BLM Colorado Fire Season

May 2014

SEASON OUTLOOK:

- A repeat of our historical fire seasons such as 2002, 2012 and 2013, is unlikely. However, recent precipitation and abundant winter snowpack does not eliminate fire potential. Historically, large fires have occurred during even the wettest years.

- The busiest fire seasons are characterized by persistent dry, warm, and windy conditions during the spring, resulting in an early onset of large fire activity (2002, 2012). An early onset of fire season is not expected for 2014.

- Drought conditions have significantly improved across the Colorado during the last year. However, “Extreme” to “Exceptional” drought indices exists over southeast Colorado, with “Abnormally Dry” conditions over portions of the West Slope.

- Temperatures have been below the seasonal averages along and east of the Divide across Colorado, but near or slightly above the seasonal averages west of the Divide.

- Snowpack is above average across the northern two-thirds of Colorado, but below average across the southern third of the state (50 to 60 percent of average across San Juan and Upper Rio Grande regions). In early May 2013, the San Juan and Upper Rio Grande region snowpack was 30 to 40 percent of average.

- Warm, dry and windy conditions have been most prevalent over the southern third of Colorado during the last several weeks. Frequency of warm, dry, and windy periods during the spring of 2014 in southern Colorado is similar to the spring of 2012.

- Green-up is expected to be most prominent across the northern two-thirds of Colorado and less prominent in the drier locations across southern parts of the state. Extensive snow cover and expected green-up will help decrease (but not eliminate) fire potential over northern sections of the state.

- Weather conditions—temperature, relative humidity, and wind—are near the 2013 levels, but significantly less than 2012. This trend is forecasted to continue. However, weather conditions this spring over southern Colorado remains a concern.

- El Nino (ENSO) is forecast to develop during the summer of 2014. This could lead to wetter than average conditions across Colorado and may further decrease fire potential. Since the timing of this event is uncertain, the extent of its impact is also uncertain.

- Typically in Colorado, less than 10 percent of wildfires on BLM lands are human caused. Now is the prime time to concentrate on public education and awareness to reduce the number of unwanted fires.

BLM

Colorado State Office

- We are well prepared for the upcoming fire season within the Department of the Interior and among our state and federal partners.

BLM FIRE PROGRAM:

- BLM-managed lands within Colorado are broken into five Interagency Fire Management Units.

- Each unit has a Fire Management Officer and staff to plan, oversee and coordinate operations.

- The 10-year average (2004–2013) for wildland fires on BLM lands in Colorado is:
  - 433 incidents (arson, lightning and wildland fire use)
  - 10,804 acres burned annually

RESOURCES:

- BLM Colorado has the following fire suppression resources available within the state:
  - One interagency hot shot crew
  - One wildland fire module
  - 12 Type-6 engines
  - 7 Type-4 engines
  - One Initial Attack squad
  - 6 Type-2 hand crews
  - One helicopter and staff for 90-day contract in Rifle Colorado.

- BLM Colorado has access to approximately 66 national on-call Single Engine Air Tankers (SEATs), and will initially host within the Rocky Mountain Area (RMA) five of the 33 nationally-funded exclusive use SEATS and two Colorado Division of Fire Prevention and Control (DFPC) SEATs.

- Nine interagency SEAT re-load bases in the state will be available, including four BLM SEAT bases, and one BLM Large Air Tanker (LAT) base in Grand Junction.
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- Nationally, all agencies will have access to 15 LATs, aircraft such as the eight MAFFS units, two Very Large Air Tankers and up to four water scoopers.

- 192 Type-1 and Type-2 helicopters are available through call-when needed contracts.

- A BLM National Office-funded exclusive-use Air Attack training platform is based in Grand Junction.

- Nationally, the BLM can call on more than 400 smokejumpers. Of these smokejumpers, about 100 are BLM employees and the rest are from the U.S. Forest Service. Grand Junction hosts an annual contingency of smokejumpers through an agreement with the BLM Boise Smokejumpers. This resource has been prepositioned at times in Cañon City and Durango.

- Nationally, there are more than 100 interagency hot shot crews. The BLM Craig Hotshot Crew is located in Colorado and became available on May 4.

- Nationally, there are four National Incident Management Organizations, 16 Interagency Type-1 Incident Management Teams, and approximately 50 Type-2 Incident Management Teams available for large and complex fires.

AVIATION:

- We have a large interagency fire aviation program made of fixed and rotor wing aircraft available nationally. Our aviation program combined with state resources gives us a solid aerial firefighting base.

- We coordinate with the Colorado National Guard to determine availability of their aviation resources.

- The BLM and the DFPC are working together in coordinating the SEAT program here in Colorado. This will ensure that aircraft are most effectively deployed throughout the state.

- The priority of any aviation mission is the personal safety of those involved. We work toward this priority through coordination among ground and aerial crews to ensure that aerial operations are safe, correct and cost effective.

- The Interagency SEAT Operations Guide offers guidelines for safe flight operations including flying in windy conditions. These guidelines call for ceasing aerial operations when winds exceed 20 knots (34.6 mph) or when wind gusts exceed 15 knots (17.3 mph).

- These guidelines do not limit nor prevent the pilot from refusing to accept any flight, landing site or drop based upon his or her personal experience and intuition. Ultimately, pilots are responsible for the safety of their aircraft and cargo.

S.E.A.T. PROGRAM:

- We greatly appreciate the Governor's continued support of the SEAT program, especially with the reduced availability of heavy air tankers.

- Annually, the BLM coordinates with the DFPC through a statewide SEAT Operations Plan that has greatly improved interagency cooperation and movement of SEATs across jurisdictional boundaries to support firefighting efforts.

- The Colorado SEAT network system provides service to interagency areas within the Rocky Mountain Region.

- A network of SEAT bases has been established throughout Colorado so that aircraft can respond within a 50-mile radius of a base. This system reduces turnaround times, which increases effectiveness.

FOREST HEALTH CONCERNS:

- Millions of acres have been impacted by the mountain pine beetle in Colorado. It is believed that the outbreak is subsiding do to the reduction of viable host trees.

- BLM Colorado has completed and is implementing its Bark Beetle Strategy. The first goal of the strategy is to focus on safety. This includes removing beetle-killed trees around roads, energy infrastructure and other high use areas.

- Beetle-killed trees go through three phases:
    - (1) Trees die yet retain dry, dead needles causing the increased possibility of crown fires.
    - (2) Trees lose needles leaving bare snags and causing increased ground fuels, but decreased crown fuels.
    - (3) Standing dead trees become weak, unstable and susceptible to high winds causing increased firefighter and public safety hazards.

- Areas impacted by the pine beetle contain trees in all three phases, with most acreage in phase 2.

- Fire suppression has disrupted the fire ecology of ponderosa pine stands along the Front Range, creating unhealthy forest structures that are more susceptible to intense wildland fires and insect and disease.

- Acreage of Spruce beetle-impacted forests is on the increase. This is most prevalent in south central Colorado.

- The decline of aspen stands on BLM lands throughout the state continues to be an area of concern.

- The forest products industry capacity seems to be increasing, giving all land managers more opportunity to complete forest treatments.

SAGEBRUSH HABITAT:

- Conserving sagebrush habitat is a high priority within the fire management program.

- Maintaining and restoring sagebrush landscapes on public lands is a primary means of conserving sage-grouse habitat.

- The BLM's goal is to limit the damage from unwanted wildfires in sagebrush habitat through comprehensive planning before a fire, prompt action during a fire, and effective rehabilitation following a fire.

- The BLM will place a high priority and take appropriate action to minimize the size and adverse effects of unwanted wildfires in sage-grouse habitat.

- The BLM will also prioritize planning and implementing fuels treatments to reduce the start and spread of unwanted wildfires in sage-grouse habitat.

SERVICE FIRST:

- All of the DOI Bureaus work together with the DFPC and the U.S. Forest Service for educating communities, counties and individuals through workshops, websites and media outreach about wildfire mitigation, planning and prevention.

- BLM Colorado has agreements with the National Park Service and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to improve the effectiveness of our firefighting capabilities on the Western Slope.

LOCAL WILDFIRE MANAGEMENT:

- We continue to support collaborative efforts with local communities around the state.

- These partnerships are making significant progress in identifying and treating hazardous fuels in the Wildland Urban Interface.

- In 2013, the BLM completed about 6,100 acres of fuels reduction projects on BLM lands in Colorado.

- About 81percent of the BLM acres treated for fuels reduction in Colorado were within the Wildland Urban Interface.

- The remaining 19 percent of fuels work aims at enhancing and sustaining healthy ecosystems.

2013 WILDLAND FIRES AND ACREAGES:

- In BLM Colorado:
  - Human caused / Acres 39 / 1,208
  - Lightning caused / acres 362 / 6,258
  - Total / acres 401 / 7,466

- Colorado totals (state, private and federal)
  - Human caused / Acres 3,958 / 41,495
  - Lightning caused / acres 948 / 181,421
  - Total / acres 4,906 / 222,916