

International Assistance Helps Ease Strains of '02 Season

What may have been the longest fire season ever in the United States could have been even longer, had it not been for the help of firefighters and managers from Canada, Australia and New Zealand.

Almost 1,000 people from the three countries joined ranks with U.S. firefighters in 2002, helping to ease the strain of a difficult fire season, said Tom Frey, BLM international fire and aviation program coordinator.

The number this year probably trailed only the 2000 fire season in terms of international assistance, Frey said.

“We were in the process of renegotiating some of the international agreements with Australia and New



Zealand earlier in the fire season,” Frey said. “Once we concluded all of the agreements, we were able to bring them over fast and quickly blend them into the incident management teams, when their orientation and training was completed.”

The Australians and New Zealanders filled needed aviation and line overhead roles.

“One incident commander told me that he couldn’t have operated helibases without them,” Frey said. “They became critical resources during the peak of fire season.”

Forty Type I crews from Canada assisted firefighting efforts. They were joined by 117 overhead personnel.



Firefighters from Australia and New Zealand joined the firefighting efforts in 2002.



“The Canadians had a severe fire season of their own until early August. In busy years, we always face a shortage of Type I crews, so their presence after their season slowed was very much welcomed,” said Frey.

Fire camps took on a bit more color than usual, with the flags of Canada, New Zealand, and Australia all flying in proximity to that of the United States.

“We also had a good exchange of fireline terminology. A spot fire, for example, is a spot-over to foreign firefighters,” Frey said.

The changes in terminology weren’t limited to fire matters, either.

“When the discussion of football came up, you had to be careful about which kind you meant – soccer, rugby, Canadian football or American football,” said Frey.

The help across borders wasn’t all one way this year. In mid-May, the U.S. assisted Mexican firefighters with a 10,000 acre fire near Agua Prieta, Sonora. In June, a 1,300 acre fire near Nogales, Arizona, and Nogales, Sonora, was suppressed under a unified command of U.S. and Mexican firefighters.

International Assistance by the Numbers

Canadian Assistance Received by the United States

- 40 Type I (20 person) crews, 800 people
- 117 miscellaneous overhead personnel

Australia

- 40 miscellaneous overhead (ground and aviation middle managers)

New Zealand

- 10 miscellaneous overhead (ground and aviation middle managers)

Years Agreements or Arrangements Were Signed

- Canada, 1982
- Mexico, 1999
- Australia, 2000, 2001, 2002
- New Zealand, 2000, 2001, 2002

