

Department of the Interior (DOI)

Fire and Aviation Operations Action Plan, 2003

Objectives

This document establishes the DOI direction for the 2003 fire season. The direction introduces operational expectations and clarifies existing policies and procedures for agency administrators and fire and aviation management personnel. This plan focuses on three primary areas: Safety, preparedness and cost containment. Within DOI, our first priority is the protection of life. Second priority is the protection of property, cultural and natural resources.

Background

Firefighters contained more than 97 percent of all new fires during initial attack in 2002. In DOI, the success was generally achieved in a safe manner. That record is all the more remarkable in consideration of the volatile conditions that prevailed in much of last year's fire season. Firefighters and managers are commended for placing the highest emphasis on safety.

The 2003 season has the potential for above-normal activity, with several regions experiencing significant wildfire activity at the same time. Of particular interest to DOI agencies is the possibility of busy fire seasons in Alaska, parts of the Great Basin, some national parks and national monuments, and on rangelands along the northern tier of states east of the Cascade Mountains.

Safety: Ground and Aviation

Policy: Although our policy remains "firefighter safety is the first priority," we've matured to a level beyond that, where safety is and should be our core value. Safety needs to be integrated into all that we do as we strive for a safety culture throughout the Department, especially as it relates to hazardous work environments in fire operations.

Principles:

- Firefighter safety comes first on every fire every time.
- The 10-Standard Firefighting Orders are firm; we don't break them, we don't bend them.
- Every firefighter has the right to a safe assignment.
- Every agency administrator, every fire manager, every fireline supervisor, and every firefighter is responsible to ensure that established safe practices are known and observed.

Secretary's Intent: Safety will not be compromised in the conduct of ground or air operations. We all have a role in safety. Proactive suppression tactics that can mitigate hazards and provide an operational advantage are favored over reactive or passive tactics that increase firefighter exposure. In pre-season preparedness meetings, take the time to discuss the responsibilities and expectations that are integral to firefighting safety.

Objective: Implement established safe practices on every fire.

Secretary's Direction:

- Unit preparedness – at management oversight, supervisory control, and crew levels – will be commensurate with observed and predicted fire danger.
- Work/rest guidelines will be proactively managed and monitored.
- An appropriate span-of-control ratio will be maintained for managers, supervisors, and firefighters in the conduct of fireline operations.
- Established safety practices will be implemented: 10 Standard Firefighting Orders; Lookouts, Communications, Escape Routes and Safety Zones (LCES); and downhill line construction standards. Violation of established safe practices procedures will be grounds for disciplinary action.
- Use of risk management is paramount in every fire operation. Hazards need to be identified and mitigated to an acceptable level, including mitigation for the 18 Situations that Shout Watch-Out.
- Airtankers will be monitored for flight hours as the fire season progresses. Airtankers will be pre-positioned, based on projected fire danger levels, in the context of values to be protected.
- Airtanker deployments will be reserved for initial attack and extended attack operations.
- Wildfires involving multiple jurisdictions will require mutually agreed-upon unified commands. Commands will be unified as early in the incident as possible. The rapid exchange of information and coordinated tactics are a safety precaution, first, and a cost containment protocol, second.

Preparedness

Policy: “Agencies will ensure their capability to provide safe, cost effective fire management programs in support of land and resource management plans through appropriate planning, staffing, training, equipment, and management oversight.”

Principle: Where hazardous fuels dominate the landscape, maintaining a strong, decisive initial attack capability is a key component in minimizing large fire suppression costs. As fire danger levels increase and suppression resources become scarce, initial attack capacity must be maintained as the most certain means of preventing new costly wildfires.

Secretary's Intent: Initial attack and extended attack operations will be the mobilization priority. All efforts will be made to use the National Weather Service and Predictive Services to anticipate threats, and pre-position protection resources. At National Preparedness Levels Four and Five, national shared resources (airtankers, hotshot crews, smokejumpers, etc.) will be allocated and re-allocated by NICC based on observed and predicted fire danger intelligence. All units will be trained, staffed and ready to meet operational demands. Staffing levels will be adjusted, based on observed and predicted fire danger in order to maintain protection capabilities. Staffing levels will be coordinated with adjacent cooperators. Personnel will be trained, qualified, and red-carded for the positions that they are assigned. Every DOI employee will be available to support fire emergencies to the best of their ability.

Objective: A 95 percent initial/extended attack success rate remains our goal in 2003.

Secretary's Direction:

- Effective organizational capability will be sustained by maintaining management, supervisory, and crew staffing skills. Coaches or mentors will be identified for support, where they may be needed.
- Staffing levels and drawdown plans will be adjusted, based on observed and predicted fire danger. Severity funding requests will be submitted and approved prior to actual need. Severity requests will be coordinated with cooperators to most effectively maintain management oversight, supervisory controls, and crew capabilities in the critical area.
- Units will be prepared to hire and train AD employees and local/volunteer fire department personnel to meet local and, as appropriate, national needs.
- Preparedness Plans, Mutual Threat Plans, Memorandums of Understanding, Cost Share Agreements, and other plans will be reviewed and updated prior to fire season.
- Multi-agency Coordinating (MAC) group members will be identified and National Weather Service and Predictive Services support will be ready prior to the start of fire season. MAC groups should include individuals with coordination and command experience. Prior to fire season, MAC groups will establish prioritization criteria for incident allocation and re-allocation of resources. Agency administrators will provide a formal Delegation of Authority to MAC groups that include agency objectives and agency expectations. Prioritization criteria will be included in the Delegation of Authority.
- Service and Supply Plans will be completed and associated Emergency Equipment Rental Agreements (EERA) will be in place prior to fire season.
- Training and availability of State and local fire departments, including volunteers, will be coordinated.
- Pre-season simulations, including WFSA development, will be conducted.

Cost Containment

Policy: “Primary consideration in suppressing fires is firefighter and public safety. Fires are suppressed at minimum cost while considering values to be protected, consistent with resource objectives.”

Principle: Agency administrator oversight and involvement during the decision-making process is critical for containing suppression costs.

Secretary’s Intent: The primary criteria for choosing suppression strategies are to minimize costs without compromising safety. Planned and actual suppression costs must also be commensurate with the values to be protected. They must be included and displayed in the Wildland Fire Situation Analysis (WFSA). Whenever possible, suppression strategies should be tailored to achieve resource benefit. Even though resource benefits may result in some areas of the fires, it is inappropriate to expend suppression dollars with the explicit objective of achieving resource benefits. Indirect containment strategies are appropriate only if they are the safest or least-cost option. Selection of these strategies must be carefully scrutinized when fire danger trends are rising. Long-duration wildfires need to be closely evaluated by cost-containment teams to ensure that operations are not occurring beyond the point of diminishing returns.

Objective: Expend only those funds required for the safe and cost-effective suppression of the incident.

Secretary’s Direction:

- Line officers are responsible for financial oversight. This responsibility cannot be delegated.

	BIA	NPS	FWS	BLM
Local Level	\$1,000,000 Agency Supervisor	\$1,000,000 Park Superintendent	\$1,000,000 Refuge Manager	\$1,000,000 Field/District Manager
Mid Level	\$1,000,000- \$5,000,000 Regional Director	\$1,000,000- \$5,000,000 Regional Director	\$1,000,000- \$5,000,000 Regional Director	\$1,000,000- \$5,000,000 State Director
National	More than \$5,000,000 BIA Director	More than \$5,000,000 NPS Director	More than \$5,000,000 FWS Director	More than \$5,000,000 BLM Director

- When fire danger trends are rising, the long-term consequences of indirect containment strategies, including final fire cost, will be considered in the initial action decision.
- The signatory official must have WFSA training or WFSA preparation experience. A mentor or coach will be assigned to those areas where the signatory official lacks this training or experience.
- The WFSA will include the least-suppression cost (maximum resource loss) option. This option will serve as a way to describe the values to be protected and the context surrounding a suppression decision. If the least-cost alternative is not chosen, the WFSA will include written rationale for not choosing it.
- A suppression cost-objective will be included as an incident objective and included in the Delegation of Authority to the Incident Commander. These cost objectives must maintain safety considerations and be commensurate with the values to be protected. Revision of the WFSA is required if incident cost objectives are exceeded.
- An incident business advisor (IBA) must be assigned to any fire with suppression costs of more than \$5 million. An IBA is advised for fires with suppression costs of \$1-5 million. If a certified IBA is not available, the approving official will appoint a financial advisor to monitor expenditures.
- A National Cost Oversight Team will be assigned to a fire with suppression costs of more than \$5 million. This team will include Line Officer (team leader), Incident Business Specialist, Incident Management Team Specialist, and Financial Specialist. (The team leader and the receiving Line Officer can agree to add team members as needed to address issues specific to the incident, i.e., aviation, personnel, contracting, etc.)
- Incident suppression cost objectives will be included as a performance measure in Incident Management Team evaluations.

Summary

Today's fire management program is among the most challenging of all resource activities. Not only are natural resources at stake, but also the health and safety of employees and communities may be determined by what we do, and don't do. These challenges can only be managed successfully with adherence to established safe practices, procedures, attention to critical fire behavior risk thresholds, and sound judgment. At the peak of activity, when suppression demands are great and resources are scarce, agency administrators and fire managers must maintain a high level of situational awareness, anticipate needs, and actively lead.

In addition, the traditional role of fire resources is changing. DOI is being counted on to support non-fire incidents. The outbreak of exotic Newcastle disease in southern Nevada and the Columbia space shuttle recovery effort are recent examples where DOI resources and expertise were needed. Homeland security may also be a future consideration in allocation of DOI resources.

Early projections indicate that this fire season may be difficult. The few steps outlined in this action plan are intended to increase margins of safety and preparedness with the aim of reducing the costs, losses, and damages that have become more common as fuels have built up in areas where people live.

As we enter the heart of the 2003 fire season, let's all commit to being prepared better than ever before, keep an eye on reducing costs without compromising safety, and take every step we can to ensure the well being of the public and firefighters.