Burning Issues

The NIFC Newsletter October 2000

A World of Fire Information

During the peak of the fire season at the end of August, more than 28,000 people were committed to fire suppression efforts, 86 large fires were burning in 16 states that covered more than 1.6 million acres, and wildland fire activity was one of the top news stories across the nation. Also during this intense period, more than 30 information officers, including those with the military, staffed the Information Center at NIFC and responded to hundreds of media and public inquiries every day.

"The phone traffic was intense during the western fire bust this summer," said Jack Sept, BLM chief of External Affairs. Information officers staffed a bank of 10 telephones that were ringing constantly with reporters from international, national, regional and local media organizations, as well as concerned citizens, political representatives, tourism organizations and so many more. "We fielded thousands of calls and e-mail inquiries this summer in our effort to keep the public informed about the current wildland fire situation," said Sept. "We also made a strong effort to weave a resource message into all our interviews to help the world understand the natural resource values that were at risk during a fire season like this."

The NIFC web site was also a major source of information. It received more than 14 million visits during the month of August when activity was at its peak. Pat Entwistle, former BLM/NIFC External Affairs employee from 1993 to 1996, was hired to assist in the information center and was amazed at the intense public interest in the western wildland fire situation. "Minute-by-minute calls from all over the world were coming in--just an amazing number of calls," said Entwistle. She was impressed by improved access to information via the Internet. "The NIFC web page had such great information and links to other good sites, we had so much more information at our fingertips to provide to the news media and public."

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Dennis Pendleton, Forest Service operations director, talked to the media about the fire season.

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Hamilton Jumps Out of the Frying Pan

By Larry Hamilton, Director, Office of Fire and Aviation

When some of my peers learned that I was leaving Montana and coming to Boise as the Director of Fire and Aviation I began to hear things like: "out of the frying pan into the fire" or "light my fire, light my fire." These prophetic words came true as we experienced one of the worst fire years in a hundred years. As I look back on this summer I am amazed and awed by the number of daily problems and challenges that people were resolving. We had retardant problems, several fatalities, shortages of all kinds, foreign assistance, legislative and executive assistance, military battalions deployed, major media coverage, public ideas and suggestions, until finally mother nature brought some snow and rain. Even though it was a hellacious year, the outcome was true to form.

The interagency firefighting community distinguished itself again as the premiere wildland firefighting organization in the world. As the result of our outstanding performance and land management challenges we are being recognized by the President and the Congress with a major budget increase to improve our effectiveness, restore fire to the ecosystem, and manage fire in the wildland-urban interface. This will be a daunting task that will take many years to accomplish, but the once-in-a-career opportunity has arrived. My goal will be to foster an intergovernmental, interagency and interdisciplinary environment that will bring ecological changes to the landscape which future generations will look back on and say, "They did the right thing with the right stuff." I hope you will join me in making our future a reality.

NIFC Website A Fire Season Hit

In what must be an undocumented record, the NIFC website recorded an unprecedented 14 million "hits" during the month of August, providing daily fire information, links to fire websites, photographs, maps, not to mention travel information for areas affected by fires, and lately, information for hunters. Janelle Smith, with the help of computer student Ben Botti, developed new and better links to fire-related sites, and created new statistical tables for historical and current fire data. Pam Johansen and Sheri Ascherfeld also assisted in making sure the site was updated every day, pulling early morning and weekend assignments to keep it current. The website assisted the fire information officers on detail at NIFC during fire season in providing the latest in fire information, and keeping themselves current on the ever-changing daily situation. The External Affairs Office also received numerous positive comments through its website mailbox, and on occasion added information to the website based on customer comments.

"Generally, I think the website was a real asset to the fire information scene," said Judith Dyess, who served as a lead information officer, on detail from Texas.

"The website was also very helpful to information officers. It was a unique assignment, in that it was not reporting on a single incident or area. It was unique to deal with many international affiliates."

The number of hits for September has dropped to a mere 4.5 million, an obvious sign that interest in the fire season has waned. However, it appears that it is still a popular site, or starting point for people in search of information.

Fire Season 2000 - An International Flare

By Tom Frey, BLM International Program Coordinator

The 2000 fire season saw NIFC engaged in unprecedented international activity. When the fire situation reached Preparedness Level-5, the National MAC Group requested assistance from Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. Canada filled more than 1300 requests for personnel, incident management teams and fire crews; Australia sent about 90 overhead and New Zealand 10. Mexico also supplied a crew and two cache personnel. Fire camp conversations were filled with a variety of *English* accents and expressions such as "g'day mate," "morning-aa," and "howdy y'all."

As these countries provided fire fighters, numerous other countries wanted to know how they could help. However, because of existing agreements with Mexico, Canada, Australia and New Zealand, these four countries were the only countries that actually had firefighters on the ground. Still, other countries were interested in coming to NIFC to observe and learn about the U.S. interagency wildland fire management system. Country representatives that came to NIFC during the fire season were from Norway, Korea, Russia, Spain, Israel, and Germany.

BLM's Office of Fire and Aviation sent a three-person team, led by Bob Clark, to southern Russia near the Caspian Sea to study cheat grass in its native habitat and to look for potential methods to deal with the cheat grass problem in the Great Basin.

Overhead from Australia and New Zealand arrived at NIFC on August 11, 2000.

This winter, BLM's International Program will be working with other agencies at NIFC to define and strengthen these relationships and improve the operational coordination with the four countries that provided so much valuable assistance during the worst fire season in decades.

Fire Information...

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Susan Giannettino, information officer, Forest Service Intermountain Region was impressed by the breadth and extent of the interest in fires. "It was not uncommon to have five information officers in the room, with one talking to someone from Denmark, one talking to CNN for the fourth time that day, and one talking to a concerned citizen wanting to know the best route from Wyoming to Montana," Giannettino said.

During her detail at the end of August, she noticed that the media were probing more deeply into the fire story asking questions like "Why are the shirts yellow?" and "How do fires get their names?" and "How much do firefighters get paid?" She felt the press coverage was generally positive and that the media recognized the land management agencies were doing their best under very difficult circumstances.

The Great Basin Cache Meets the Demand for Scarce Supplies

During a season that tested wildland fire operations in every way, the Great Basin Cache responded by conducting business as usual. Although their operations expanded by hiring more people than in a typical season, purchasing emergency supplies, and working with experts from Canada and Australia, the standard operating procedures were followed, and they worked.

The Great Basin Cache provided equipment and supplies for large fires across the nation.

"We plan ahead for these situations," said Linda Bass, Great Basin Cache manager. "It is not good business to change things in mid-stream." For example, a good working relationship with the General Services Administration (GSA) was in place long before this season started. "We would have been at a loss if we didn't have them (GSA) there to help us back fill our inventory," said Bass.

In addition to being prepared, the employees of the Great Basin Cache made it possible to meet the demands of this extreme season due to their knowledge, experience and dedication. "Their efforts made the season flow without any major hitches, and I'd like to credit all of them for making the program so successful in meeting our field customer needs," said Bass.

At the height of wildland fire activity in the West, the Cache system began to run short on certain supplies. For example, hot food containers were in demand, so workers from the Northwest Area Cache developed their own version, received approval from the Missoula Technology and Development Center and produced containers to feed hot meals to the numerous firefighters in spike camps. As large fires neared containment and mop-up was the major task, mop-up kits were scarce. The Great Basin Cache requested all components from the other caches and assembled enough kits to meet the demands. These are just two examples among many of how the Cache system stepped up to meet the demands of one of the most intense fire seasons on record.

As the season winds down, it is now time for the national cache system to regroup. The geographic area caches throughout the country have already conducted a preliminary phase of redistribution, and will complete the process in December. "We can't tell if we have an overabundance of supplies yet," said Bass, when asked if the extra equipment purchased through GSA and other local vendors will cause bulges in the National Fire Equipment System. "The new stuff already meets specifications and standards, and we have several options once we determine appropriate stocking levels for all of the caches." Some of the items will be used to help expedite the phase-out of equipment that is obsolete. Other equipment might be sent to local caches. The bottom line is, however, that it is too early to tell.

Office of Aircraft Services Takes Flight With Fire Season

If last year was a harbinger of what they would face this summer, the Office of Aircraft Services' (OAS) staff might have looked for a flight of their own to some place cool and far away. Instead, they geared up as they usually do for fire season. What they didn't know was just how busy 2000 would be.

"Our largest year ever was last year when we paid $85 million to vendors for aircraft services; this year we've hit nearly $115 million," said Barb Mahaffey, chief of finance and information management at OAS' headquarters office located at the National Interagency Fire Center. Mahaffey said that figure doesn't include the Forest Service's work because the agency handles its own aircraft contracts.

The OAS procures aircraft services for all Department of the Interior agencies with wildland fire responsibilities – Bureau of Land Management (BLM), Bureau of Indian Affairs, Fish and Wildlife Service and the National Park Service. Sam Stivison, OAS' chief of acquisition management said the bureaus do a good job of planning and forecasting aircraft needs given their tight budgets and the available aircraft. That's something, given the intense fire season federal agencies just experienced.

Mahaffey said the finance staff of six people worked 20 to 40 hours overtime every week in order to process the huge volume of aircraft use reports, payments to vendors and billings to the agencies. "In a year like this, it almost overwhelms us, but the adrenaline kicks in and we go to a different level."

Mick McCurry, shared a similar story. As chief of technical services, McCurry spent much of his time on the road – rather on the fires. He and his staff were responsible for helping keep aircraft on contract and working. That meant lots of inspections.

"We also inspected and approved the Canadian aircraft, and trained the Australian, New Zealander and Canadian helicopter and helibase managers," McCurry said.

And those inspections are critical to the safety of people in or near aircraft during wildland fires. Still, accidents happen. This year five aircraft accidents resulted in six fatalities. Bob Galloway, aviation safety manager for OAS' headquarters office at NIFC, spends most of his time investigating or working to prevent these accidents and the sometimes tragic consequences.

Galloway handles aviation "SAFECOMS," which are reports from employees with safety concerns related to aircraft and wildland fire operations. When these forms are submitted, Galloway, along with aviation safety staff, area offices and many others in this joint effort, analyze the reports and look for breakdowns in the system.

"As of October 2, we've received 448 SAFECOMS, which is about 30 more than last year," Galloway said. During the fire season's peak, that's about 10 or 12 per day. Each SAFECOM can take from a few minutes to weeks or months to resolve.

Whether they're writing contracts, processing payments, inspecting damaged aircraft or processing SAFECOMS, OAS staff know their work is important to wildland fire operations.

No one is more aware of this than Mahaffey: "Vendors are sometimes small operators; if they don't get paid promptly, they can't buy fuel to launch their aircraft. Even if you're not on the ground, you quickly realize you're a critical part of the organization."

A helicopter landed at a helibase for fuel.

BLM Aviation at Osh Kosh

An aerial view of the Federal Pavilion on just a portion of the expansive AirVenture grounds.

Approximately 765,000 people entered the gates on the Experimental Aircraft Association grounds in Osh Kosh, Wisconsin, during the last week in July for the AirVenture 2000 air show, the largest air show in the world. An estimated 10,500 aircraft flew into a small airstrip carrying aviators from around the world. More than 60 nations were represented by about 2,300 international visitors, and nearly 1,000 media personnel from five different continents were there to cover the AirVenture story.

The Bureau of Land Management Aviation Program was also there to share its story with hundreds of thousands of aviation enthusiasts. BLM employees from Wyoming, Alaska, Colorado, Nevada, Washington D.C., and Idaho educated visitors about the aircraft it uses as part of its natural resource mission. Also, during the seven-day event, wildland fires in the West intensified and became one of the headline news stories across the nation. "This year's fire season helped make us an easy link in some peoples minds about what BLM's Fire and Aviation program does," said JoLynn Worley, Public Affairs Specialist from the Nevada State Office in Reno.

"This is a tremendous opportunity to reach audiences that may not otherwise hear about BLM," said Lynn Findley, Aviation Program Manager. "Our message this year was to familiarize pilots with what to do when they encounter a wildland fire." Sometimes private pilots can clog airspace around a fire causing safety problems to themselves and the agency aircraft. "By letting them know that our aircraft is already on scene by the time they see the smoke, we hopefully steer them clear of potentially harmful situations," Findley said.

The BLM display area featured a newly-designed exhibit, photos of different aircraft used by the aviation program, the ever-popular smokejumper mannequin, a laptop computer with an Internet link to the NIFC web site and a TV/VCR displaying continuous videos of wildland fire footage. The area was set in the heart of the Federal Pavilion and was surrounded by dozens of other U.S. and Canadian government agencies with similar programs and messages to share with the thousands of visitors.

Tom Gorey (left), Washington, D.C., and Jim Ward (right), Alaska, greet visitors in front of the new BLM Aviation display.

NIFC Talks Fire in Nevada

Fire grabs everyone's attention in northern Nevada. And no wonder! Last year more than 1.7 million acres of public land burned in the Great Basin -- much of it in northern Nevada. This year fires in Nevada have burned more than 600,000 acres.

That's why the National Interagency Fire Center was invited this year to join the BLM's Carson City, Nevada, field office for Public Lands Appreciation Day.

"Half the months of June and July, you could see and smell smoke from Reno and Carson City, and people were really worried about it," said Chris Miller, an outdoor recreation planner for the Carson City Field Office.

Armed with volunteer recognition items and educational information about wildland and prescribed fire, Pam Johansen, Nancy Lull, and intern Priscilla Hammon traveled to the historic Silver Saddle Ranch on the outskirts of Carson City. They joined 298 volunteers who spent the morning painting an historic barn, constructing 2,800 feet of trail, collecting trash along the Carson River, wrapping 100 trees for protection from beavers, planting 400 willow trees, and placing 1,000 trout fingerlings in the river. Several visitors stayed behind to learn more about wildland fire. However, everyone gathered at noon for a catered lunch, raffle drawings, award presentations and bluegrass entertainment.

The Silver Saddle Ranch encompasses 702 acres along the east and west banks of the Carson River. It was transferred to the BLM in 1997 so the historic ranch could be spared from residential development and preserved for open space, recreation and education.

Base Maintenance Happenings

The buildings are getting larger at NIFC! Completion of the Radio Cache extension is expected at the end of November and will provide much needed office space for the staff and a co-op training lab.

Work will soon begin on a 2,500-foot addition to the Returns Warehouse that will house the small engine repair shop. After the foundation is poured, the base maintenance staff will take over the construction of the extension.

Office space in the Airport Business Center just north of the Jack Wilson Building has been leased for some NIFC tenants. The base maintenance staff has finished building the handicap access and walkway and has installed a card reader in preparation for occupancy.

Group Leader Marty Nelson reported that base maintenance received 525 work orders so far this year, with 98 percent of them now complete.

BURNING ISSUES: THE NEXT GENERATION OF FIRE EDUCATION

Pat Durland, BLM fire prevention and education specialist, has captivated the younger generation with *Burning Issues*, the new educational compact disc (CD). Durland, in conjunction with Florida State University, created an interactive CD designed to teach middle and high school students about the role of fire in ecosystems and about fire management practices.

"*Burning Issues* is a great outreach tool and an outstanding example of how computer technology can help us achieve our environmental education goals," Durland said.

The CD includes four EcoVentures illustrating the impact of fire on a southern pine ecosystem, the shrub-steppe ecosystem of Idaho, a ponderosa pine ecosystem in the Rocky Mountain foothills, and the chaparral of America's southwest. It also includes dynamic video, an interactive resource room, and interviews with resource and fire specialists.

Burning Issues made its debut at the National Science Teachers Association conference in Boise on October 5 - 6. "Teachers were very enthusiastic about the program," said Pam Johansen, BLM external affairs. "They were impressed with all the ecosystem information and reference materials available on the CD."

For more information about this CD, contact Durland at 387-5162.

NIFC Welcomes New Exmployees

Tina Winters, BLM Personnel
Jose Lopez, BLM Radio Shop
Corey Prescott, BLM RAWS
Rudy Rodriguez, BLM RAWS
Michelle Ryerson-Grett, BLM Safety and Occupational Health

Length of Service Awards

Congratulations to the following BLM, BIA, and OAS employees for their years of service.

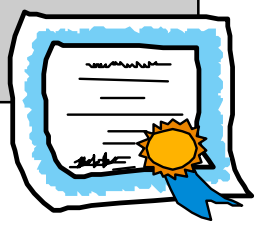
30 years
Marcia Scifres - BLM
Gregory Jensen - BLM
David Smith - BLM
Elmer Hurd - OAS
Ed Blakeslee - OAS
Steve Smith - OAS

20 years

Diane Lukesh - OAS
Jeff Bergquist - BLM
Larry Good - BLM
Charles Kazimir - BLM

10 years

Hector Madrid - BLM
Tony Demasters - BLM
David Estey - BLM
Eric Hipke - BLM
Jerome Drazinski - BLM
Ronald Hunter - BIA
Roberta Steele - BIA



Three Misuses of Technology by a Coworker

1. Installed AOL CDs on computers, instead of using them as coasters or mini-frisbees.

2. A high school intern sent the same fax over and over again. The intern couldn't figure out why it kept coming back out of the machine instead of getting sent.

3. Another intern was asked to make copies of CD-ROMS. She used the photocopier.

Jumpers Stay Busy This Summer

Ask a smokejumper about the recent fire season, and he or she probably will use the same word to describe it.

Busy.

"We stayed really busy over a tough, long season in difficult burning conditions," says Sean Cross, smokejumper manager.

"It was a really busy season," adds Mike Burin, who has logged 20 seasons as a firefighter, 13 of them as a jumper. "I had seven, 21-day assignments this year."

Some jumpers had even more assignments. One, Dennis Terry, logged 20 fire jumps.

The high demand for all firefighters helped keep the smokejumpers hopping this year. At times, it was next to impossible to find a Type I crew. Smokejumpers, because of their relatively short rotations on a fire, were called on to temporarily fill the void. Burin, for example, found himself jumping a 1,000-acre timber fire -- not a typical scenario for a smokejumper.

BLM smokejumpers were grounded until mid-July, following an investigation of an accident in Alaska that claimed the life of 28-year old David Liston. When the investigation was completed and the recommendations accepted, BLM smokejumpers were airborne again.

That didn't mean the smokejumpers sat around waiting for the investigation to wrap up. "We took a lot of different fire assignments before we came on line. Some of us worked helitack, others took assignments as members of overhead teams," Burin said.

The numbers help tell just how busy the smokejumpers were. The Boise smokejumpers jumped 188 fires and pounded on another 108, for a season total of 296 fires. Total number of smokejumpers dispatched was 1,259.

"It was a good season for us, if good means that we had a lot of action," Burin says.

Cross had one more measure of a good season.

"We managed to keep everyone safe and healthy, with only a few minor injuries," he said, which is the best thing that can be said about a very busy season.

MOB CENTER SHUFFLES THOUSANDS THROUGH NIFC

The Mob Center welcomed firefighting personnel from Australia and New Zealand.

Firefighters from all over the world passed through the National Interagency Fire Center (NIFC) this summer as they headed to fires in the western United States. The coordination for the support of moving firefighters and overhead team members through the Boise area is the responsibility of the Great Basin Mobilization Center (Mob Center) at NIFC. When activated, personnel staffing this center are responsible for the well being and smooth transition of emergency personnel traveling through Boise to an incident, and coordinating their return through Boise to their home base. They must arrange overnight accommodations, provide meals, schedule transportation, and in general provide for anything firefighters need (medical attention, finding lost luggage, filling prescriptions) while traveling to or from an incident.

The NIFC Great Basin Support Group manages the Mob Center. This group is very diversified in its fire and logistical experience and training, and has been given this job due to their expertise in logistics and administrative operations. This year, the Mob Center was in operation 24 hours a day and seven days a week for almost two months. It provided personnel support to NICC, geographic area coordination centers, expanded dispatch centers, and every major incident in the western United States. They also provided logistical assistance to military cadres for mobilization of military battalions, Australian firefighters, and Canadian helicopter rapellers.

When asked how this fire season compared with other busy fire seasons, Fire Equipment Specialist Robert Stroud said, "There has been as much or more activity in past years, but this season started and finished in a shorter period of time without any breaks".

Between May 11 and September 14, the Mob Center provided for all personnel needs and coordinated the movement of about 5,240 firefighters and overhead team members. During this period the Center provided:

- 10,550 meals
- 795 motel reservations
- 1,240 beds at the National Guard Barracks
- 12,864 bottles of water
- 7,488 bottles of juice