

# Suppression Proposal for SW State Fire Program

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Looking at the question of how to prevent or reduce catastrophic wildfires in SW Utah, the subject of fire suppression preparedness should be examined. The state of federal firefighting resources and the status of future funding stability have a huge effect on our ability to prevent catastrophic wildfires but for the purpose of this evaluation we will focus on non-federal program capabilities.

**Overview:** the SW Area of the Division of Forestry, Fire and State Lands (FFSL) staffs five Type 6 wildland fire engines in cooperation with the counties in which they reside. The engines are state owned and operated by personnel that are seasonal, full time state employees co-funded by the Division and the county to which they are assigned. This level of equipment disbursement has been in place for the last 30 years, but has evolved from call when needed part time, to seasonal full time staffing. The Fire Warden positions have evolved into year round full time positions. The Fire Wardens serve as non federal representatives and coordinators with federal resources and local resources. Modest growth in suppression capabilities has occurred in comparison to a marked increase in fire occurrence, acres burnt and values at risk.

The SW Area's Fire Departments and Fire Districts (FDs) comprise the balance of fire suppression resources from non-federal sources. These FDs range widely in size and capabilities. Very few have paid full time staffing and are confined to the larger cities such as St. George, Washington, Cedar City, Hurricane, Santa Clara and Ivins. A few others have a full or part time paid Fire Chief as the only employee. All of these FDs rely on volunteer staffing to one degree or another. However, the vast majority of FDs in the Area are essentially volunteers. The public expects a lot from our FDs; structural firefighting, emergency medical services and rescue, vehicle extrication, hazardous materials as well as wildland fire.

The National Fire Plan enacted by Congress in 2001 vastly improved the training and equipment available for FDs for wildland firefighting. Funding for equipment grants and training programs that have been making this possible have been sharply reduced or discontinued due to federal budget shortfalls. The Division has been administering these grant programs on behalf of the federal agencies and delivering training to our FDs.

As much as we appreciate and value our FDs, we recognize the limitations that are inherent with them. The first challenge we face with our FDs is they have a lot of other duties and protection responsibilities other than wildland fire. Second, they are primarily a volunteer work force, they have jobs, they are business owners, they are retired etc. Wildland fire suppression is time consuming. Although we have a program to reimburse the FDs for their time and expenses while working outside of their jurisdiction; they are not always available to us on a consistent basis. Again, the FDs are a valued resource especially for initial attack and surge capacity during periods of high fire volume, but again, availability is limited and inconsistent.

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## **FFSL SW Area 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:** FFSL SW Area's initial attack engine capabilities have been static for over 30 years while wildfire occurrence, intensity, size and cost have increased many times over during that time. The added complexity of the increasing wildland urban interface also calls for different tools to be more effective in that environment as well.

The addition of two Type 3 engines and seasonal full time staffing would shore up a short fall in the Area's engine capability. These engines should be Area resources, not assigned to a specific county. They could be moved around the Area to where they are needed due to existing or emerging fires or where the threat exists for initial attack.

Approx. Annual Cost \$154,000 per unit

**Hand Crew:** Many of the fuels mitigation proposals we are putting forth are extremely labor intensive, as is wildland firefighting. One of the tools that are used maybe used in both arenas is organized hand crews. They are generally made up of 20 physically fit individuals that are capable of arduous labor. Trained in firefighting and fuels mitigation techniques, they may be used for both functions as they complement one another.

This proposal would be to fund a dual purpose crew based out of the SW Area. The goal would be to have a workforce that could work on local fuels mitigation projects and also be available for local firefighting when needed.

Approx. Cost per year \$430,000

**Dozer:** Another commonly used wildland firefighting tool is the bulldozer. In certain terrain and fuel types the dozer can be very effective in building fireline to contain fires. Many fire agencies around the country maintain dozers as a part the of their initial attack equipment.

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Here in SW Utah, we depend on federally contracted call-when-needed dozers in which there are very few or a couple of our 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 process.

A dozer dedicated to fire suppression, on the transport ready to go would be beneficial. There are also applications for a dozer in fuels mitigation projects that may be appealing and help keep the equipment productive.

Approx. Cost \$83,600 6mos. DRY

**Aircraft:** using aircraft to knock down fire intensity during initial attack so that the ground based firefighters can begin working is a huge benefit to keeping fires small. This is especially true in remote areas with limited options for ground access or long response times.

All firefighting aircraft used in Utah are under federal contact. The Division via our cooperative agreements with the federal agencies has access to these aircraft for fire suppression. 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.

We should be exploring options for state contracted and controlled aviation assets such as Single Engine Air Tankers (SEATs) and helicopters. We could be looking at shared contracts with neighboring states, such as New Mexico and Arizona. Their fire season is earlier than ours and the aircraft could start there and work their way north with the severity of the fire season.

Other options would be to create our own exclusive use contracts for aircraft services or partner with the federal agencies on their existing contacts.

SEAT Ex Use	Daily Availability	\$2,200	60 day
	Fight Hour	\$1,800	+ Retardant
On Call	Daily Availability	\$3,295	+SEMG
	Fight Hour	\$2,495	
Type II Helicopter Ex. Use	Daily Availability	\$5,500	+Staff
	Flight Time	\$1,800	
CWN	Daily Availability	\$6,500	
	Flight Time	\$1,800	

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**Fire Prevention and Education Program:** currently our fire prevention and education program is an effort that we have used some limited federal grant dollars and very little non-federal funds. It is a collateral duty of our fire management personnel. We do not have a set budget or personnel that are dedicated to fire prevention and education. 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.

Again, we piggy back on the federal efforts where we can. A true wildfire prevention and education program does not exist for non-federal lands. Our fear is with looming budget cuts the federal agencies will be further reducing their programs.

Funding one seasonal fulltime Fire Prevention and Education Specialist and providing a dedicated budget specifically for Fire Prevention and Education would definitely be moving in a positive direction. The person in this position could also be trained as a Fire Information Officer eventually as a collateral duty.

**Severity Funding:** A method that is used by the federal agencies when fire conditions are “severe” is to request additional funding for resources to be brought in to address needs due to the extreme fire conditions. For example, this funding could be used to fund engines brought from other Areas to fortify initial attack capabilities to an Area that is having extreme fire danger.

The requesting Area would have to justify their request to the State Office due to current and expected fire danger indices, high amount of initial attack occurring etc. The resources would charge to fire funds when committed to incidents or the severity funding for time and per diem if not committed to an incident.

Other uses for these funds may be putting a dozer or a hand crew on standby for initial attack. Any number of plausible scenarios could play out in this situation given funding. We would recommend that a pool of funds be set aside for this purpose. This is a pro-active action versus a reactive use of funds.

**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 support of our interagency wildland fire programs around the state. There are five centers and

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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 our “fair share” of the overhead and personnel expenses on an on-going basis has been fruitless. We need to pay our fair share of these expenses and not be dependant of the federal agencies carrying our responsibilities to keep these centers staffed at appropriate levels.

Approx. Cost Annually \$150,000

**Dependence on Federal Funding:** Over time our non-federal firefighting agencies have become more and more dependent on the federal agencies for funding our wildland fire programs. Both the Forest Service and the BLM supplement the Division’s fire program with what is called State Fire Assistance funding. This is base funding that helps the Division fund personnel, vehicles and other basic program needs. With decreasing federal budgets the state needs to figure out how we are going to fund these essential needs as the funds decline.

Our entire fuels mitigation program is funded by federal grants. These programs are ending due to the federal funding not being allocated. Utah needs to recognize the need to fund a fuels mitigation program to assist on non-federal land owners with their mitigation efforts. This capability of the Division to manage and operate a fuels mitigation program will fail to exist once these funds are depleted.