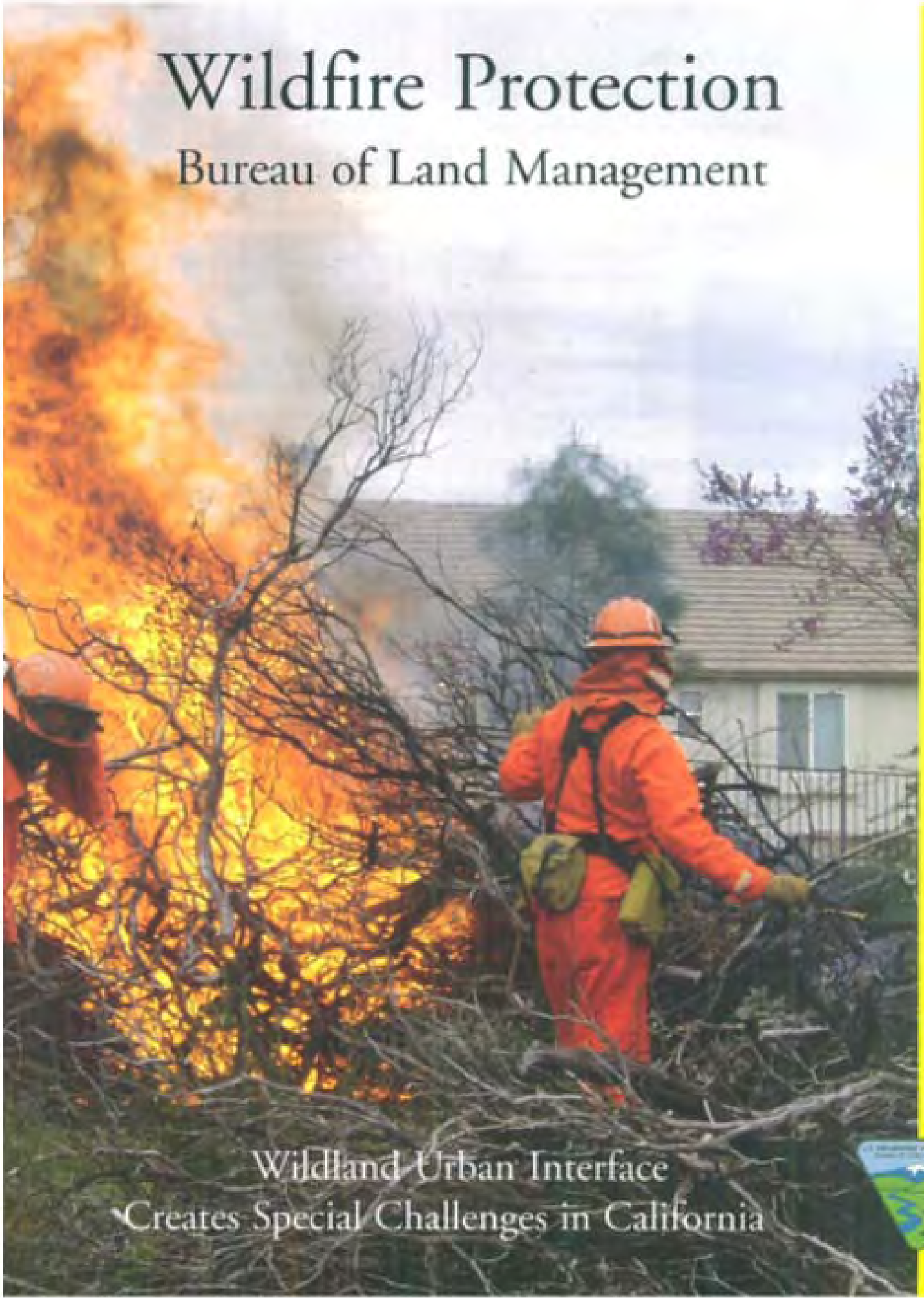
Wildfire Protection

Bureau of Land Management



Wildland Urban Interface
Creates Special Challenges in California

BLM

California

2006

Dear Friends,

Tens of millions of Californians live in communities at risk to wildfire, an area called the wildland-urban interface. California is unique among the western states for challenges faced in addressing the wildland-urban interface, particularly in reducing fuels to help protect "at-risk" communities.

Mike Pool
California State Director

Why? Three critical factors – number of "at risk" communities, big populations, and huge financial property values – mixed in a seasonally explosive time period.

With hundreds of "at-risk" communities (over 1,260), a population greater than all other 11 western states combined (36 million), and property values exceeding hundreds of millions of dollars, reducing fuels near California communities becomes more expensive per acre than anywhere in the West. For BLM, these unique challenges must be addressed in fire management funding and national allocations.

Most wildland-urban interface areas accumulate hazardous levels of vegetation because of land management, urban development, and past fire suppression efforts. The biological hierarchy changes and the mix of humans, structures, and "wildland" vegetation change how fire functions in these ecosystems.

A combination of overgrown vegetation and tens of thousands of homes makes for a highly combustible environment and potentially catastrophic results from wildfires. For example, in 2003, catastrophe struck California when wildfires burned 739,000 acres, destroyed 3,600 homes, caused 24 deaths, injured 217, and cost an estimated $3 billion. In that year, of all homes lost nationally to wildfires, 88% occurred in California.

The BLM's fire force is committed to collaborative community-based efforts in fire prevention and rehabilitation. Since 2001, BLM has assisted over 400 communities at-risk to wildfire in 47 of the 58 counties across the state and helped treat 50,000 acres of hazardous fuels on private lands through National Fire Plan funding provided by Congress.

*"...reducing fuels near California communities becomes **more expensive per acre** than anywhere in the West."*

The BLM in California aggressively seeks fire management funds and budget allocations from all levels of government for support of our California communities and homeowners residing near or in the wildland-urban interface of seasonal wildfire.

Mike Pool, California State Director

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BLM Funds for At-Risk Communities

Table 1: Community-Based Project Funding

Fiscal Year	BLM Funding	Projects Funded	Private Acres Treated
2001	4.5 million	110	7,579
2002	5.0 million	118	8,882
2003	4.5 million	95	11,839
2004	2.5 million	55	9,185
2005	2.1 million	37	11,253
2006	2.2 million	37	8,081

"Between 2001 and 2006, BLM grants totaling nearly $21 million supported local fire safe councils and communities at-risk in California."

California is uniquely involved in fire activities with the support of 130 fire safe councils who work with the California Fire Alliance and local partners to reduce the risk of wildfire to "at risk" communities. Each year nearly 400 funding requests ($27 to $29 million) are made to the BLM and Forest Service for National Fire Plan efforts in California. On average, community groups provide a 30 to 40 percent match of the total project funding.

Defensible Space Works

Success stories against wildfire result from community-based prefire activities. Through BLM funding to local fire safe councils in Butte County, vegetation clearances, road enhancements and signage efforts helped firefighters protect homes in the Yankee Hill and Cherokee communities during a wildfire in August of 2004. The $282,000 cost to BLM for prefire activities helped protect $112-million worth of property. Homeowners considered the money well spent.

A wildfire along the California- Mexican border in San Diego County tested the prefire efforts of BLM and other fire workers. Their face-to-face education efforts with homeowners was the key.

Fire personnel worked with local homeowners to help them meet a county ordinance for a 100 foot clearance. The wildfire struck September 2004. The outcome was 15 homes saved and one home lost. The homeowners' clearance work made the difference. The home lost had failed to meet compliance recommendations. Prefire activities protected millions in home values, structures, and other resources.

The personal contact with homeowners, combined with educational materials, is not only a highly effective tool for learning about fire hazards and risk reduction, but this contact also provides homeowners greater motivation to implement their fire plan for defensible space.

With assistance by the local fire safe council, the homeowner widened the road, cleared vegetation and completed defensible space around the home. A sign designated their swimming pool as a water source to assist fire suppression efforts, and when the fire came, firefighters saved the home because of defensible space work.

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