

**Statement of
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**Before the
Subcommittee on Forests and Forest Health
Committee on Resources
United States House of Representatives
Concerning: GAO Report - Federal Wildfire Activities
September 14, 1999**

MADAM CHAIRMAN AND MEMBERS OF THE SUBCOMMITTEE

Thank you for the opportunity to discuss the General Accounting Office report on Federal Wildfire Activities, GAO/RCED-99-233. I am Larry Payne, Assistant Deputy Chief for State and Private Forestry, with responsibility for the fire management programs of the Forest Service. I will also be presenting the Bureau of Land Management's views. Accompanying me is Dennis Pendleton, Assistant Director for the Fire and Aviation Management staff and Les Rosenkrance, BLM Director, Office of Fire and Aviation.

Wildland firefighting is a complex business requiring strong management and professional teamwork. The firefighting organization is made up of highly trained, dedicated and experienced wildland fire managers and firefighters and we pride ourselves on our professional management of this very important program.

The federal agencies have experienced a more active than usual fire season in 1999, burning more than 4.4 million acres through August; more than double the ten year average. In addition, these acres have been concentrated in Alaska, with one million acres, and the western Great Basin of Nevada, Idaho, parts of Oregon, as well as California and the southern part of the country. Notably, more than 1.2 million acres of the Great Basin of Nevada have burned, affecting a concentrated ecosystem that will have long-term consequences on the grazing, wildlife, riparian, and economic values of the area. Rehabilitation and restoration will be needed in this area in the coming years.

The General Accounting Office (GAO) report gives an overview of the Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management wildfire programs and identifies three issues that need attention.

Shrinking Firefighting Workforce

The first issue detailed in the GAO report is the Forest Service's shrinking firefighting workforce. The report suggests several reasons: the aging of the workforce and physical demands of firefighting, lack of personal satisfaction, and, in some cases, a pay equity issue with some older and more experienced employees. Other reasons, such as the agency's transition toward a broader prescribed fire management program also requires the concurrent use of the same highly trained and physically fit employees - they cannot be in two places at the same time.

The report offers several recommendations to strengthen the workforce, including developing a strategy to use contract crews and requiring all employees become qualified, in some manner to contribute to fighting fires.

The BLM is concerned about the shrinking management numbers in wildland firefighting resources. Many factors affect this decline including issues such as pay inequity, retirements, downsizing, and less desire by resource professionals to participate in wildland firefighting. There does not appear to be a lack of applicants for the line firefighters, but firefighting support by other programs such as forestry, range management, and wildlife biology is declining.

The agencies recognized the need to strengthen the workforce long ago as a result of competition for resources during average fire seasons. Acknowledging a declining workforce as a priority concern and a paramount safety issue, the agency chartered a national fire review team to address this and other issues.

The team will present its findings and recommendations to the Chief this October, after which we will be better able to respond to GAO's recommendations. The Forest Service is considering options that include increased contract agreements, reorganization of the fire and aviation management program, and improved agency administrator support for employee fire involvement. The results of this study will be available for other wildland fire management agencies to consider.

Incident Communications

The second issue identified in the GAO report regards incident communications. GAO recommends the Forest Service and the Secretary of the Interior develop a strategy for converting to narrowband radio technology that ensures radio communications between firefighters will not be affected by the conversion.

All federal agencies are mandated to change to narrowband analog VHF radio systems by January 1, 2005 and narrowband analog UHF systems by 2008. In February, 1998, the Department of the Interior mandated all Department of the Interior agencies purchase Project-25 digital compliant radio equipment. The Forest Service has not mandated purchase of digital radio equipment. Currently, we are purchasing narrowband analog radio equipment which is compatible with the Department of Interior narrowband digital as well as state analog equipment. To test this compatibility, the National Interagency Fire Center will field test 48 digital radios and associated hardware on an interagency Type I wildland fire incident.

Because there are different radio systems, and concerns about interoperability between the different wildfire entities, a task force was created by the National Wildfire Coordinating Group (NWCG) to address the problem. The NWCG adopted the following task force's recommendations:

- All fire communications activity will be performed in the analog wideband mode through the 1999 fire season.
- Any Interior entity that converts its system to digital must keep it in the multi-mode configuration so the radios will accept and pass narrowband analog transmissions.
- All emergency radio equipment coming out of the National Incident Radio Support Cache, for Type I and Type II Teams, will be configured in the analog wideband mode.
- All aviation communications (Federal and contracted) will be in the analog wideband mode.

The recommendations were successfully implemented during this fire season. This fall, the task force will reconvene to develop further recommendations for the 2000 fire season.

Although digital radio technology will ultimately be the operating system, the Forest Service will proceed slowly with purchase and implementation of digital radio technology as recommended by the GAO report. This cautious approach will allow us to test the new technology under actual field conditions while ensuring firefighter safety. Furthermore, to ensure that firefighting agencies rapidly attain compatible radio technology, the Department of the Interior wildfire agencies have begun to slow down implementation of digital radio technology.

Physical Fitness

The final issue raised in the GAO report concerns the Forest Service's test to measure the physical fitness of its firefighters. Currently, the Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management both have the same physical standards for firefighting and support positions based on NWCG standards.

The BLM has adopted the Work Capacity Test and is satisfied that it is a good indicator of firefighter fitness and capability. It has been well received by firefighters as an accurate measure of physical conditioning.

The Forest Service will implement the Work Capacity Test for the 2000 fire season. The new work capacity testing procedure was to be implemented during the 1999 firefighting field season, but because of an employee fatality while taking the Work Capacity Test, the use of the test was suspended pending the findings and recommendations from the Board of Review that investigated the incident. In the interim, the Forest Service reverted to its other approved method of testing, the step test, for the 1999 fire season.

The GAO report recommends the Forest Service issue policy direction on test administration and consider using the BLM's screening process, which the Forest Service will do this winter. This guidance will allow training time for employees to meet the arduous fitness level, inform employees about the work capacity test, ensure additional analysis for the test, and provide additional monitoring to determine any administrative problems or physical injury impacts to employees.

This concludes my statement; I will be happy to answer any questions you may have.