

**“Emerging Challenges in the Wildland Urban Interface”  
Congressional Fire Service Institute  
Washington Hilton  
Washington, D.C.  
April 1, 2009**

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**Opening Comments**

I want to thank you for the opportunity to participate with you today; it's always a great pleasure and opportunity to come and talk about the issues of today—the challenges we face together; and the road, as I see it, to the solutions for tomorrow.

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Last year, I stood before you and spoke about the population explosion in the wildland urban interface or WUI—those areas closest to our public lands, and the many challenges that this increased population in those areas presents to those of us here in this room when a wildland fire strikes.

I spoke about not only what we—the United States Forest Service, the largest federal wildland firefighting agency in this nation encounters; but what you, as the protection agency for that particular area faces when fires occur.

**Quadrennial Fire Review—The future<sup>1</sup>**

Today, I'd like to take that one step further. Early in 2009, the five federal wildland firefighting agencies in concert with our tribal, state, and local government and non-governmental partners published the 2009 Quadrennial Fire Review or QFR. The QFR is not a policy-making document, does not issue mandates to either you or me. It is a document that provides federal policy leadership and the agency senior executives with the driving forces for change, suggests mission strategies, and analyzes workforce and operational capabilities. It looks out, into the future a decade or so, and provides a solid foundation for policy discussion with not only the federal agencies; but more importantly, among you our state, local, tribal and other partners. The QFR sets

the stage for good, strategic conversation about the future direction and the changes needed in wildland fire management. And, it is that “strategic” conversation that I would like to have here with you today—one that builds upon what I discussed with you here last year.

First, let’s talk about what hasn’t changed much since last year—those “driving forces” that are highlighted in the 2009 QFR:

- More people in fire-prone landscapes,
- More and bigger fires, across all regions of the United States,
- Longer fire seasons,
- A warming climate and unhealthy landscapes which create a wildland fire situation that overwhelms traditional fire management efforts, creates tension and conflict between fire management entities, and
- A fire season that results in billions of dollars in suppression costs each year.

The future will bring more of the same; and if nothing changes, more communities and resources will be at risk, fire-prone landscapes will further decline, and our budgets will continue to struggle—break the bank, as we battle to meet our costs. We must take a hard, realistic look at the way we do business, the way we live with wildland fire in this nation. New choices must be made; changes must be effectuated so that we will be successful.

### **Call for New National Framework**

Last year I called for a new national framework that would extend into the wildland urban interface. With that in mind today, when I talk to you about the “emerging challenges in the wildland urban interface,” I do so from the viewpoint of reaffirming fire governance. We need to move beyond the goal originally established by the National Fire Plan—the goal to build a greater sense of “living with fire” within the communities, which focused on establishing “defensible space.” Don’t get me wrong, that objective—building defensible space, remains vital to our success; however, communities need to understand that just like some of our ecosystems must adapt to a fire-prone environment in order to survive, those communities, built in the wildland urban interface, must likewise adapt if they are to survive for the long-term. We NEED to take them to the next

level. We NEED to make those who choose to live in these pristine areas of the country—our wildlands, understand that there is an inherent risk when they build their homes in these areas. It is our responsibility to lead in effecting change in the public's expectations that the government will be there for everyone, at everyplace, at every time, for every citizen during a wildfire event. We must encourage our communities and property and homeowners to assume the responsibilities they acquire when they move into these areas and become active participants.

Many factors have changed since the implementation of the National Fire Plan; we must move beyond that point, take them to the next level—they need to understand the “bigger picture” and realize they are an integral part of the solution!

The QFR mission strategy fosters this larger picture of achieving fire-adaptive communities. There is a dire need to build a sense of responsibility among private landowners, homeowners, the insurance industry, fire districts, local governments and other key partners of the WUI communities for wildfire mitigation and prevention.

### **Need to Reaffirm the Fire Governance**

We need to reaffirm the fire governance that prefaces fire prevention and mitigation. The fire governance core strategy encompasses two elements—first, to clarify existing federal, state, and local roles, responsibilities and authorities for protecting the WUI; and second, to realign federal, state, and local roles and responsibilities and authorities for WUI fire protection—meaning suppression, prevention, mitigation and education. We need to consider the bigger picture here, extend our reach.

Extend our reach and get more communities involved in making collaboration more effective. We have to deepen the base by strengthening our existing practices and the capabilities of the communities themselves. We NEED to move the communities beyond why fire-adapted communities are important and do what we have to in order to make them a GREATER REALITY.

Success no longer can be measured by “communities at risk—protect at all costs;” but can only be achieved when and if we have successfully moved to “fostering self-reliance and increased resiliency.”

Don’t misunderstand what I am saying here today, what “achieving fire adapted communities” entails, continues to be critically important; but it must be seen as the larger picture of restoring fire in ecosystem sustainability.

A “fire adapted community” assumes that the state and local authorities are fulfilling their roles and responsibilities in land-use planning and regulating to include building codes and ordinances, establishing fire management planning and Community Wildland Fire Protection Plans, and ensuring vigorous local suppression response capabilities. Significant is the creation of more effective alliances and relationships within a larger community of prepared, responsible partners.

### **Recent study on the ways residential development impacts cost**

The Headwaters Economics of Bozeman, Montana, an independent, nonprofit research group whose mission is to improve community development and land management decisions in the West, conducted a recent study on the ways in which residential development adds to the cost of fighting wildfires. For their case study, they used the state of Montana and affirmed there is a strong correlation between the cost of fighting wildfires and the numbers of homes threatened. The potential for significant increases in the costs of fire protection if current development trends continue is enormous. The report stated only 14 percent of forested western private land adjacent to public land is currently developed for residential use. Based on current growth trends, there is a tremendous potential for future development on the remaining 86 percent. If nothing changes, the skyrocketing cost of fighting wildfires could create an unmanageable financial burden for taxpayers—at a time when our economy is already overburdened.

### **Common National Wildland Fire Framework**

New building codes are essential and work well for new communities. The heart of our nation’s WUI quandary, however, continues to rest with the existing structures, those that can only be mitigated by retrofitting the structures. It is

imperative that we here in this room today, develop better alliances with our building officials and create an outreach program for government, homeowners, and the insurance industry to effectuate some of these most important changes. Ideally, a successful program would include fiscal options and incentives.

We talked last year about the fact that some local, most states, and the federal government had wildland fire policies; but there was no organized framework to tie us all together. We were a jumble of intermingled and connected jurisdictions facing a force of nature that recognizes no jurisdictions at all. I called for a broadly, shared vision, and a clear, articulated framework that would enable us to prevent wildland fire in the WUI and extinguish it when it does occur. We are living in a time when wildfire potential has never been greater. You heard me say earlier that the future is bigger fires, longer fire seasons across all regions of the nation and about the study conducted by Headwaters Economics. Social expectations for protection are at their highest, and there is no political tolerance for failure. A shared national wildland fire framework is essential to helping us meet these challenges. We need a framework that does not recognize jurisdictional boundaries. It is time to go beyond a policy of simply responding to ever more extensive wildfire with an ever larger suppression force. To be truly effective, the national wildland fire framework needs to be a common, shared vision for how we SAFELY, EFFECTIVELY EXTINGUISH FIRE WHEN NEEDED, USE FIRE WHERE WE CAN, MANAGE OUR NATURAL RESOURCES, AND LIVE WITH WILDLAND FIRE AS A NATION!

A shared, coherent national wildland fire framework should clearly define roles and responsibilities and tier to regional, state, and local policies, with the ultimate goal of complete interoperability. It should also focus on restoring healthy, sustainable, fire-adapted ecosystems and be based on guiding principle that support innovation and adaptive management. We need to incorporate public involvement and encourage the desired behavior I described earlier. Development of this framework must be viewed differently than ever before. We must move forward with a different goal in mind—the development of a shared national wildland fire framework that provides both the stimulus, and the means, to manage wildland fire jointly, regardless of jurisdictions.

## **Mutual Expectations**

With the uncertainty over responsibilities that continues today, under the direction of the Wildland Fire Leadership Council, a small cadre of government entities with statutory wildland fire protection responsibilities gathered in Emmitsburg, Maryland, in early October 2008 to help clarify wildland fire management expectations and responsibilities for the WUI. They've begun the dialogue to encourage a collaborative review to develop mutually agreed upon jurisdictional expectations and responsibilities prior to the beginning of this fire season, seeking to clarify tactical measures including operational strategies which will keep fire on the originating jurisdictions and outline mutually developed cost-share expectations for all areas of response—bringing us one step closer to a shared national wildland fire framework.

## **“Call to Action”**

Additionally, a “Call to Action” has been issued by a small cadre of federal, state, and local wildland fire agency leaders, meant to stimulate Presidential, Congressional, and Gubernatorial leadership to undertake what's necessary for all of us to collectively fix our wildland fire program. It is apparent across agencies and jurisdictions that “business as usual is not working!” Our goal should be to create well-prepared, fire-adapted communities and healthy, resilient landscapes at the most efficient cost. In order to do so, we need effective partnerships with shared responsibilities held by all stakeholders—responsibility and benefits for all those affected by the wildland fire problem!

I'm sure there are a few of you sitting here today saying to yourselves, “this isn't my problem—we don't have this problem where I come from.” And that may very well be the case where you come from, but this is an issue of national significance and one that threatens lives and destroys homes and property every year. The national impact to transportation, budgets, power grids, and tax bases run coast-to-coast; and once again, puts us all on common ground.

I will challenge each of you to get involved to successfully build a “new” national intergovernmental wildfire policy framework. This framework would be based on the central premise of promoting the operating practice of protecting and managing our wildlands surrounding or adjacent to the WUI by the protection

organization that is best-suited and positioned to effectively, safely, and cost-efficient provide that protection.

None of this is easy. Although the commitment to cooperate and willingness to share resources during a fire incident within the fire community is legendary, there are real differences in land management objectives, fire management capabilities, funding availability, and protection philosophies.

As costs of annual wildfire suppression and fuels reduction programs escalate, it's obvious the time has come for clarification and realignment as opposed to continued controversy and dispute about whose fire strategy dominates and who should bear the costs. **WE NEED TO DO BETTER!**

### **Closing Remarks**

Our “business as usual” is not working; our success is dependent upon ourselves and our abilities to work together and tackle the tough issues. We need to come together and conduct a collaborative review and mutually agreed upon jurisdictional expectations and responsibilities prior to the wildfire event occurring. Our discussions should seek to clarify tactical measures including operational strategies which will keep fire on our respective jurisdictions and outline mutually developed cost-share expectations for all areas of the response. Above all else, **ALL SUPPRESSION ACTIVITIES MUST BE ANCHORED IN FIREFIGHTER AND PUBLIC SAFETY**, while considering the resources at risk.

As I said last year, the best time to get the upper hand on a fast moving wildfire in the wildland urban interface is before the first flame ignites. If there is one certainty in what we do, it is the assurance that wildland fire is not going to go away, and people are going to continue to build in the most pristine parts of this country. We need to learn to live with wildland fire as a nation; and to do so, it is incumbent upon each one of us to develop a shared vision, reach a common ground for managing wildfire and meeting “the challenges in the wildland urban interface.”

Wildland fires know no boundaries—neither should we. Our wildland fire practices must be cross-jurisdictional. It is time to go beyond a policy of simply responding to those fires. It's vital we develop a truly effective national wildland fire framework with clearly defined roles and responsibilities, tiered to regional,

state, local and federal capabilities with the ultimate goal of interoperability. Development of this framework must be viewed differently than previous undertakings. We must move forward with one goal in mind—the development of a shared national wildland fire framework that provides the stimulus and means to manage wildland fire jointly, across jurisdictions.

I challenge each of you to help us all work together to craft the new fire governance of the future to ensure the nation has a fire service able to safely and effectively extinguish fire when needed, use fire where we can, manage our natural resources, and live with wildland fire as a nation. Lives, properties and communities depend on us. Thank you.

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<sup>1</sup>References from 2009 Quadrennial Fire Review, published January 2009