

**Remarks for Larry Hamilton  
(Basis for Power Point Presentation)  
2001 Environmental Performance Summit  
November 6<sup>th</sup>, 1:30 p.m.**

**Breakout Session, “Innovative Strategies and Partnerships for Healthy Lands”**

*Specific Topic: “Focusing interagency resources on fire lands prevention and restoration priorities.”*

**I. Background**

Good afternoon. I am Larry Hamilton, and for the last 18 months, I’ve served as the director of the Bureau of Land Management’s Office of Fire and Aviation at the National Interagency Fire Center, or NIFC, in Boise, Idaho.

It has been a fast-paced and anything-but-dull experience for me at NIFC. About six weeks after arriving in Boise, a prescribed fire at Bandelier National Monument escaped, eventually burning more than 240 homes. That was followed by an intense fire season in 2000, in which 8 million acres burned. Then came what has become known as the National Fire Plan, and life as we knew it at the fire center changed. The National Fire Plan brought a huge budget increase, and with it came a proportionately huge work increase as we wrestled with just how to accomplish the long and imposing list that Congress attached to the funding for the National Fire Plan.

There have been painful times as well, most poignantly, when four young firefighters in Washington state and an air tanker pilot in northern Idaho all lost their lives in the line of duty on the same day.

My topic today is in the general area of how we can focus interagency resources on fire suppression, prevention and restoration work, and what to consider when setting performance measures. Before addressing that, I’d like to share a commercial and bit of philosophy with you.

## **II. What NIFC Is**

First, the commercial. You've probably heard of NIFC, especially in the last two summers, as wildfires burned across the country. NIFC is a place, not a stand-alone organization. It is where seven federal agencies combine skills and experience to coordinate personnel and supplies, and provide national direction for firefighting. NIFC allows for agencies to coordinate and cooperate in fighting fires, and at times, other natural and human-caused disasters. It's efficient and effective and a much better way to conduct business, compared with 40 years ago, when different agencies competed intensely and independently for the same limited firefighting resources. More on that will come later.

The overall theme of this conference centers on performance measures. At NIFC, we know about performance measures of the informal kind ... we are a closely scrutinized group. That happens when you're dealing with people, danger, natural resources, loss, risk and emotions, all set against a backdrop of a wall of flames. You may be wondering what kind of performance measures. Last year, we had about 40,000 news media inquiries, and at the peak of fire season, we had 14 million hits on our website in a single month. Those figures, I've been told, placed us only behind NASA in terms of public interest for a federal entity. In the last 14 months, we've had at least five visits by Cabinet members, one visit from the president, and one from the vice-president. We've lost track of how many members of Congress and staffers have come by.

Given that kind of exposure, we tend to get a lot of feedback from people who are eager to evaluate our performance. One of my favorites was a letter and sketches from a gentleman who could not understand why it was so difficult to control wildfires. He suggested we build huge steel domes about the size of a football field, use large helicopters to maneuver them into place, then drop them over the fire. Thus deprived of oxygen, the fires would extinguish themselves.

A simple plan. Certainly innovative. We wrote him back a nice letter, thanking him for his suggestion, and told him we'd give it some thought. Then we forwarded the letter to the Colorado state forester for his consideration.

### **III. Dylan Was Right, The Times They Are A Changin'**

There is a dichotomy in much of what we do as public administrators working in the field of natural resources. Even before September 11<sup>th</sup>, we lived in a world that was changing daily, where uncertainty and instability were facts of life. The days of a steady and predictable constituency, a consistent mission, and standard technology are gone, even for managers of natural resources. In the fire community, for example, where we once had the straightforward policy of aggressively suppressing every fire, we're now monitoring some fires because they are, in fact, doing more good than harm. In a culture where Smokey Bear ruled with his friendly growl, "Only you can prevent forest fires," we now conduct, on millions of acres, purposely ignited prescribed fires each year. In fact, this year, if all had gone right, we would have used prescribed fire on almost as many acres that burned in wildfires. In places where we ripped out sagebrush by the hundreds and thousands of acres in the 1950s and 1960s, and planted crested wheatgrass in its place, we're now ripping out the crested wheatgrass and planting sagebrush and other native species.

Change is all around us. Yet more than ever we need to make difficult, critical decisions in compressed time frames, while still being held accountable for all we do.

So there we have it. How do we make good decisions when all the rules may be obsolete tomorrow? We long for stability, but need to deal daily with change. We would like pat answers in natural resources based on solid science, but learn each day that we probably have only more to learn, and the constants are few. We want a clear mission, with reliable performance measures, but continually witness a change in our basic tenets that are difficult to quantify.

The chemistry of all this points to several things. One conclusion is that mistakes are inevitable because there are too many moving parts. Maybe a realistic goal in this ever-changing mix should be to not avoid mistakes, but ensure that our mistakes are of a higher quality. Higher-quality mistakes are those that do no long-term damage, and in fact, might do some good, though they fall short of their original intent. They are recoverable, and a solid, rational reason existed for taking the course we chose – even if it eventually proved to be the wrong course.

I've already mentioned two low-quality mistakes specific to the fire community: the Cerro Grande fire, which burned about 240 homes in New Mexico; and the deaths of four firefighters on the Thirtymile Fire, a blaze that was described as a “mop-up” operation when the local crew was sent to it. In 1999, another escaped prescribed fire in northern California burned 23 homes.

Let's face it. As human beings, we're much more apt to learn more from our mistakes than our successes. When we learn from our mistakes, we hope to become wise. When we learn from our successes, we hope to become consultants.

All of this leads to one basic question. In our search to make higher-quality mistakes, and even in our bid to sprinkle in some success stories from time-to-time, where do we start?

#### **IV. Partnerships in Suppression Activities**

Here is one approach. The first place we need to start is probably with one another.

In the firefighting community, we're learning, after much experience with low-quality mistakes, that we really do need one another as partners. The agency or jurisdiction that strikes out on its own in fire management today usually does just that: it strikes out.

A bit of context is needed to explain the necessity of partnerships. There are only so many firefighting resources to go around. We've known that for many years. Retired federal firefighters talk about the not-so-good-old-days, when a fire crew might be recruited by several agencies and often could pick and choose where it wanted to go. It was a little bit like today's free agency in professional sports, although on a slightly different pay scale. Take a look at the offers, then cut a deal.

Agencies competed with one another for scarce resources. They hoarded whatever they could get their hands on. One legendary story – and, by the way, completely true – concerns a national forest in Utah, that, in a moment of selflessness, sent a crew of firefighters to a Bureau of Land Management fire in Nevada. A couple of days later, when lightning ignited wildfires in Utah, the national forest asked for its crew to be sent home to help. BLM refused, thus cementing the notion among fire managers that no good deed goes unpunished, and setting off a minor turf war that lasted for some time.

Such infighting was counterproductive, chaotic, and combative. It was a classic example of a low-quality mistake. In the 1960s, the seeds of a cooperative national fire center were planted, and within a few years, the Boise Interagency Fire Center was formed, later to be renamed the National Interagency Fire Center, after a few prominent, though somewhat parochial, Idaho elected officials retired from office or simply died.

Federal agencies are now bona fide partners. They pool resources and assist each other. On a large fire, it's common to find local and state crews, Forest Service and BLM crews, and perhaps personnel from other federal agencies or the private sector working side by side. This approach makes sense. It saves money for the taxpayers. It takes much of the competitiveness out of fire management and replaces it with cooperation.

Granted, there is still some competition and jostling among agencies and jurisdictions. It's a good system, though not perfect. We'll probably, as partners, never quite overcome that, and maybe a small amount of competition is healthy. But in difficult times, such as the nasty fire season of a year ago, we are acting more and more in true partnership, to the benefit of communities, natural resources and public safety.

To eliminate low-quality mistakes, start with partnerships. Had a better partnership been in place at Cerro Grande, that prescribed fire might never have been so damaging.

## **V. Partnerships in the Wildland Urban Interface**

Working in partnership is essential in wildland fire suppression, and it's also integral to our success in prevention activities. Jim (Hubbard) will talk in depth about a problem called "the wildland-urban interface," which essentially means we're building too many homes and other structures in fire-prone areas, but the topic begs for comment regarding partnership.

Many of the interface homes are built with wood roofs, big wood decks, and have a stack of firewood piled against the house. Trees and brush have not been cleared away from the home. Such structures can become the densest fuel load around, and more prone to burn than the forest surrounding them. Wildfire is indiscriminate. It needs fuel, and it doesn't matter if the fuel is trees, brush, grasses or your living room. Perhaps the problem is best illustrated by a homeowner in New Mexico who said, "I'd rather my house burn than cut any of the trees next to it." When wildfire came, she got her wish. Her home burned. So did her trees. It is an entirely preventable, low-quality mistake that thousands of people make each year.

The best way to resolve the problem is through wide-ranging partnerships. It's not enough for the Forest Service or the State of Colorado or a rural fire department to warn property owners. It's not even enough for those agencies to remove brush or trim trees, because a few years later, the problem is

back.

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What does work is a partnership among local interests, where property owners assume responsibility and accountability for what could happen. Partnerships must be encompassing. They should include, of course, the local, state or federal fire agency, as appropriate. But those partnerships also need to include homeowners' associations, town councils, planning and zoning commissions, contractor and building associations, real estate representatives, developers, emergency response organizations, schools, and anyone else who has a stake in keeping the homes from burning. You really can't get overly inclusive in such an effort.

Partnerships and pooling resources are the key to effective wildland fire prevention. Smokey Bear talking about fire prevention is one thing. Hearing it from your neighbor, builder, or local fire chief is another. Where people who've done nothing to prevent fire on their property assume the state or local or federal firefighters will come charging in over the ridge and save their homes, we have a big problem. Where property owners commit to making their communities defensible, we – and they – have a chance to save their homes.

## **VII. Partnerships in Restoration**

Earlier, I made the point that agency approaches have changed radically in some of our management activities in the last few years, as we've learned a little more and tended to look at things from a landscape or ecosystem perspective. We're following the advice of Yogi Berra, who said, "You can observe a lot by watching."

It used to be that after a fire, we were content to stabilize the soil from wind and water erosion, seed it or replant it, and call it done.

But we've been watching. We're realizing now that such an approach was not enough. We're looking

more at trying to restore ecosystems so that they look and act as Nature intended them to. One example that comes to mind is the attempt by my agency, the Bureau of Land Management, to begin restoring parts of the Great Basin. Let me give you just a bit of history.

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BLM manages mostly rangelands in the United States, a good portion of which are in the Great Basin of Nevada, Utah, Idaho and Oregon. Annual weeds, primarily cheatgrass, invaded from central Asia about 150 years ago, and they now dominate more than 25 million acres in the Great Basin. According to some estimates, the annual weeds, which are aggressive and prolific, take over about 4,000 acres a day in the West. They rob these areas of native vegetation and most of what is natural.

Cheatgrass dries early, is highly flammable, and thrives in disturbed areas, especially where fire has occurred. You see the cycle: the more cheatgrass, the more fire. The more fire, the more cheatgrass. The Idaho Statesman newspaper reported of cheatgrass, "It grows in a day, ripens in a day, and blows away in a day." That was written in May ... of 1928. The ecological integrity of much of the West is at stake. Restoration of these areas to naturally functioning condition is not a luxury. It is a necessity.

While the restoration work is still in its early stages, I'm confident that we'll make good progress. Part of the reason for that is the array of interests and organizations that support restoration. Among our partners are livestock associations and environmental groups; elected officials from both political parties; state agencies and federal agencies; urban and rural interests.

These varied groups are not exactly known for joining hands and singing "Kumbaya," but in this case, they are united to achieve a common goal that has something in it for all the stakeholders. This is so obvious I hesitate to point it out, but will anyway: One of the keys to a successful partnership in almost any aspect of natural resource management is to find common ground. Then set a common goal.

Identify what good will come out of it and how it will benefit all. Be willing to sacrifice a little to gain a little more. This approach can serve as a model for how other equally vexing environmental problems are resolved.

Some of you are thinking, “If it were only that easy.” And you’re right. It isn’t easy. But you can’t let the thought of difficult mission prevent you from trying. The best natural resource management success stories of late are those that followed that pattern of mutually beneficial partnerships. None of us can plough much ground alone.

### **VIII. Performance Measures in Natural Resources**

Before wrapping up my remarks, I’d like to spend a couple of minutes on performance measures as applied to natural resources. It doesn’t fit in perfectly with the rest of my remarks, but I think that’s okay, since measuring performance is the theme of this conference. We need performance measures. When done properly, they improve our management, help us cut down on low-quality mistakes, and help us become accountable to our ultimate boss, the taxpayer. But they must be good performance measures that meet several tests.

C Many organizations tend to set performance measures that are too aggressive, or they try to measure too many things. Let’s not fool ourselves. Good performance measures are difficult to set. Keep them simple and understandable.

C Performance measures can become, not a means to an end, but an end to a means. Too many of us too many times have checked off a list of accomplishments at the end of the year, yet our organization doesn’t seem to have taken a step forward. As one expert (*Dr. George Roth*) noted, “As people become aware of being judged and measured, they seek to satisfy the evaluation criteria instead of improving.”

C Performance measures must be understood, accepted and developed by all the players, to the extent possible. That should include partner organizations. Too often, performance measures

are set by a relatively small group of managers without the participation of the people who will be responsible for most of the work. That's a recipe for failure in the fire business, and probably your business as well.

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- C Agree on what to measure, how to measure it and when to measure it. Performance measures should be practical to use and yield valuable information focused on activities in a specific level.
- C Performance measures must be flexible and allow for change as needed. Any performance measure that constricts your agency to an inflexible routine is not worth the time or investment. Build flexibility into your performance measures that will allow you to adapt, watch, change and grow.
- C Be aware of intangible performance measures. Not everything we do in resource management can be counted, measured and analyzed. Albert Einstein said, "Not everything that counts can be counted, and not everything that is counted counts."

## **IX. Summary – What I Think I've Said and Why**

It's time to summarize my remarks.

- C First, we live in a time when change is occurring at a scale and pace never before witnessed. Good decision-making abilities have never been more difficult, and never needed more.
- C We need to recognize that all decisions aren't going to work out as planned. It's a given that mistakes will be made. What we should do is aim to eliminate the low-quality mistakes that cannot be reversed and cause damage to people and our organizations.
- C Partnerships are essential in this age to achieve the common good for the public by leveraging the abilities of individual agencies. They are essential in the success of fire suppression, fire

prevention and restoration of natural resources. Chances are they're essential to your agency's success, too.

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C Performance measures must be set that are realistic, practical, valuable, with flexibility built in. They must count. They must include the advice and be aligned with the goals of your partner organizations.

I believe in the value of partnerships and in performance measures that are properly developed. In this day of unprecedented change, it is one of the best ways for us to accomplish our work, meet our goals, and, when it comes to it, improve the quality of our mistakes and perhaps eliminate some altogether. It's a sobering thought to think of what our fire management efforts would be like in this country if we still used the old model of building our own kingdoms at the expense of take what you can, use it until it's gone, and worry only about what's in your own backyard.

I suppose the gentleman who wrote us about the flying steel domes was, in a sense, trying to partner up with us. While that particular scheme has a few insurmountable engineering and logistical problems, I like the notion that he was willing to work together with us toward resolution of a common problem. Maybe next time, he'll have an idea that works. If so, we will welcome him as our partner, and we will always welcome his ideas.

Partnerships are a way to make sure that what we do deserves to be counted, and more importantly, that what we do truly counts.

Thank you.

