IMPLEMENTING THE NATIONAL FIRE PLAN

The 2000 fire season led to the development of the National Fire Plan, a joint Department of the Interior and U.S. Forest Service strategy to improve the effectiveness of the wildland fire program to better protect communities and the environment from future wildfire devastation. The plan has guided efforts to better prepare the land management agencies and their partners to control fires when they are small, manage large-scale fires, reduce hazardous fuel loads, rehabilitate burned-over areas, and assist rural fire departments.

The Department made significant progress in implementing the plan's recommendations in 2001, including an unprecedented level of interagency cooperation with the Forest Service. The Department conducted an aggressive hiring program to staff essential firefighting positions; purchased necessary equipment; contracted aircraft; and repaired fire facilities. Assistance funding was allocated to the agencies and awarded to rural and volunteer fire departments. Hazardous fuels treatment projects were selected and conducted, including projects treating approximately 164,000 acres in the wildland-urban interface.

Interior actively pursued outreach and partnership activities with States and local government agencies, Tribes, other Federal partners, and non-governmental organizations in the development of the 10-Year Comprehensive Strategy. The Department is continuing this effort with the Forest Service and other partners, developing an implementation plan for the 10-Year Comprehensive Strategy. In addition, both Interior and the Forest Service are developing a common set of long-term goals and performance outputs with which to measure the performance of the wildland fire program.

The 2003 budget funds the wildland fire program at $675.5 million, including $21.8 million for the government-wide legislative proposal to shift to agencies the full cost of the CSRS pension system and the Federal employee health benefits program. Without this proposal, the request is $653.8 million, an increase of $29.3 million above the base 2002 appropriation of $624.4 million, which does not include $54.0 million in 2002 emergency contingency funding. This budget carries forward the initiatives begun in 2001 and continued in 2002 to reduce the buildup of hazardous fuels, especially in the wildland-urban interface.

PREPAREDNESS

The 2003 budget provides $277.2 million for the fire preparedness program, including $256.8 million for continuing fire readiness activities. This funding level will maintain the current capacity to prevent and promptly detect and respond to fires.

Ongoing Cooperative Efforts to Improve Wildland Fire Management

- **Workload and Performance Measures -** Interior and the Forest Service are developing joint workload and performance measures for wildland fire management goals.
- **Fire Management Planning** - An interagency group with members from the four Interior agencies and Forest Service will ensure consistency and coordination in fire management planning efforts.
- **Contracting Evaluation** - Interior and the Forest Service are conducting a review of the progress in contracting for hazardous fuels and rehabilitation work.
- **Wildfire Suppression Costs and Strategies Review** - Interior and the Forest Service are contracting for an independent review of wildfire suppression costs and strategies. A final report to Congress is due September 30, 2002.
- **Implementation Plan for the 10-Year Comprehensive Strategy** - Interior and the Forest Service together are developing the plan to provide consistent and standard direction for all Federal and State partners.
- **New Budget Planning Model** - Interior, with the Forest Service, is developing an interagency, landscape-scale, fire planning analysis and budget tool. Called "Fire-MAP", it will allow agencies to share fire management resources across jurisdictions, focus on the full scope of fire management activities, and determine the most cost-effective fire management program.
- **National Fire Plan Database -** Interior and the Forest Service are developing a compatible system for tracking and reporting progress and ensuring accountability for implementing the goals of the National Fire Plan.
- **Native Plant Materials -** An interagency group with members from Interior and the Forest Service and other Federal agencies is developing a long-term program to supply and manage native plant materials for post-fire rehabilitation and restoration.
- **Interagency Cohesive Strategy -** Interior and the Forest Service will publish a joint cohesive strategy to establish a program to restore and maintain fire-adapted ecosystems to reduce the risks to communities and improve forest and rangeland health.
- **Wildland Fire Leadership Council -** Interior and the Forest Service will formalize a charter establishing this council, which will provide executive oversight and ensure policy coordination, accountability, and effective implementation of both agencies' wildland fire programs.

The preparedness budget includes $12.4 million for high priority deferred maintenance and capital improvement projects for fire facilities such as lookouts, barracks for firefighting crews, and air tanker bases. This is a reduction of $7.4 million from the 2002 level, reflecting the phased approach to rehabilitation of a large fire barracks in Anchorage, Alaska.

The Department is cooperating with the Forest Service to bring about greater consistency and communication between the fire agencies. The 2003 budget request provides $8.0 million for the Joint Fire Science program, which supports a cooperative, applied fire research program that is conducted in collaboration with academia, Federal and State agencies, and Tribes. The Joint Fire Science program provides effective tools to support fire suppression and innovative techniques to improve fuels hazard reduction goals.

Interior is actively updating fire management plans so that all of the participating bureaus will be in full compliance with the requirements of the Federal wildland fire policy by the end of 2004. The agencies are also developing a new fire planning analysis and budget model to be used by all Interior wildland fire management agencies and the Forest Service. The model will guide program management decisions.

FIRE OPERATIONS

The 2003 budget requests $366.5 million, an increase of $32.9 million over 2002, to provide a sustained level of support for fire operations. This program provides suppression, emergency stabilization and burned area rehabilitation, and fuels management, including fuels reduction in wildland-urban interface areas where fires pose a risk

Landfire

This pilot study will produce a process to map, at a higher resolution, areas of high fire risk across all land ownerships in the lower 48 States. The process being used is repeatable, so that 5-10 years after the completion of the project, the process can be reused to measure differences in fuels conditions. The data layers for Landfire can be used in the Fire-MAP project.

to people, property, and natural resources.

Suppression - The budget requests $160.4 million for fire suppression. This level will maintain 2002 fire control capabilities, such as aircraft operations, and related support costs. The suppression budget is calculated by estimating the 10-year average costs of suppression.

Hazardous Fuels Reduction - The budget continues the major efforts of the Department to address the dangerous accumulation of hazardous fuels, especially in wildland-urban interface communities. Fuel loads in forests and rangelands have built up as a result of years of suppressing fires. Forests are now covered with smaller trees and underbrush, and more people have migrated to the edges of forests and rangelands. This program reduces the danger of uncontrollable and costly fires by removing smaller trees, heavy vegetation, downed trees, and brush.

The 2003 budget proposes $186.2 million for an effective fuels reduction program, including $111.3 million for such activities in the wildland-urban interface. This is the same level provided in 2002. Almost 1.1 million acres will receive fuels management treatments in 2003, including 227,000 acres in the wildland-urban interface.

Round Valley

Fuels treatment efforts undertaken by the Round Valley Indian Tribe proved instrumental in stopping a catastrophic fire near the Mendocino National Forest, California in August 2001. The Medicine Fire started in the foothills, near the edge of Round Valley Reservation, on a hot afternoon and spread rapidly uphill consuming approximately 70 acres until State and local firefighters, with the aid of air support, were able to stop the blaze on a recently constructed fuelbreak. Without the Perry Ridge fuelbreak, the fire could have spread to over a thousand acres, consuming valuable timber and impacting watershed resources. The Round Valley Indian Tribe has conducted an aggressive fuels treatment program for the past three years. During that period of time, tribal employees have constructed over eight miles of fuel breaks at strategic locations. Two recently purchased tractors equipped with brush rakes and crews operating chainsaws and power pruners constructed the fuel breaks as part of the Tribes' natural resources program.

Interior will continue hazardous fuels treatments, including prescribed fire, mechanical removal, mulching, and application of chemicals. The program will emphasize the reduction of risks in forest and rangelands adjacent to and within communities. Collaborative efforts with States, Tribes,

and others will be employed to identify high priority wildland-urban interface fuels projects.

Emergency Stabilization and Rehabilitation - The 2003 budget includes $20.0 million to stabilize and rehabilitate fire-damaged areas. The 2003 request does not continue the $20.0 million in contingent emergency funding added to the President's request in 2002 for burned area rehabilitation. The Department rehabilitated over 1.4 million acres of burned forest and rangeland habitat in 2001.

After wildfires are suppressed, Interior takes steps to prevent further degradation of resources and reduce threats to life, property, and natural and cultural resources. The Department rehabilitates burned areas through revegetation with native and desirable plant species, reforestation with desirable tree species, and control of undesirable invasive or fire-prone species. The outcome of these efforts is healthy ecosystems that will provide wildlife habitat, protect public safety, sustain local economies, restore and preserve water quality, and ensure perpetuation of natural resource and commodity values.

RURAL FIRE ASSISTANCE

The 2003 budget continues funding at $10.0 million for the rural fire department assistance program. Local firefighting agencies are often the first line of defense in protecting wildland-urban interface areas threatened by fire. This program provides training, equipment and materials, supplies, and technical support for wildland fire protection to communities with populations of 10,000 or less. Interior will provide assistance to over 1,000 rural volunteer fire departments in 2003.

2001 Wildland Fire Accomplishments

The number of acres burned in wildland fires in 2001 was 3.6 million acres, a decline of 4.8 million acres from 2002. Although this decline resulted, in part from a one-third decrease in the number of fire starts, it also reflects success in implementing the National Fire Plan.

As part of the National Fire Plan, in 2001, Interior agencies:

- hired 2,163 more fire employees than in 2000 to improve preparedness capability and fuels hazard planning and treatments;
- awarded $65 million in contracts for hazardous fuels treatment and rehabilitation work;
- treated 726,138 acres to reduce hazardous fuels and accomplished an additional 159,156 acres of hazardous fuel reduction through the beneficial use of wildland fire;
- conducted rehabilitation and restoration projects on 1.43 million acres of burned land; and
- provided rural fire assistance grants to 1,445 fire departments.

The Interior / Forest Service Joint Fire Science program initiated 54 multi-year science projects.