



SOCIETY FOR RANGE MANAGEMENT

Guest Editorial: Wildfire Suppression Borrowing

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The benefits of active natural resource management have been proven across the west, demonstrating that a proactive investment results in lower wildfire suppression costs. Forest, woodland and rangeland management reduces fuel loading, improves ecosystem health, creates resilient landscapes and reduces the threat of catastrophic wildfire. Unfortunately, despite being in the budget, many proactive fuels reduction and vegetative treatment projects are not occurring because of ongoing “wildfire borrowing.”

Historically, federal land management agencies such as the US Forest Service (FS) and the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) have covered the costs of wildfire suppression, based on a ten year average, through their annual agency budget process. Meanwhile, throughout the country there has been a significant increase in the number, size, intensity and frequency of wildfire ignitions and the associated costs of wildfire suppression have likewise grown tremendously. This situation forces the FS and BLM to “borrow” from remaining agency programs to cover the wildfire suppression expenditures and, during extreme wildfire seasons, to pursue emergency funding from Congress. The impacted agencies request reimbursement from Congress for the “borrowed” funds during the next fiscal year, but it is often not fully replaced and even when it is, funds may be “borrowed” yet again. This cycle has significantly impacted numerous FS and BLM programs such as wildfire prevention, preparedness and on the ground fuels treatment projects, which if implemented, could in fact reduce the size and intensity of wildfires.

The “wildfire borrowing” challenge has been growing incrementally for years. In an effort to address the problem, a diverse coalition of entities led by the National Association of State Foresters encouraged Congress to pass the Federal Land Assistance Management and Enhancement Act (FLAME Act) in 2009 and it was signed by the President. FLAME established reserve accounts for the FS and BLM to pay for wildfire suppression costs above their agency budgets without impacting other critical agency programs. Unfortunately, since the Act’s passage in 2009, Congress has not always fully funded the FLAME accounts and has redirected FLAME funding for other purposes, so “wildfire borrowing” continues. On June

9, 2014, the USDA released a report detailing the impacts of “wildfire borrowing” on every state. These impacts include reductions in local wildfire preparedness, forest restoration and wildfire prevention. As an example, in Nevada critical work was not completed on the Santa Rosa Ranger District and FS road maintenance machinery was not purchased, impacting National Forest roads. In California numerous forest restoration and fuels reduction projects did not occur because funds were diverted to pay wildfire suppression expenses. The list of impacts is lengthy and can be found at <http://www.fs.fed.us/publications/forest-service-fire-transfer-state-impacts.pdf>.

A May 2014 FS report projects the cost of suppressing wildfire this summer at nearly \$1.8 billion, \$470 million more than the FS and BLM 2014 wildfire budgets. During FFY 2012 and FFY 2013, the FS had to transfer \$440 million and \$505 million respectively from other existing agency programs to cover wildfire suppression expenditures. The result? Over the last 12 years the staggering amount of \$3.2 billion was shifted from other critical forest management and fuels reduction programs to pay for suppression.

The solution is simple and is basic common sense: treat wildfire suppression costs similarly to how the Federal Emergency Management Agency manages other disasters such as tornados, hurricanes and floods. According to FS and BLM analysis, one percent of all wildfires result in thirty percent of the total costs to suppress wildfires. By establishing a “disaster cap” within a federal agency budget, suppression costs that exceed the “disaster cap” could be funded outside of the agency budget similar to other disasters. Bipartisan bills to establish “emergency accounts” have been introduced in both the Senate (S 1875) and the House (HR 3992) and are well supported by Western Governors and numerous NGOs. Some resistance to the legislation remains, as there is a perception that Congress may lose some oversight of the federal agency expenditures. However, appropriate fiscal and reporting controls can and should be built into the legislation, because continued failure to address the “wildfire borrowing” issues will further delay critical natural resource projects that would, in fact, reduce the threat of catastrophic wildfire.



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2014 SRM Tour Summary: Nevada Division of Forestry Wildfire Protection Program

June 25, 2014

The Nevada Department of Conservation & Natural Resources, Division of Forestry (Division) developed the Wildland Fire Protection Program (WFPP), to defend the people and lands of Nevada against wildland fire through collaborative and comprehensive use of expertise and fire suppression, prevention and restoration resources available throughout the state. The Division is transitioning “all risk” emergency services in the remaining two NRS 473 Fire Districts, to Elko County on January 1, 2015 and Clark County July 1, 2015 and will focus on natural resource management responsibilities and the comprehensive management of wildfire. The WFPP works to address the many challenges of wildfire management and allows local jurisdictions to focus on all-risk emergency services.

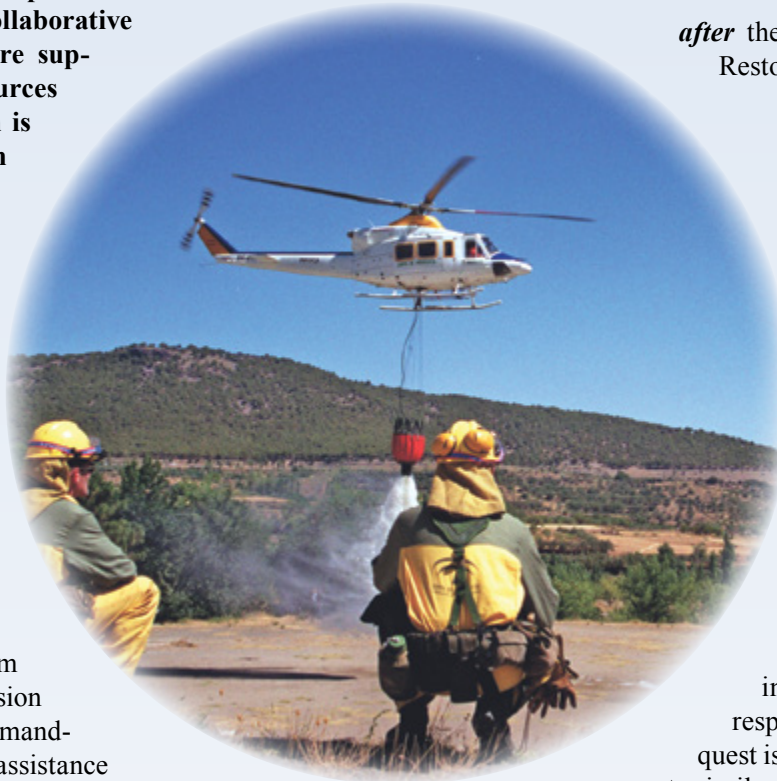
Increasing wildland fire suppression capacity and capability within the Division is in the best interests of State and local governmental agencies. The program focuses response capabilities where historical fire occurrences and “values at risk” intersect. The program provides historically “unable-to-fill” suppression resources, develops more Type 3 Incident Commanders and associated staff, and provides technical assistance with FEMA’s Fire Management Assistance Grant program, as well as fuel reduction projects, cost share agreements and training. The program is voluntary. Counties pay an annual assessment to help fund the program based on wildland fire risk. Participation allows the State to provide financial assistance with wildland fire costs, use of Nevada Division of Forestry resources on other emergencies that threaten human life and property, increased availability of suppression forces for all, enhanced fuels reduction projects and improved restoration of burned areas. Other benefits include incident management assistance, wildfire prevention programs, public education and training.

The Wildland Fire Protection Program provides the State of Nevada and participating jurisdictions enhanced capability:

before a wildfire occurs through fuels management projects (e.g. green strips, thinning, reductions, defensible space, and community infrastructure) and fire prevention activities (e.g. public education, compliance with rules, regulations and restrictions);

during a wildfire through increased Initial Attack suppression resources and coordination, Incident Management capability, technical expertise for FMAGs and cost share agreements and logistics; and

after the wildfire with Burned Area Rehabilitation and Restoration.



An emerging opportunity for Nevada is the creation of Rangeland Fire Protection Associations (RFPAs) to improve the early detection and initial attack of wildfire ignitions in our rural areas. Our interagency objective is to locate and suppress wildfire ignitions rapidly with the goal of keeping all wildfires small. The interagency fire service has a very commendable record of suppressing approximately 95% of all unwanted wildfire ignitions. The remaining 5% grow large and typically become the most expensive wildfires to suppress. Establishing the necessary legislative authority to form RFPAs in Nevada will improve detection, response and suppression of wildfire ignitions in the rural areas of our state. RFPAs are successfully operating in Oregon and Idaho and are functioning under respective enabling state legislation. A Bill Draft Request is proposed for the 2015 Nevada Legislature to create similar authority in Nevada for the formation of RFPAs.

The Division and the Department of Conservation & Natural Resources (DCNR) fully recognizes the importance of comprehensive management of Nevada’s sagebrush ecosystems. The two primary threats are wildfire and invasive plant species and while the sage grouse is the current and highly visible species of concern, there are numerous species dependent upon sagebrush ecosystems that could be at risk. With the formation of the Sagebrush Ecosystem Council and the Sagebrush Ecosystem Technical Team land management decisions are now moving toward integration with stakeholders. DCNR and the Division are committed to stabilizing and improving sagebrush ecosystems working with private landowners and coordinating priority projects with adjacent federal land managers. The Division brings a variety of natural resource expertise, equipment, seed collection and application capabilities including aerial seeding and a trained statewide labor force. While the rehabilitation challenges are numerous, the prospects for success are high and will strengthen over time with an interagency, landscape approach.

See also “NSRM Hosts Summer Workshop on Rangeland Fire, parts 1 & 2” in the September/October issue of *The Progressive Rancher*.

The Society for Range Management (SRM) is “the professional society dedicated to supporting persons who work with rangelands and have a commitment to their sustainable use.” SRM’s members are ranchers, land managers, scientists, educators, students, conservationists – a diverse membership guided by a professional code of ethics and unified by a strong land ethic. This series of articles is dedicated to connecting the science of range management with the art, by applied science on the ground in Nevada. Articles are the opinion of the author and may not be an official position of SRM. Further information and a link to submit suggestions or questions are available at the Nevada Section website at <http://www.ag.unr.edu/nsrm/>. SRM’s main webpage is www.rangelands.org. We welcome your comments.

