

The Tie that Binds

Remarks delivered by FAM Director Tom Harbour to the Congressional Fire Service Institute National Advisory Committee, October 2, 2008, Washington DC

There are more than a few organizations and missions represented in this room. I represent one more.

The US Forest Service manages 193 million acres of national forests and grasslands with a workforce of 30,000 people across the United States. The Forest Service is the world's preeminent forest research organization. But what will really get your attention, I believe, is that the Forest Service is the largest fire management and wildland firefighting organization in the world. About two thirds of all federal wildland firefighting assets come from the Forest Service. The Forest Service responds to about 10,000 wildland fires each year with about 10,000 firefighters who are well trained and well equipped. Our initial attack success rate is approximately 97%.

Maybe I sound proud of the Forest Service. I guess I am. We are a unique agency with a rich history and strong traditions. But we are not alone in what we do. Every day, our firefighting efforts bring us shoulder to shoulder with many of the groups represented here. Every day we have more and more in common. I am here to talk about one of the big things that tie all of us together. Frankly, as you hear what I have to say, I hope you start to feel the squeeze.

The wildland urban interface (WUI) is our common ground. What we call the WUI extends into every state in the country and probably most counties. It's that place where cities thread into the countryside, where neighborhoods are carved out of forests, and homeowners build chain link fences to keep the deer out of the shrubs. It's the place where more and more people are choosing to live. They're bringing with them not just houses with three-car garages, but schools, hospitals, and offices. And they're bringing with them a strong preference for living in the sticks, which looks just the way they like it. In some respects, perhaps without understanding it, these folks are living dangerously.

The wildland urban interface is exploding with people. In the last half of the 20th Century, Americans discovered the great outdoors, and many took their passion for the woods a step further by building their homes there. Over 8.4 million homes were added to the WUI in the 1990s. That's over 60% of the new homes constructed in the U.S. during that time. About one-third of all the housing units in the lower 48 are in the WUI. Those of us in the Forest Service know that the number of homes near National Forests grew by 18% during the 1990s, while the overall growth in housing in the entire U.S. was just 12%. We expect 12.3 million homes will be added to the WUI in the western United States by 2030. Think of the change we are facing, as something like 20 million new homes get established in the WUI.

Unfortunately, many of these neighborhoods are located in or adjacent to wildland fire-prone areas. In 2007, nearly 3,000 homes in the U.S. were damaged or destroyed by wildfires. In 2003, wildfires destroyed more than 4,200 homes, most of them in

California. The fact is, the explosion of the WUI across the country exceeds the federal government's ability to plan for and manage the growing threat of wildfire. The federal government, working alone, will not solve the issues in the WUI. Remember, though, we are all tied together here on common ground. Are you beginning to feel the squeeze?

The complications of fighting fire in the WUI go beyond the numbers. There are not only more people living near natural landscapes, there are more different kinds of people with different expectations and needs. Many retirees move to WUI areas, especially in warmer parts of the Southeast and California where wildland fire seasons can last year-round. People with diverse ethnic backgrounds may see the WUI differently, and that can complicate things for those of us who manage wildfire through some form of consensus or shared expectations. Many new residents in the WUI are simply unaware of local wildfire risks, and that's a dangerous situation.

And then there's the weather. You've probably heard it's getting warmer out there. In fact, current climatic and moisture trends are making wildland fire conditions worse.

During the 20th Century, the U.S. experienced a .9 to 1.8 degree increase in average temperature. Scientists project an additional 2.5 to 10.4 degree increase in global temperature during the 21st Century.

And, though most of the U.S. got wetter over the past 100 years, the patterns of that moisture have shifted. More precipitation is falling as rain instead of snow, and more of the rain is falling in intense downpours. Generally speaking, in many parts of the country, this has meant an earlier onset of spring with shorter snow seasons and extended periods of drought. Wildfire seasons are correspondingly longer, too: nearly 80 days longer than they were just a few decades ago.

There is more to burn—what I call “fuel”—to sustain these longer fire seasons. Fuels are denser, drier, and often in inconvenient places. Over the last century, flammable fuels in the U.S. have increased dramatically, despite aggressive actions by federal agencies to reduce accumulations of hazardous fuels on over 25 million acres from 2000-2007.

Whether the fuels are forests, shrubs, or grasslands, WUI areas are intermingled with vegetation stressed by longer drying seasons and crowded growing conditions. Forest managers recognize that the historic practice of preventing all forest fires at all costs has contributed to unhealthy forests and grasslands and made some more susceptible to wildfire, whether that fire is miles away from the nearest city, or yards away from densely populated neighborhoods.

Nation-wide, these fuels conditions will continue to propel wildfire into and within the WUI. Whether fires are started by lightning or people, wildfire can not be kept away from the growing population living in wildfire-prone places. And that's where people are moving. That's where they want to build their homes, and that's where they want their homes protected from wildland fire.

Some of you hail from a few of the places where wildfires in the urban interface are not a problem. Others are beginning to recognize their own WUI fire challenges. Regardless,

more and more of us in this business are waking up to this reality and are working in it, sometimes year-round. And it's a national problem, one that threatens lives and destroys homes and property every year. The national impacts to transportation, budgets, power grids, and tax bases run coast to coast and, once again, tie us all together on this common ground.

In some parts of the country, wildfire threats in the WUI are growing especially fast.

In the South, any wildland fire is likely to threaten homes, because the region is so densely populated. Wildland fire destroyed more homes in the South in 2000 than in the rest of the country, even though the number of acres burned was relatively small.

In recent years, wildland fires in Florida have raced from uninhabited natural areas into crowded neighborhoods at Daytona 500 speeds, consuming homes in one residential block after another. In Brevard County alone last May, 159 homes were damaged, and 30 homes and hundreds of other structures were destroyed. The 1998 Florida fires burned half a million acres and hundreds of structures. None of these numbers tells the stories of heightened risk to frightened residents who were forced to flee by the tens of thousands or of the heightened risk to firefighters facing raging, erratic wildfires among the hazards and values of urban settings.

Over the last several years, millions of residents in Southern California have been shocked to learn their ordinary, suburban neighborhoods are at high risk of raging, catastrophic wildland fire. All the elements are there: Santa Ana winds, flammable fuels, drought, and millions of people in combustible communities.

In 2003, wildfires in southern California caused 22 deaths and destroyed more than 3,640 homes, over 600 more than were lost in Hurricane Rita. In 2007, southern California wildfires consumed 3,000 structures. Seventeen people lost their lives there in 2007: ten were killed by fire, three were killed while evacuating, and four others died from the strain of the crisis.

WUI fires threaten middle America, too.

During Colorado's 2002 fire season, 142 subdivisions were evacuated, and more than 1,000 structures were destroyed. Nine firefighters lost their lives. Two years ago, wildfires forced evacuations and destroyed homes in the small town of Chadron, Nebraska. The campus of Chadron State College was nearly burned, and the Chadron Fire chief was reported to have said the streets that led from the college acted like chimneys, carrying wind-blown embers right into town.

I wonder how many of us understand there will be more wildland fires in the wildland urban interface, maybe far worse than any of these. I wonder how many of us understand that if we can make any difference at all, we will have to make it together.

If you have a sense of where I'm going, you probably sense you are about to be challenged

Now is the time for those of us who share firefighting responsibilities to develop a national framework that will extend into the wildland urban interface. To work, this framework must recognize individual responsibility alongside private, local, state, and federal responsibilities.

Fire in the WUI, and the factors that are making it worse, are viewed and managed quite differently from place to place. In fact, some of these approaches actually work against each other. Zoning ordinances, homeowner insurance policies, and professional fire protection often work at cross purposes.

The United States currently has federal wildland fire policy, policy in each state, some local policy, but no organized framework that ties us all together. We are a jumble of intermingled and connected jurisdictions facing a force of nature that recognizes no jurisdictions at all.

We urgently need a broadly shared vision, as broad as the interests in this room, and a clear, articulated framework that will enable us to prevent wildland fire in the WUI and extinguish it when it does occur. Learning to live with wildland fire means taking responsibility and working with the people who share it.

We don't have to start from scratch. The 2000 National Fire Plan brought funding and focus to bear on the problem of wildland fire in the urban interface. The Plan brought local, state, federal, and non-government stakeholders together to create goals and strategies, many designed to protect communities in the WUI. In the Comprehensive Ten Year Strategy, these partners collaborated on ambitious goals to further improve forest health and reduce risks to communities.

A new strategy, one for the 21st Century, must finally unite diverse interests that are not yet well acquainted to face the growing complexities of wildland fire in the WUI.

It might be more meaningful to you if I tell you that now is the time for *America Wildlands Burning*. Commissioned by the President, endorsed by groups like yours, and published in 1973, *America Burning* has served as a 'north star' for American fire service for over 30 years. Rural and wildlands were noted in the section, "Fuel and the Rural Wildlands Environment". It's time for this body, before a catastrophic disaster occurs, to throw its considerable influence behind a similar effort.

I will be the first to admit there is a significant federal government component to the problem. Although cooperation among federal wildland agencies, particularly between the Forest Service and the Department of Interior, is stronger than ever, our unique ways of doing business can slow things down. Agency missions vary, and what we do about wildfire can vary with the mission. We have a frustrating tendency to report things differently, and communication takes more work than it should. Broader governmental policies have encouraged a population shift to areas where natural disasters, including wildland fire, are likely to occur.

And there are even tensions within the largest wildland firefighting organization in the world.

But, I am proud to say much has improved. Better interagency cooperation within the wildland fire community is making response to wildland fires smoother and almost seamless in many cases. The Department of Homeland Security coordinates the National Response Framework that pools different skills from federal agencies to respond to national disasters. The Forest Service is an active part of that framework, providing firefighting and incident management expertise wherever it is needed.

Is it possible those of us with ties to the WUI can construct a coordinated approach to wildfire in the wildland urban interface? The answer has to be *Yes*. A coordinated approach to wildfire in the WUI should operate within a framework that eliminates contradiction and incorporates the various strengths of the organizations connected to the common ground. I encourage everyone here to consider the following elements of such a framework.

Fire Management.

The first priority cannot change: Firefighter and public safety must remain the highest priority. Points of confusion, such as the responsibility for structure protection, must be clarified, and the discussion should involve all the players in WUI wildfires: insurance companies, county or city tax assessors, residents, and firefighters.

Restoration and Hazard Mitigation.

We must restore resilient, fire-adapted ecosystems on broad scales across the nation, including near the wildland urban interface. Until fuel loads on landscapes are reduced to a level that can safely accommodate some natural wildfire, any cooperative wildland fire framework will remain reactive and potentially ineffective. Firefighters will continue to pursue suppression in an environment that is perilous to them and the people who live there. Restoring ecosystems and safety to the wildland urban interface will require cooperation among new partners whose missions have been contradictory or mutually exclusive.

Building Community Capacity

Emphasizing prevention, mitigation, and safety among residents in the WUI must continue and expand. Ultimately, new partners in this common ground, such as county zoning departments, insurance companies, and firefighting organizations, should step out ahead of new development in the WUI to mitigate or prevent wildland fire threats to residential areas. Communities added to the WUI through this broad-based planning would be more sustainable and in line with limited local government services.

Fire Workforce

Designing a professional workforce to meet the full spectrum of firefighting and related needs of the wildland urban interface will require sustained cooperation among

firefighting partners. Cross-discipline leadership among county planners, law enforcement, and firefighters will enhance public and firefighter safety.

Accountability

Meaningful accounting measures among new wildland fire partners in the WUI will be especially important. They will also be difficult to create. But if all the players in the wildland urban interface are to advocate their interests, whether those interests are tax bases or environmental health or ecosystem restoration, there must be meaningful measurements that guarantee transparency and oversight.

Common sense and history demonstrate the best time to organize disaster response is before disaster happens. Likewise, the best time to get the upper hand on fast moving wildfires in the wildland urban interface is before the first flame ignites. We need a coherent, complimentary, non-contradictory framework for managing wildfire in this common ground.

I hope you feel challenged. In fact, that might be your common state.

But don't walk away from this one. There are lives and property in the balance. More people depend on us than we will ever know.