

PART 6

PUBLIC HEALTH, SAFETY, AND RESOURCE PROTECTION

High among BLM's stewardship responsibilities are its roles in protecting public health, safety, and property. The Bureau is responsible for maintaining facilities and infrastructure, reducing health and safety risks to employees and the public, and protecting public lands from illegal dumping of wastes, theft and destruction of Federal property, misuse of resources, and wildland fires.

Table 6-1 summarizes the numbers of wildland fires and acres burned on BLM lands and lands protected by BLM through cooperative agreements with local fire protection agencies. As the second year of La Niña conditions continued, the southern tier of states from California to Florida went through a second winter of deficit precipitation. Areas to the north had a more normal winter snowpack, but the snow left early as a strong high pressure established itself in the west and produced a long, dry summer. The stage was set for an extremely busy and widespread fire season.

In the late winter and spring, numerous fires occurred in Oklahoma and other southern states. April began with wind-driven fires in Northern California, along with additional fire activity in the Southwest and across the South. In May, there was persistent fire activity in Florida, South Carolina, Minnesota, and Michigan. The Cerro Grande fire near Los Alamos, New Mexico, focused worldwide attention on the United States fire season and prescribed fire practices. A monumental rehabilitation effort helped mitigate effects of seasonal rains on the burned areas in many parts of the Southwest. Wildland fire activity continued in the southwestern states in June and began a northward movement into Colorado and Utah. Range fires occurred in Nevada, Utah, southern Idaho, Wyoming, and western Colorado in July, and Texas and Florida fires were still active. The unprecedented fire activity in August demanded extraordinary management actions. Six military battalions – four from the U.S. Army and two from the U.S. Marine Corps – trained as firefighters. Eight Modular Airborne Firefighting Systems (MAFFs) were pressed into service from the Air Force Reserve and Air National Guard. Canadian overhead and incident management teams, Type I crews, air tankers, and helicopters were assigned. Additional overhead teams were brought in from Australia and New Zealand. By mid-August, more than 25,000 people were engaged in large fire support and initial attack. Fire season 2000 was one of the most significant challenges for wildland fire agencies in many years.

Table 6-2 shows the major types of capital investments on public lands. Roads, trails, recreation sites, and other improvements give the public access to public lands. The Bureau completed the third year of an aggressive re-inventory and condition assessment program to update its Facilities Inventory and Maintenance Management System (FIMMS) database, reduce the backlog of deferred maintenance projects, and improve the overall physical condition of facilities and infrastructure. In Fiscal Year 2000, approximately 20 percent of deferred maintenance spending went toward improving sanitation at recreation sites by replacing old vault toilets with new toilets that incorporate environmentally friendly, sweet-smelling technology and universal access features. Other major work included maintaining and repairing roads and bridges, which accounted for nearly 40 percent of deferred maintenance spending.

Table 6-3 summarizes releases of hazardous substances and other pollutants and contaminants discovered on public lands. Historically, approximately 60 percent of all hazardous substance releases on public lands have been related to authorized commercial uses, mainly landfills, mines and mill sites, airstrips, and oil and gas sites. The other 40 percent have been created by illegal activities, such as midnight

dumping of agricultural and industrial wastes, wire burning, and illicit drug production. Unlike previous years, nearly 90 percent of the hazardous substance releases found on public lands in Fiscal Year 2000 arose from illegal dumping incidents involving debris or drums of biomedical, chemical, and petroleum wastes; pesticides; paints; batteries; asbestos; and illicit drug labs. Methamphetamine drug labs alone accounted for over one-third of the 150 discoveries. The remaining 10 percent of the hazardous substances releases in Fiscal Year 2000 were related to tire and wire burning, fuel spills, mining wastes, and military accidents.