



USDA Forest Service Fire and Aviation Management



Message from the Director June 5, 2008

In our business, distraction can lead to disaster.

We are halfway through the calendar year and heading into the summer months that used to be considered 'fire season'. Not any more - we manage and suppress fires all year now. But at this midway point in the year, I want to openly offer my thanks to all who are already engaged in this program. I especially recognize the men and women in Regions 8 and 9 for their tremendous work in prescribed fire and for being the first-rate professionals in sharing their knowledge and energies with our state partners during a very active spring season.

I remain concerned about the potentially grueling pace ahead of us this summer in the west and this fall in the east. In addition to being students of fire, many of you find yourselves also as pupils of paperwork. I know the challenges in your daily lives just winding through our business systems, wondering what transformation talk really means on the ground, and seeing sporadic starts and stops in our hiring. There are definitely organizational hazards from this "noise" in the system, which heightens my concern about the flames before you. I ask you to mentally compartmentalize the noise; you must maintain your focus.

As firefighters we know well that losing our focus and our situational awareness leads to horrific tragedies. We cannot afford even one bad day. Since 1990, just four bad days resulted in a total of 29 burnover fatalities. Events on the Dude Fire in 1990 (6 lives), the South Canyon Fire in 1994 (14 lives), the Thirtymile Fire in 2001 (4 lives) and the Esperanza Fire in 2006 (5 lives), will never be forgotten. Three more bad days since 1990 resulted in sixteen firefighters dying in driving accidents. In fact, from 1990 to 2007 we've had a lot of bad days: a total of 319 wildland firefighters died in the line of duty on the fireline, in vehicles and aircraft, and from snags, heart attacks and other causes. Hundreds of firefighters suffered injuries, some so severe that their lives are changed forever.

I believe that as we become more self-aware and attuned to each other, there will be less bad days. While solutions are being implemented that will gradually resolve impacts from transformation, budget reduction, HR issues, and election year politics, they won't immediately improve our ability to manage risk. What will keep us on track today is a belief in the fact that well focused and well prepared firefighters are safe firefighters.

I urge you to prepare for the hazardous mission that you face each day by continually focusing on your physical and mental fitness. Train your body and mind to withstand the rigors of the job, but recognize your limits and those of your crew. We must not allow any bureaucratic burdens to distract us from our first obligation to bring all firefighters and aviators home when the day is done.

Tom Harbour