Summary of the National Fire Plan Strategy For the Pacific Northwest

BACKGROUND

In the Pacific Northwest (Oregon and Washington), the federal and state fire management and environmental management agencies have chosen to implement the National Fire Plan through an interagency and intergovernmental strategy.

As with other areas of the country, we have experienced the unintended consequences of our very effective wildfire fighting program: The wildfires of today are getting bigger, more dangerous, harder to control, and are adversely affecting the safety of the public and our fire fighters. The risks from wildfire to our communities are growing. As a result of the devastating fire season of 2000, the country recognized the problem and is supportive of dealing with the long-term issue. Thanks to the actions of Governors, Congressman, Senators, and Presidents, we have a National Fire plan, which provides additional funding and emphasis to deal with the problems underlying the wildfire threats to our communities and the environment.

The foundation principle for dealing with this risk is to reduce the unnatural levels of hazardous fuels threatening our communities and the wildland ecosystems. Critical to this principle is increasing public awareness of wildland-urban interface hazards and solutions. The other aspects of the National Fire Plan that address preparedness for fighting wildfires, and rehabilitating burned areas are important, but do not deal with changing the growing wildfire threat.

CONGRESSIONAL INTENT

Congress gave some specific direction (P.L. 107-63) and has expectations for how the National Fire Plan is to be implemented. First of all they expect the federal fire management agencies to work together, and with the states, communities, and tribes to implement the National Fire Plan:

> "The managers expect the agencies to work closely with the states and local communities to maximize benefits to the environment and to local communities."

> "… seek the advice of Governors, and local and tribal government representatives in setting priorities …"

Congress also considers hazardous fuel reduction and fire planning as essential to the success of the National Fire Plan:

> "… emphasis on fuels reduction work in the wildland-urban interface is critical to protecting the safety of rural communities."
>
> "… reiterate the House direction concerning the need for completed fire plans …"

Congress also places emphasis on economic benefits to communities and on job creation through flexibility allowed in contracting:

> "In conducting treatments, local contract personnel are to be used wherever practical and efficient."
>
> "… emphasize the use of cooperative agreements and grants to a wide-range of interests to help meet the National Fire Plan goals and objectives on all lands …"
>
> "Notwithstanding Federal government procurement and contracting laws, in order to provide employment and training opportunities to people in rural communities, the Secretaries may award contracts …"

DRIVING PRINCIPLES

With this direction, expectations from political and administration leaders, and with the elements of the National Fire Plan we developed the following driving principles for implementing the National Fire Plan in Oregon and Washington:

1. Ultimately, we are to work together (federal, state, and local) to reduce the costs, losses, and damages caused by wildfire, and provide for better public and firefighter safety.
2. Hazardous fuel treatment particularly in the wildland-urban interface is a major priority.
3. Communities are to become more fire safe.
4. Fire-adapted ecosystems are to become more resilient, and we should conserve priority watersheds, species, and biodiversity.
5. Communities are to benefit economically, particularly through job creation and training. Agencies are to seek to build community capacity to perform fire and fuel reduction work and to create their own protection plans. (Agencies issue contracts and grants).
6. Priorities are to be determined through interagency/intergovernmental consultation. Locally this can best be done through interagency and intergovernmental fire hazard reduction plans.
7. The public expects government agencies to act as one government.
8. The public expects the agencies to put public service and attainment of National Fire Plan goals ahead of other agency needs.

ORGANIZATION

We began by assembling the most affected agencies and worked under the umbrella of the Pacific Northwest Wildfire Coordinating Group, which had an obvious interest in the National Fire Plan and was already an interagency body. The agencies involved to date include:

Washington Department of Natural Resources
Oregon Department of Forestry
National Park Service
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
Bureau of Indian Affairs
Bureau of Land Management
U.S. Forest Service
National Marine Fisheries Service
Environmental Protection Agency
The State Fire Marshals of Oregon and Washington
The Oregon Governors Office
Community and Tribal Representatives

We have added or are seeking to add the participation and coordination of other agencies, such as: the Federal Emergency Management Agency, the Department of Defense (Base lands and Corps of Engineers projects), the Department of Energy (project lands), and the Natural Resources Conservation Service (land owner relations and assistance).

We formed an Interagency National Fire Plan Strategy Team, consisting of representatives of the above organizations, that coordinates and oversees interagency implementation of the National Fire Plan. The Pacific Northwest Wildfire Coordinating Group selected an interagency coordinator (Executive Director for the National Fire Plan for the Pacific Northwest Wildfire Coordinating Group). The Strategy Team establishes the program for coordinating the interagency implementation efforts and resolves problems interfering with successful attainment of the National Fire Plan goals.

The Strategy Team developed the following **vision** to guide National Fire Plan implementation:

Improve community well-being and ecosystem health through the collaborative and coordinated efforts of implementing the National Fire Plan.

STRATEGY DEVELOPMENT

The Interagency National Fire Plan Strategy Team then established priority objectives and strategies to implement the National Fire Plan.

OBJECTIVES

1. **COMMUNITY SERVICE.** Make the processes easy for communities to access and understand, and efficient for the agencies, in order to provide the best public service, minimize overhead expenses, and maximize effectiveness of program delivery.

2. **COMMUNITY BENEFITS.** Maximize benefits (results) to communities for both fire safety (survivable space) and economics (jobs and training opportunities – build Community capacity).

3. **ECOSYSTEM HEALTH.** Maximize ecosystem health and restore fire-adapted ecosystems. This is prioritized through the collaborative process and is accomplished through standard agency processes and through improved processes where necessary.

4. **PUBLIC SUPPORT.** Increase understanding of and support for National Fire Plan objectives (1 voice – public contacts, press information, collective success, public ceremonies, monitor, listen, adjust, show accountability).

STRATEGIES TO MEET OBJECTIVES

The team then developed strategies to meet those objectives. The main strategies and some of their key elements follow:

1. **COMMUNITY SERVICE**
    a. Use existing processes where available (e.g., add DOI Rural Fire Assistance program to existing USFS/State process for Volunteer Fire Assistance).
    b. Develop common interagency processes where there is no adequate existing process (e.g., one request for applications and one selection process for grants for wildland urban interface, economic action programs, and community fire planning).
    c. Make the processes and strategies easy to understand (e.g., through items a. and b. above, and helping people understand other process that cannot be combined such as the Federal Emergency Management Agency grants to fire departments that are being administered nationally).
    d. Leverage resources available (i.e., combining and coordinating agency programs available to states and communities).
    e. Facilitate implementation of the National Fire Plan
        i. Regionally: provide tools, eliminate barriers, and create interagency consistency.
        ii. Locally: agencies facilitate community involvement, planning, implementation, and intergovernmental coordination.
    f. Fully coordinate on an interagency basis all processes and issues.
        i. Develop an interagency communication plan and provide interagency delivery of information (speaking with one voice – one government), and expedited availability of information through a Pacific Northwest Interagency web site (located at http://www.nwfireplan.gov/) (see Strategy #4).
        ii. Provide interagency coordination and streamlining of regulatory compliance needs for National Environmental Policy Act, Endangered Species Act, and National Historic Preservation Act.
        iii. Provide guidance to local federal, state, and community leaders to communicate opportunities, expectations, and streamlined processes.
        iv. Streamline contracting procedures and develop understanding of available flexibility, expectations, and contract tools (see Strategy #2).

v. Develop interagency coordination and development of strategies to address air quality concerns because of the increased potential for smoke from prescribed burning.

vi. Share information among agencies to facilitate agency workload assessments.

g. Coordinate locally those processes that are largely internal agency processes to facilitate efficiency, reduce duplication, and take advantage of opportunities to share. This would include activities such as preparedness for fighting fire, rehabilitation of burned areas, hiring, equipment acquisition, and federal land fuels programs.

2. COMMUNITY BENEFITS.

a. Expand the use of contracting and agreements. Agencies are asked to use contracting and agreements wherever possible for fuel treatment and to meet preparedness needs.

b. Build community capacity to perform fuels reduction work. This provides local jobs, training, and experience consistent with National Fire Plan objectives.

c. Develop regionally, a consistent, objective, and understandable process for determining priorities that take into account community and ecosystem risk, fuel strategies, and ecosystem assessment processes.

d. Collaborate locally in developing interagency/intergovernmental fire hazardous fuel reduction plans that address existing conditions and risk at a landscape level and then prioritize needs for all ownerships, and coordinate implementation.

e. Local agencies should collaborate, coordinate, facilitate, and educate as much as necessary to ensure that communities are able to take full advantage of the opportunities afforded by the National Fire Plan to make their communities more fire safe.

3. ECOSYSTEM HEALTH.

a. Use existing programs (enhanced by National Fire Plan increased financing) to restore fire-adapted ecosystems to conditions that reflect a more natural range of variability.

b. Reduce unnatural fuel accumulations to restore the natural role of fire in fire-adapted ecosystems. Unnatural fuel accumulations are those beyond what normally would be expected for that ecosystem type.

c. Implement priorities as identified in Strategy #2 c. and d.

4. **PUBLIC SUPPORT.** Prepare a Communication Plan to facilitate the following.

a. Build public support and understanding of the importance of reducing hazardous fuel accumulations to protect communities and ecosystems.

b. Build public support and understanding of the importance of improving the ability of agencies to manage fire.

c. Build public support and understanding of the role and benefits of the National Fire Plan for providing that protection.

d. Promote successes in implementing the National Fire Plan and meeting its goals.

i. Use ceremonies, press releases, and other media opportunities when issuing contacts to service providers.
ii. Use ceremonies, press releases, and other media opportunities when awarding grants to communities or to states for communities.

e. Agencies work together to provide public information so that they "speak with one voice" as one government providing public service.
f. Take advantage of "teaching moments" during fires and other events to educate the public about the need to reduce hazardous fuels, provide community protection, and about the natural role of fire in the ecosystem.
g. Provide a web site for easy public and agency access to National Fire Plan information (http://www.nwfireplan.gov/).
h. Demonstrate accountability by monitoring, measuring, and reporting accomplishment.
    i. Work with communities and interested partners to determine what to monitor.
    ii. Publish an interagency report for accomplishments in the Pacific Northwest.
i. Coordinate effectively with the Departments of Agriculture and the Interior and with the headquarters of the affected Federal Agencies. Coordinate also with the Departments of Commerce, Energy, and Defense.

RESULTS OF STRATEGIC IMPLEMENTATION

1. COMMUNITY SERVICE. The foundation of this strategy was (1) expanding existing processes to include other agencies, and (2) where there is no existing process, developing new common interagency processes. This strategy was efficient and effective, allowed us to leverage resources, and maximized the coordination among agencies. Money went to the highest priorities; the maximum number of projects was funded; there was no duplication of grants among agencies; and by working together we were able to accommodate specific agency requirements without leaving any priority communities or fire departments out of the process. The interagency processes minimized the burdens on communities and states through coordination and by minimizing the number of processes to which they had to respond, making the program more user-friendly for nonfederal parties.

We distributed the Department of the Interior Rural Fire Assistance (RFA) funding through the same process that the Forest Service had with the State for Volunteer Fire Assistance (VFA). By so doing, the processes were coordinated and efficient (minimized overhead and maximized fire departments assisted). We were able to avoid duplicating grants to some fire departments or missing others. We were able to reduce the confusion that would have resulted from multiple processes by different agencies. And, we were able to accommodate the differing agency requirements and match those restrictions to individual fire department needs and resources. The funds provided needed equipment and training that small fire districts otherwise would not be able to afford. We distributed about $1.6 million to 269 fire districts (an increase of $1.5 million over the prior year's VFA only program).

We established an interagency grants selection committee (Task Team) to develop and manage an interagency process for distribution of grants and agreements for the wildland urban interface, economic action program, and community fire planning funds. We were able to use the existing expertise of the Forest Service State and Private Forestry staff with the

Interior Agencies' staff to design a successful program. We issued one call for applications instead of five and were able to coordinate community grant needs among the agencies to match the community needs with the best agency grant to meet those needs. We were again able to minimize overhead costs and time and maximize the number of priority communities receiving assistance. We were able to reduce the burdens to states and communities by creating one process for all agencies to use. We received almost 200 applications and distributed approximately $10 million in over 100 grants in an entirely new program.

The Bureau of Indian Affairs awarded 8 National Fire Plan "grants" directly to Tribes in the Pacific Northwest totaling about $6.2 million.

The State Fire Assistance program operated by State and Private Forestry of the Forest Service increased the amount of money distributed to Oregon and Washington to approximately $5.5 million (up $4.3 million). In total, the value of the National Fire Plan and the leverage provided by working together supplied federal grants in Oregon and Washington amounting to about $23 million in about 380 grants.

Through the establishment of the Interagency Strategy Team and the various Task Teams under that team, and with regular coordination with the Pacific Northwest Wildfire Coordinating Group, we were able to coordinate all the National Fire Plan processes at the Regional level. By so doing, we were also able to model, encourage, and facilitate similar coordination at the local level. Local coordination groups, which were already established, were able to excel in interagency coordination and in service to communities. Those areas where such coordination was not happening began to work together. We are encouraging the establishment of "Local Coordination Groups," keyed around communities and groups of communities with the associated state and federal agencies, to facilitate fire planning and prioritization (particularly hazardous fuels management) in order to meet National Fire Plan goals.

2. COMMUNITY BENEFITS. We are working to develop a consistent, objective, and understandable process for determining priorities. We are working to identify an objective and consistent process to determine communities at risk, and refine fuel strategies. We intend to integrate (or identify how and when to use) those processes with an ecosystem assessment process to help guide the regional level in the allocation of resources. The process would assist local leaders determine actual treatment priorities. That would also support local federal and state agencies as they facilitate community involvement to collaborate on development of interagency/intergovernmental fire plans that address existing conditions and risk at a landscape level and then prioritize needs for all ownerships, and coordinate implementation.

We are expanding the use of contracting. Interagency contracts have been developed and used increasing our efficiency and consistency. Some areas already use fuels treatment contracts extensively and the program has increased with the additional funding. Other areas are increasing their use of contracting fuels treatments rather than hiring additional federal personnel.

Two geographic areas within the Northwest used contracting to meet preparedness needs. They contracted engines to be positioned and ready to fight fire; and just like with federal engines, the engines do other resource work in the field until a fire call comes.

Both of these efforts will help build community capacity to perform fuels reduction work. This provides local jobs, training, and experience consistent with National Fire Plan objectives. We intend to encourage local coordination groups to help build new contracting capabilities through training and through the way contracts are designed and let.

3. ECOSYSTEM HEALTH. Increased funding from the National Fire Plan enhanced the existing agency programs for hazardous fuel treatments. This allowed treatment of more acres of federal land where unnatural fuel accumulations have occurred and has restored land to a more natural range of variability in fire-adapted ecosystems. The National Fire Plan also modified the priority of where federal land treatments will occur and allows for the higher cost of working in the wildland urban interface.

We are encouraging the development of the prioritization system and fire planning of Strategy #2 c. and d. to enhance the restoration of ecosystem health in fire-adapted ecosystems also.

4. PUBLIC SUPPORT. We are updating the Pacific Northwest Interagency Communication Plan for the National Fire Plan. That plan assists us in "speaking with one voice" to provide consistent information that is not confusing to the communities. Regionally, there is a team of public affairs specialists that work together to get consistent information out to the public and coordinate public and congressional contacts. Local units are providing information to television, and other media organizations showing projects on the ground, fire effects, what protected areas look like. Fire information officers have been provided with National Fire Plan information to use as it fits into situations on the fires they are handling. We are asking local federal and state agency leaders to increase the visibility of the issuance of National Fire Plan contracts and the award of grants to communities and to fire departments. We have established a web site at http://www.nwfireplan.gov to provide easy public and agency access to National Fire Plan information. We are preparing an interagency report for FY 2001 accomplishments, and are working with interested partners to determine what our priorities should be for monitoring.

EMPHASIS GUIDANCE FOR LOCAL 2002 IMPLEMENTATION

The following are the areas that we are emphasizing for improvement in FY 2002:

1. Develop strategic interagency/intergovernmental landscape-based fire plans that map risks and needs in order to prioritize treatment and other needs across all ownerships. In order to do this planning and improve coordination, encourage local establishment of Local Coordinating Groups (LCGs) made-up of community leaders and representatives of the appropriate state and federal agencies.
2. Favor integrated projects (those projects resulting from a strategy as above where treatments on federal and nonfederal lands both need to be done to improve effectiveness).
3. Work up-front with the federal agencies, particularly the regulatory agencies, to design projects that will easily comply with environmental regulations.

4. Advertise success in implementing the National Fire plan through media events such as during fires, and in the awarding of contracts and grants.
5. Expand the use of contracting in fuel treatments; and, in meeting fire-fighting preparedness needs by contracting for fire engines and crews that function similarly to federal engines to work on other projects while positioned, in a desired location, for a fire call.
6. Continue and expand interagency suppression pre-season agreements that lead to emergency contracts.
7. Consider the following advice:
    a. Choose priority sites and treatments that would have broad support, so we can actually implement projects in a timely manner to demonstrate the minimal impact and the value of fuel treatment, without getting bogged down in controversy.
    b. Show the public treatment areas so they can see actual treatment effects and to build support and understanding for treating their own properties and for the National Fire Plan.
    c. Balance accomplishment in 2002 with planning for 2003 so the program continues on in future years.

CONCLUSION

By working together, increasing our attention to public service, and implementing congressional intent, the federal, state, and local agencies have been very successful in implementing the National Fire Plan. Reviews have shown that the public appreciates how we have organized to serve them. Assessments have shown that the way we organized and delivered National Fire Plan assistance has efficiently maximized the number of communities and fire departments who have benefited from the National Fire Plan. We have interagency teams working on solutions to the problems we are facing and expect to face in the future, and thereby have an ongoing program to improve our performance. We have built trust and we have the desire to work together to provide public service on an interagency basis, and it has lead to great success.