

MANAGING FIRE



Our forests in many areas are 10 times as dense today as they were in the 1900s. We must have some active management of our forests to maintain them as healthy.

Secretary Gale A. Norton, March 2, 2001

The 2000 fire season was one of the most challenging on record, with nearly 93,000 fires and almost 7.4 million acres burned. The season was long and grueling, stretching the capacities of firefighters at the Federal, State, and local level. Many of the fires were catastrophic and resulted in severe damages. The 2000 season tested the resilience of the Federal wildland fire program and proved that the program is sound. It also underscored the need to re-examine the capacity of the program and sufficiency of firefighting resources.

The 2000 fire season led to the development of the National Fire Plan, a joint Department of the Interior/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 the Interior's efforts to ensure that the land management agencies and their partners are better prepared to control fires when they are small; to manage large-scale fires; to reduce hazardous fuel loads; and to rehabilitate burned areas.

The Department has made significant progress in implementing the Fire Plan's recommendations. In 2001, Interior has initiated an aggressive hiring program to staff essential firefighting positions;

ordered equipment; undertaken repairs to fire facilities; allocated funding to provide assistance to rural fire districts; and identified hazardous fuels treatment projects ready for implementation. The Interior Department and Forest Service have initiated outreach and partnership activities with the Western Governors' Association, National Association of Counties, Tribes, other Federal partners, and non-governmental organizations to develop a plan of action to continue to implement the Fire Plan. The Federal agencies with their State, tribal, and other partners, are also actively engaged in designing a 10-year strategy for treatment in the wildland urban interface to protect communities from the threat of fire.

The 2002 budget funds the wildland fire program at \$658.4 million. The 2002 funding level is more than double historical levels and \$367.5 million above the 2000 base fire program level of \$291.0 million. At the proposed level, Interior will continue to focus on full implementation of the Fire Plan, including building capacity in preparedness, ensuring a responsive operations program, and sustaining support for rural fire districts. Although this is \$318.7 million lower than the 2001 level, a large part of the decrease reflects the elimination of an emergency contingency fund of \$199.6

million as well as \$26.8 million in one-time costs for equipment purchases and a specific, targeted research project. The 2002 budget proposes a \$5.6 billion national emergency reserve that will be available to pay for emergency needs, including higher than average wildland fire costs.

PREPAREDNESS

The 2002 budget provides \$280.8 million for the fire preparedness program. This funding level will sustain an expanded capacity to prevent, detect, and respond to fires promptly, including larger fires. Preparedness activities include planning, prevention, detection, information and education, pre-incident training, equipment and supplies, maintenance and construction, and fire science and research.

A number of factors have changed how Federal fire managers now assess preparedness for the "average" fire season. These factors include: the increased urbanization of many areas in the vicinity of Federal lands; the scope and intensity of recent fire seasons; and the increased frequency and severity of fires over the preceding decade. Models used to design workforce and equipment needs have been modified taking into consideration these factors, to identify the program requirements for personnel, deployment of person-



nel, and other preparedness components for expanded fire seasons. The 2002 budget seeks \$252.0 million for normal year fire readiness activities, which funds 95 percent of the amount included in the National Fire Plan adjusted for fixed costs. Together with expected carryover from 2001, the fire program should be able to maintain full readiness in 2002.

The 2002 budget continues funding for the fire science program at \$8.0 million, supporting fire research and application programs that play a key role in developing tools, models, and data to support fire programs. Through extensive cooperation with researchers in universities and other institutions, Federal agencies, and State organizations, the fire science program addresses critically-needed mapping and inventories, evaluation of fuels management practices and techniques, modeling, and identification of fire characteristics. Included within the fire science program is \$2.8 million that will continue important research conducted by the U.S. Geological Survey on fuels hazard mapping and other topics.

One important component of the expanded fire program is completion of high priority deferred maintenance and capital improvement projects for fire facilities such as lookouts, barracks for firefighting crews, and air tanker bases. The Department's five-year plan prioritizes those projects. The 2002 budget provides \$19.8 million for 76 projects.

FIRE OPERATIONS

Wildland fire operations provides suppression, burned area rehabilitation, and fuels management, including fuels reduction in wildland-urban interface areas where fires pose a risk to people, property, and natural resources. The 2002 budget includes \$367.6 million for fire operations, providing a sustained level of support for suppression and fuels reduction.

Suppression – The Department has requested \$161.4 million for suppression. This includes an





increase of \$8.3 million for fire control capabilities, personnel, and related costs. This will enhance Interior's ability to control small fires and to manage large fires. Budgeted within suppression are funds for extraordinary personnel costs, including authorized overtime pay and hazard pay, fire suppression and monitoring, aircraft flight operations, logistical services for all employees assigned to incidents, and related support costs. The budget for suppression is calculated by estimating the ten-year average costs of suppression. At the requested funding level the budget fully funds the ten-year average.

Improved fuels management is a key part of a new national fire plan we have begun to implement across bureaus at the Interior Department this year.

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Hazardous Fuels Reduction – Years of suppressing fires with increasingly sophisticated and effective tactics and equipment have changed the character and structure of forests and resulted in the build up of fuel loads. Forests are now covered with smaller trees and underbrush. At the same time, the migration of people and the construction of structures near public lands has complicated fire management. Effective fuels management, including the removal of smaller trees, heavy vegetation, and downed trees, is a key component of an effective fire management program. By reducing fuel accumulations, fire managers can reduce fire intensity and improve fire control outcomes at less cost and lower risk to the public and the environment.

The 2002 budget proposes \$186.2 million for an effective fuels reduction program, including \$111.3 million for fuels reduction activities in the wild-land urban interface. This is the same level as provided in 2001.

The Department will conduct hazardous fuels treatments including prescribed fire, mechanical removal, mulching, and application of chemicals. Particular emphasis will be placed on the reduction of risks in forest and rangelands adjacent to and within communities. Interior will continue collaborative efforts begun in 2001 with States, Tribes, and others to identify high priority wild-land urban interface fuels projects. In 2002, Interior's goal is to treat 1.4 million acres, including an increased number of projects in the wild-land urban interface.

Included within the request for fuels reduction is \$6.0 million to facilitate the regulatory review of critical hazardous fuels treatment and burned area rehabilitation projects. These funds will support consultations under Section 7 of the Endangered Species Act performed by the Fish and Wildlife Service and National Marine Fisheries Service.

Burned Area Rehabilitation – Just as hazardous fuels reduction is an important tool in a compre-



hensive fire management program, so too is stabilization and rehabilitation of burned areas. Fire managers can minimize short-term damage to an area, and enhance long-term management, by stabilizing and restoring areas impacted by fires. Areas left untreated can also become more susceptible to future wildfires with the invasion of fire-prone plant species, such as cheatgrass.

The 2002 budget includes \$20.0 million to prevent further degradation of resources and to mitigate threats to life, property, and natural and cultural resources. Funding will be used to revegetate impacted areas with native plant species; restore or enhance habitat; reforest desired tree species; conduct mechanical or chemical treatments to reduce undesirable species; and undertake other efforts to control undesirable invasive species. These actions will restore healthy, native 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. The 2002 budget reflects a reduction of



\$84.8 million from 2001 for rehabilitation of areas burned in the 1999 and 2000 fire seasons.

RURAL FIRE ASSISTANCE

The 2002 budget continues funding at \$10.0 million for the rural fire department assistance program. This program, created in 2001, enhances wildland fire protection capabilities of rural fire departments by providing training, equipment and materials, supplies, and technical support to improve the protection of communities with populations less than 10,000. Technical assistance to volunteer fire departments improves the ef-

fectiveness of fire protection on public lands, especially in wildland urban interface areas adjacent to Federal land boundaries. Local firefighting agencies are often the first line of defense in protecting wildland urban interface areas threatened by fire. In 2001 and 2002, Interior's goal is to provide assistance to over 800 rural volunteer fire departments scattered across the country.