

FINAL

**STATEMENT OF
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STATE AND PRIVATE FORESTRY
UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE
FOREST SERVICE**

Before the
Committee on Resources
Subcommittee on Forests and Forest Health and
Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure
Subcommittee on Oversight, Investigations and Emergency Management

Concerning Florida Wildfires of 1998

June 21, 1999

MADAM CHAIRMAN AND MEMBERS OF THE COMMITTEE:

I am Denny Truesdale, Assistant Director, Fire and Aviation Management for State and Private Forestry, Forest Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture. I have responsibility for strategic fire operations. Accompanying me is Bruce Jewell, Deputy Regional Forester for the Southern Region in Atlanta, and Joe Ferguson, Fire Management Officer, at the National Forests in Florida in Tallahassee.

As you requested, I will briefly discuss the Florida Wildfires of 1998 from the Forest Service perspective and involvement. I will discuss how we prepared, for what we recognized would be a significant fire season and how we responded to the fire situation, not only on National Forest System land but also in support of State and local governments. Also, I will briefly describe recovery efforts that were undertaken to mitigate effects of wildfires. We always try to learn from each major fire engagement through a series of fire critiques, post incident evaluations, and interagency task forces. Finally, I will highlight a few of the lessons we learned that will improve the way we manage similar situations in the future.

BACKGROUND

The Forest Service had 4 major roles in the 1998 Florida wildfire campaigns. First, we managed the fires that occurred on National Forest System land. Second, we participated as a cooperator with the Florida Division of Forestry and local governments. Third, we served as a Principal Advisor to the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) to provide a technical assessment of the severity of the situation for the Fire Suppression Assistance program. Finally, we fulfilled our responsibility under the Federal Response Plan as the lead agency for Emergency Support Function #4 - Firefighting.

The 1.1 million acres of National Forests in Florida which include - the Apalachicola, Ocala, Osceola, and Choctawhatchee Forests - are managed by the Forest Supervisor's Office in Tallahassee. We currently prescribe burn about 155,000 acres on the national forests in Florida annually.

Florida's 1998 wildland fire season started out very wet with many emergency resources dedicated to protecting the citizens of Florida from flooding created by one of the strongest El Nino events ever recorded. Record rainfall across Florida occurred during the months of January, February, and March 1998. By the end of March the heavy rains ceased and little rain fell for the next three months. Lack of rain, combined with record heat during May and June, created extreme fire conditions throughout most of Florida.

PREPAREDNESS

As a fire season approaches, we track a number of weather related indices as a predictor of future fire conditions. One of the most telling indices in Southern ecosystems is the Keetch-Byram Drought Index (KBDI). In 1998, the KBDI reached its peak in late June and early July with a statewide average of 725. The KBDI ranges from 0-800, with 800 being desert-like conditions.

All national forests are funded to provide adequate fire protection, based on average fire conditions over a five - year period. During periods of unusually extreme fire conditions, forests may request severity funding authorization to increase their level of fire protection for the duration of these infrequent episodes. In recognition that Florida's fire season held great potential to be devastating, the Regional Forester requested fire severity fund authorization on five occasions between May 23 and August 1, 1998. The Forest received the authority to spend an additional \$5,399,848 to increase fire protection levels and utilized these funds to:

- extend helicopter and crew availability;
- provide additional fire detection capability;
- place a type I helicopter on standby;
- hire addition fire crew personnel;
- hire additional tractor plows and operators.

The Forest and cooperators increased fire prevention efforts and community education by utilizing Public Service Announcements to increase awareness for protecting homes from wildfire and use of fire safe landscaping. We also developed specific Prevention programs for children.

A National Interagency Fire Prevention Team was mobilized to assist Florida fire officials in developing a short-term prevention strategy to decrease human-caused fire starts. Long-term goals were developed to assist fire managers in developing a statewide interagency wildland fire prevention program in the next 3-5 years.

RESPONSE

By early May, Florida was experiencing extreme fire behavior and significant losses to property and resources.

The first significant outbreak of wildfires in the urban interface occurred on June 6th in the north-central and northeastern parts of the state. The Forest Service deployed two Incident Management Teams to the Oakhead and Holiday fires located on National Forest System lands. The Holiday Fire (24,621 acres) and the Oakhead Fire (20,370 acres) proved to be the most significant fires to burn on National Forest System land during the 1998 season. The national forests in Florida have a 10-year average of 140 wildfires that burn approximately 5,000 acres. In 1998, 221 wildland fires burned 50,017 acres on the National Forests in Florida.

In response to increased number of fires in all jurisdictions, the Florida Division of Forestry, Georgia Forestry Commission and the Forest Service combined firefighting resources and established a Multi-Agency Coordinating group (MAC). This group set daily priorities to distribute scarce air resources and organized the ordering of wildland fire equipment and personnel through the Southern Forest Fire Compact and the National Interagency Fire Center (NIFC). The national mobilization process, managed through NIFC, provided firefighting resources from across the country, which included 2,532 fire overhead, 110 fire crews, 1,769 pieces of fire equipment, and 150 tactical aircraft.

June 7th, Governor Lawton Chiles signed Executive Order #98-141 declaring a "State of Emergency" and ordered the Florida National Guard to assist in wildfire suppression in support of the Division of Forestry.

On June 21st, a Unified Area Command was established between the Florida Division of Forestry and the Forest Service with support from the Florida Division of Emergency Management and FEMA at the State Emergency Operating Center. The Fire Marshal's Office and the Florida Fire Chief's Association committed to provide structural firefighting resources statewide. The Florida Governor activated the Emergency Management Assistance Compact (EMAC) to provide additional resources for suppressing wildfires.

The States provided resources through EMAC and Fire Compacts. The National Interagency Fire Center at Boise, Idaho, focused on mobilization of resources from all over the country to support the Florida efforts. Eight fire complexes were established throughout Florida over a six-week period, the largest firefighting effort ever undertaken in Florida. Over 10,000 firefighters from across the nation fought these fires with no loss of life to any firefighter or citizen.

At the peak of the Florida wildfire emergency over 150 tactical aircraft were deployed performing a variety of fire suppression tasks including dropping aerial fire retardants, delivering water/foam mixtures, scouting fire spread, infrared mapping of fire location, directing and coordinating aircraft and delivering firefighters. High temperatures, numerous private non-fire suppression aircraft in the area, and difficult radio communications made this a high risk environment. Even in this high risk environment no aviation accidents occurred because of the professionalism of the flight crews and aviation managers and the fact that all flight crews and aircraft were previously certified for wildland firefighting.

DISASTER/EMERGENCY OPERATIONS

On June 9, FEMA approved the request for an Emergency Declaration for Florida. This was the first time that FEMA had full activation of the Federal Response Plan for forest fires. The Federal Response Plan, Emergency Support Function 4- Firefighting, designates the Forest Service to be the lead agency to coordinate the mobilization of firefighting resources needed to support the disaster. This function was activated in the Emergency Operations Center in Tallahassee, Florida. Most coordination between agencies went well. However, we recognized that FEMA and the Florida State Division of Emergency Management should have been members of the Unified Command Team.

The Fire Suppression Assistance Program through FEMA provides wildland fire emergency assistance to States when fire emergencies exceed the capabilities of State and local resources. Due to extreme fire conditions, Florida requested an Emergency Declaration in lieu of this program. The Forest Service role in the Fire Suppression Assistance Program is to provide Principal Advisor services that provide fire and emergency related information and expertise and coordinate between agencies when a fire emergency may require FEMA assistance.

RECOVERY

Forest Service Chief Mike Dombeck, in his review last summer of the Southern Region, tasked the national forests in Florida to devise a strategy applicable to future events similar to the Florida fires of 1998, particularly in the urban interface. In response, the Southern Region established the Southern Wildland Interface Fire Team (SWIFT). SWIFT is an interagency group with federal, state, and private interests represented.

SWIFT's charter is to develop and recommend a strategy for expanding, developing, and applying a scientific base for natural resource management and community planning in heavily populated areas of the southeast. The focus will be fire protection, fire prevention, and risk reduction through community planning. We hope this initiative will serve as a national model to accelerate progress toward effectively dealing with wildland/urban interface fire issues.

→ There are three components of the strategy: prevention and mitigation; response; and recovery and post-fire management. The elements of the strategy include public information, research, and monitoring.

Part of prevention and mitigation, will be to design an outreach program that will help homeowners learn about the risk and responsibility of living in the wildland/urban interface. The team supports the October 1999 beta test of FIREWISE. FIREWISE is an internet based program that is easily accessible by the public and provides information on living in fire prone areas and gives advice that, when used, will lessen the risk of endangering life and property.

In addition to these efforts, the Governor of Florida appointed the Governor's Wildfire Response and Mitigation Review Committee to review issues surrounding the 1998 Florida wildfires.

LESSONS LEARNED

Large and complex disasters highlight processes that need to be improved, but they also affirm that we are doing many things right. The 1998 Florida fire season re-emphasized that certain aspects of wildland firefighting are operating well.

The following three major success areas were identified as a key components to a successful campaign:

- The Incident Command System (ICS) enables wildland fire agencies from across the country to come together and work efficiently during a crisis. ICS provides common training, standardized terminology, standardized equipment specifications and consistent personnel qualifications.
- Prescribed fire will lessen the intensity of wildfires, and make them easier and less expensive to control. For example, on the national forests in Florida during the 1998 season, the Forest really only had 2 fires that presented extended and difficult control problems despite the extreme burning conditions. The Oakhead and Holiday fires were located in swamp areas that could not be prescribed burned as frequently, and they accounted for almost 45,000 acres or 90% of the national forest land burned in Florida last year. Dozens of potentially severe wildland fires on national forest lands during the extreme drought period were suppressed with relative ease due to recent prescribed fire applications. Time after time, running head fires would hit a recent burn and the crews were able to take safe, effective action to suppress the fires.
- The Forest Service's use of Severity Fund Authorizations to increase staffing and preparedness during abnormally high fire danger conditions allowed Forest managers to conduct effective operations during periods of high fire occurrence.
- The Wildland/Urban Interface Assistance component within State Fire Assistance, helps communities at risk of wildfire by providing special competitive grants for planning and mitigation. This proactive approach can reduce insurance premiums for homeowners, prevent wildland fires from destroying homes, and reduce damage to federal, state, and private forest resources.

There were also some areas identified as needing improvement. In 1999, the following changes have been made to the system:

- Unified command at the statewide level was initiated as soon as the 1999 fire activity started. It included Florida Division of Forestry, State Fire Marshals Office, Division of Emergency Management, FEMA and the Forest Service. This approach abolished any jurisdictional constraints on resources.
- Incoming Incident Management Teams received a comprehensive briefing from both Federal and state agencies. The briefing stressed the lessons learned in 1998 and the differences the teams encountered when the majority of fires are occurring on private lands.
- A liaison from the Florida Fire Chief's Association, Florida Division of Emergency Management and Florida Division of Forestry was assigned to every incoming Incident Management Team regardless of jurisdiction to which assigned.

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- A staging step-up plan was developed early in the 1999 season for FEMA. FEMA used a different approach for fire suppression assistance grants, which increased efficiency and streamlined record keeping and the reimbursement process.

CLOSING

The Forest Service fire management program is professional, responsive to the concerns and needs of partners and based on the continuous study of historical fire occurrence and risk. We are very proud of the program, its value to the public, and the firefighters, and the great satisfaction of protecting people and resources.