

U.S. / Australia and New Zealand Wildfire Agreement Discussions in Sydney, Australia April 19-23, 2001

Purpose of the Trip:

Tom Frey, International Program Coordinator for BLM's National Office of Fire and Aviation traveled to Sydney, Australia in April of 2001 to meet with Australian and New Zealand officials to discuss the contents of U.S. wildland fire agreements with Australia and New Zealand.

Background:

During the peak of the 2000 fire season, the U.S. wildland fire agencies were no longer able to locate qualified mid-level fire management personnel for fire line assignments. Because of the long-standing exchanges of personnel and ideas between the U.S. and Australia and New Zealand and because Australian and New Zealand wildland firefighters have training and experience similar to U.S. firefighters, it was decided by the National Multi-Agency Coordinating Group that the U.S. should officially approach Australia and New Zealand with the proposal to send their firefighters to assist the U.S. Australia and New Zealand agreed to this request and approximately 100 firefighters were brought from Down Under to assist with the fires.

The agreement under which these international firefighters were brought to the U.S. was quickly written and justified and based on the emergency situation that the U.S. was facing. However, that agreement was only for the emergency requirements caused by the extreme fire season of 2000 and would not be legal for any other year.

The Meeting:

The meeting took place on Sunday, April 22 at the Police College in Manly, New South Wales, a suburb of Sydney. The U.S. individuals in attendance at the meeting, besides Tom, included Denny Truesdale from the U.S. Forest Service, Robin Friedman from the Department of the Interior Solicitor's Office, and Brian Siler from the U.S. Embassy in Australia. Australian representatives from four Australian states New South Wales, Western Australia, Victoria, and Tasmania attended the meeting. New Zealand sent two representatives.

The meeting centered around the feasibility of new agreements, the issues that needed to be addressed in the agreements, the legality of such agreements, and a discussion what process to follow and how long it would take to complete the agreements. A draft agreement was reviewed and edited, line by line and word by word by the attendees. The meeting ended Sunday evening. Some attendees planned to remain in Australia on Monday and to continue working on drafts of the agreement. Tom returned to the U.S. on Monday morning April 23.

Conclusions:

At the conclusion of the meeting, all the attendees felt that an agreement was both feasible and desirable. They also agreed that the goal should be to try to complete an agreement prior to the main part of the 2001 fire season in the U.S.