaluate fuel types and conditions, evaluate recent fuels treatments in the area. Return to Barcelona.

2/5: Drive from Barcelona to the NE area of Catalonia and the Costa Brava area to assess major 2000 wildfire incidents in that area, and evaluate recent fuels treatments in the area. Return to Barcelona.

2/6: Presentation and workshop with fire managers and firefighters at Barcelona headquarters station (morning). Presentation and workshop with major forest owners (much of Catalonia is forested, and most is in private ownership) of central Catalonia (Barcelona, afternoon/evening).

2/7: Drive to Girona for presentation and workshop with fire managers and firefighters. Stay in Girona.

2/8: Drive to Lleida for presentation and workshop with fire managers and firefighters. Field demonstration of suppression tools and tactics by Lleida fire staff. Drive to Tarragona.

2/9: Presentation and workshop with fire managers and firefighters in Tarragona suburb of Reus (morning). Presentation and workshop with fuels technicians in Reus (evening).

2/10: Drive to Barcelona, fly to Boise.

Findings/observations/conclusions/recommendations

Having had little opportunity to strategize with my Forest Service counterparts prior to our arrival in Catalonia, it was initially a challenge to coordinate our presentations. However, through repetition and fine-tuning, they quickly became synchronized and complementary. My presentation consisted of three parts: (1) climatic and weather factors leading up to the 2000 fire season in the Intermountain West, what actually occurred and how we dealt with the challenges, and what lessons were learned from the experience; (2) an analysis of cost of suppression vs. fuels treatments for federal fire agencies for the period 1995-99; (3) an analysis of some recent [USFS] fuels treatments in the path of the Clear Creek Fire near Salmon (2000) and their effect on severity and fire behavior.

Both myself and John Szymoniak have been involved with Marc Castellnou and his nascent fuels program since 1997. Our experiences in fuels and fire management, and an awareness of some of the social and political challenges he is facing in the development of his program, influenced the content and tenor of our presentations and the direction of the workshops. Some of the challenges they are facing are familiar to us, others are not. Castellnou is also challenged by the fabric and history of his own agency. The fuels program is now annually funded, but that funding is nested within the general fire management budget, leading many of the old-school suppression folks to perceive his program as a threat to theirs. And some of these folks are still not entirely convinced of the need for fuels treatments, although that viewpoint has softened considerably from what it appeared to be at the 1999 conference. Planning and implementing [government] fuels treatments predominately on private lands also presents social and funding challenges on a scale that we in the U.S. have not yet encountered. Significant, however, are the changes in social acceptance, both public and within their organization, within the last two years. Also, several neighboring countries and provinces have recently prevailed on Catalonia and Castellnou for assistance in prescribed fire training and project initiation.

The Department of Interior, Bureau of Land Management, and Fish & Wildlife Service have had, and continue to have an influence in the development of a pro-active fire management program for Catalonia (and indirectly, the Mediterranean region). I feel this goal is worthy of continued Bureau support. In any case, I continue to have a personal interest and commitment, and will maintain contact with their program.



Standard Crew Haulers



Example of Catalonian Urban Interface



Aircraft used for fire Support



Pumps are quite similar our "Mark 3"



Standard Crew Haulers



Cadi National Park



Typical
Wildland Fuels and Topography