

Preparedness Proposal for SW Utah Federal Fire Programs

In looking at the question posed by the Governor of how to prevent or reduce the effects of catastrophic wildfires in SW Utah, the subject of fire suppression preparedness should be examined. The current state of federal and non-federal firefighting resources and future funding stability has a huge effect on our ability to prevent catastrophic wildfires through the combination of federal program capabilities with non-federal partners. To fully address the questions posed by the Governor, more than just firefighting resources must be considered. The continuation (and expansion) of fuels mitigation and fire prevention efforts are of equal importance to the overall goal of reducing or preventing the occurrence and impacts of catastrophic wildfires.

Overview: Within SW Utah the four Federal agencies with wildland fire management responsibilities (USFS, BLM, NPS, BIA) collectively staff an array of fire suppression resources for use at the local and national levels that include wildland fire engines, hand crews, helicopters, single engine airtankers, and aerial supervision/coordination aircraft. This level of suppression resources has been in place for the last 10-15 years, but has evolved from a majority staffed with temporary seasonal employees (those working four months or less), to more permanent seasonal and full time (those working six months or longer) staffing. This mix of temporary and permanent positions, even though many are still seasonal, has increased capabilities for the agencies, particularly in fuels management activities outside of the traditional fire season. Over the past several years a reduction in suppression capabilities has occurred in comparison to a marked increase in fire occurrence, acres burnt and values at risk.

The National Fire Plan enacted by Congress in 2001 increased the personnel and equipment available for wildland firefighting. New resources were added as well as increased staffing for existing resources that boosted the capabilities of the federal agencies to respond to and manage wildland fire across their jurisdictions. In most places, as was the case in SW Utah and NW Arizona (Color Country), these additions were a coordinated effort between all the agencies to avoid duplication and provide the most efficient mix of resources that was the greatest benefit for all. Funding for resources added as a result of the 2000 fire season through the National Fire Plan has been steadily reduced or discontinued due to federal budget shortfalls over the past several years. The levels of firefighting resources available both locally and nationally has steadily declined to the point where most federal agencies are back to pre-National Fire Plan resource mixes as the 2014 federal fiscal year approaches while wildfire occurrence, intensity, size and cost have continued to increase during that time. The added complexity of the increasing number of homes in the wildland urban interface also adds to an already increasing problem of prioritizing response to new fire starts with a limited amount of resources at initial attack, increasing the probability of escape and large fire growth.

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Federal Program Enhancements to Prevent Catastrophic Wildfires

One method to prevent wildfires becoming large, destructive and costly is to suppress them early. Timely and aggressive initial attack is essential. If we keep one fire from growing into a large fire requiring extended attack and costs possibly into the millions of dollars we would have paid for the additional initial attack resources many times over. It takes multiple methods to accomplish successful initial attack.

Engines: The Color Country area’s initial attack engine capabilities have been decreasing the past several years. Recent reductions in federal firefighting budgets has not only reduced the number of engines available in Color Country, but has also reduced the number of firefighters staffing the remaining engines. This further reduces initial attack capabilities by limiting the number of engines available each day. The table below displays the current status of Federal engines in the Color Country area.

UTAH BLM					
Engine	6	E-4602	BLM-CCD	St. George	Unstaffed
Engine	6	E-4603	BLM-CCD	St. George	w/3
Engine	4	E-4406	BLM	Cedar City	w/3
Engine	4	E-4407	BLM	Cedar City	w/3
Engine	6	E-4601	BLM	Cedar City	w/3
Engine	6	E-4604	BLM	Kanab	Unstaffed
Engine	6	E-4605	BLM	Kanab	w/3
Water Tender	1	WT-4910	BLM	Cedar City	Unstaffed
ARIZONA BLM					
Engine	4	E-1447	BLM-ASD	St. George	w/3
Engine	4	E-1444	BLM-ASD	St. George	Unstaffed
Engine	6	E-1660	BLM-ASD	St. George	w/4
Engine	6	E-1661	BLM-ASD	St. George	w/4
Engine	6	E-1662	BLM-ASD	St. George	w/4
Engine	6	E-1663	BLM-ASD	St. George	w/2
Water Tender	1	WT-1922	BLM-ASD	St. George	w/2
USFS					
Engine	4	E-4711	USFS	St. George	w/5
Engine	4	E-4721	USFS	Cedar City	w/5
Engine	4	E-4722	USFS	Cedar City	w/5
Engine	4	E-441	USFS	Escalante	w/5
Engine	6	E-631	USFS	Panguitch	w/5
NPS					
Engine	6	E-611	NPS	Zion NP	w/3
Engine	6	E-612	NPS	Zion NP	Unstaffed
Engine	6	E-621	NPS	Bryce Canyon NP	Unstaffed
Water Tender	3	T-321	NPS	Zion NP	Unstaffed
BIA					
Engine	6	E-691	BIA	St. George	Unstaffed

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The return of funding levels necessary to fully staff all engines would bolster the Color Country area’s engine capability. By fully staffing all the available engines, increased capabilities could be realized by having more engines available on a daily basis. These engines could then be moved around more actively due to existing or emerging fires or where the threat exists for initial attack significantly increasing probabilities of success in catching fires small, and reducing the risk of a fire starting where there are no engines available. An additional engine in the Escalante area and two additional engines in the Washington County area have also been identified through past analyses as a need to manage the number of starts that occur in those areas. Additional engine availability also boosts the capabilities of the Color Country area to support national scale firefighting efforts providing additional cost reduction benefits at the national level.

Hand Crews: As with engines, the number of organized hand crews funded in Color Country has declined over the past several years. These hand crews complement the contingent of engines by bringing a different skill set to the table. They often are utilized in areas where there is no engine access, or can be organized in different configurations to manage fires for longer durations keeping engines more mobile to respond to additional fires. In many cases, these firefighters are the ones that make up the majority of the organized crews that are assigned to support national priorities. Often, the crews are trained in both firefighting and fuels mitigation techniques, and are used for both functions as they complement one another. The table below displays the current status of Federal hand crews in the Color Country area.

USFS					
Hand Crew		Squad-11	USFS	St. George	5 Person
Hand Crew		Squad-21	USFS	Cedar City	5 Person
Hand Crew		Squad-31	USFS	Panguitch	5 Person
Hand Crew		Squad-41	USFS	Escalante	5 Person
Hand Crew	Ty 1	Hotshots	USFS	Cedar City	National Crew (20)
NPS					
Hand Crew		Fire Use	NPS	Cedar City	Unstaffed (10)
Hand Crew		Fuels	NPS	Cedar City	Unstaffed (7)
UTAH BLM					
Hand Crew		Fuels	BLM	Cedar City	12 Person
ARIZONA BLM					
Hand Crew		Fuels	BLM	St. George	Unstaffed (12)
BIA					
Hand Crew	Ty 2	Crew	BIA	St. George	20 Person AD

This proposal would be to fully fund the identified crews, and increase staffing on some to boost the availability of firefighters. The goal would be to have a workforce that could work on local fuels mitigation projects and also be available for local and national firefighting efforts

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when needed. Reductions in funding for the fuels management program should also be restored to previous levels or those crews traditionally funded for fuels program goals be funded by preparedness to restore suppression capabilities.

Dozer: Many fire agencies around the country maintain dozers as a part the of their initial attack equipment. In Color Country, call-when-needed dozers on emergency use contracts are utilized to fill the need for dozers, along with cooperating county road department dozers which are not always available. In either case, the fire is usually beyond initial attack by the time we can get a dozer to the scene of the fire due to time lags involved with the ordering and pre-use inspection process. The Forest Service and BLM both employ dozers for road maintenance as well, but these pieces of equipment are typically unavailable for fire suppression needs. The Forest Service has utilized their fleet of skid-steer machines in a dozer role on some fires, but due to the size and horsepower of these machines they are only productive in limited situations.

Having dozers of the appropriate size, dedicated to fire suppression, on the transport ready to go would be beneficial to improving initial attack capabilities. There are also applications for a dozer in fuels mitigation projects that may be appealing and help keep the equipment productive when not being used for suppression. These machines could be prepositioned in Color Country during times of high fire danger where they would be most effective to aid in initial attack.

Aircraft: Aircraft are often utilized during initial attack to reduce fire intensity so that the ground based firefighters can begin working nearer the fire's edge and aiding in keeping fires small. This is especially true in remote areas with limited options for ground access or long response times.

The Forest Service, BLM, and National Park Service all have aviation assets located within Color Country for initial attack and large fire support. The BLM and NPS budgets have been reduced in recent years, affecting the availability and staffing of the initial attack helicopters, aerial supervision platform, and single engine airtankers (SEATs) in Color Country.

The helitanker operated by the Forest Service and based in Cedar City is available for initial attack support; however its mission is to provide support to large fire suppression on a national scale. In addition, the Cedar City Air Center operates a full service airtanker base during the fire season that supports large airtankers as needed for fires in the surrounding area. We do not have administrative control of these assets and are subject to the geographic area (Great Basin) coordination center and the National Interagency Coordination Center as to where these assets are deployed given regional and national priorities at the time. The table below displays the current status of Federal aerial assets in the Color Country area.

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USFS					
Helicopter	1	Helitanker	USFS	Cedar City	180 days National Resource
NPS					
Helicopter w/Helitack	3	Zion Helitack	NPS	Cedar City	120 days 8 Person
UTAH BLM					
Air Attack	1	AC 500S	BLM	Cedar City	120 days
SEAT	4	AG-802	BLM	Cedar City	90 days
SEAT	4	AG-802	BLM	Cedar City	90 days
ARIZONA BLM					
Helicopter w/Helitack	3	Moki Helitack	BLM	St. George	90 days 5 Person

Key to the continued success of initial attack efforts in Color Country is the restoration of appropriate funding of these assets and the associated crews to prior levels (typically 10 people per helitack crew). There may be options for efficiency by exploring shared contracts with assets located in other states, such as New Mexico and Arizona where the fire season is earlier than ours and the aircraft could start there and work their way north with the severity of the fire season, or Idaho and Montana where the season is later allowing for a start here and move north as the season progresses.

Other options would be to partner with the State of Utah and/or counties to fund the assets and keep more local control of when and where they might move.

Fire Prevention and Education Program: currently our fire prevention and education program is an effort that has limited staffing and funding and often is a collateral duty of our other fire management personnel. When we are not busy we are able to get information to the public; unfortunately when we really need to be focusing on preventing fires we are fighting fire. With looming budget cuts the federal agencies will be further reducing their programs, including prevention and education, along with the other functions. This is often the case, as the limited funds received get prioritized to providing suppression responses at the expense of prevention and education.

Funding the Fire Prevention and Education Specialists and providing a dedicated budget specifically for Fire Prevention and Education, outside of the normal preparedness funding stream, would definitely be moving in a positive direction. A fully funded and staffed prevention and education program has the potential to reduce fire suppression costs in the long run.

Interagency Dispatch Center Funding: This has been an on-going issue. The interagency dispatch centers are a communications and logistics hub dedicated to the dispatching and

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support of our interagency wildland fire programs around the state. There are five centers and one geographic area coordination center located in Utah, all of which support the firefighting effort on federal and non-federal lands which is absolutely essential to our success. Continuing efforts to appropriate funding to pay the “fair share” of the overhead and personnel expenses by all agencies is necessary to the successful management of these centers. Without appropriate levels of funding from all agencies involved, some centers may be reduced in staffing or areas of responsibility expanded to the point where it impacts the ability to support the firefighters on the ground, the very reason these centers are in place.

Overhead/Supervision Funding: With the reduction in overall preparedness and fuels management funding came a reduction in the number of managers and supervisors as well. These reductions also have an impact on the overall preparedness of the agencies to respond to wildfires both in terms of efficiency and safety. These positions often make up the incident management teams that provide the on-scene command and coordination of suppression forces, as well as supporting regional and national teams supporting the overall wildfire management situation. Reductions in these key positions in the local area not only impacts the abilities of the agencies to support local firefighting efforts, but also impacts the number of people available at a national level, which in turn impacts the availability of supporting local incidents when the need arises.