

**National Volunteer Fire Council  
Remarks by  
Tom Harbour, Director  
Fire and Aviation Management  
U. S. Forest Service**

**Opening Remarks:**

I want to thank Phil for inviting me here today to speak at your Spring Board Meeting luncheon. It's a great opportunity and honor for me to address you, who have such an integral tie to our volunteer fire, EMS, and rescue services across this nation—those folks we deal with on a daily basis during any incident for which we respond. You are important to us in the wildland fire community! And I really enjoy being part of these types of events.

**President's Budget**

Today, in the short period of time I have with you, I, first, want to briefly touch on the President Obama's Fiscal Year 2010 budget; and although, at this point, I am not able to go into any type of detail, let me just say I believe you will all be pleased as I am with the generally good news about fire program marks included in President Obama's budget.

**Volunteerism**

As I look across the room, I see those of you who are “intimately” involved with the US Forest Service in the work you do fighting wildland fire on those public lands close to your communities, and then, there are some of you who may never encounter a wildland fire across your jurisdiction. Whether the case is that we work together daily or maybe never, we have more than 120 national forests, nearly 600 districts offices, and upwards of 45,000 employees permanent and temporary employees, who live, work and, in many instances, volunteer side-by-side with you throughout your communities. When disaster strikes across the nation, wildfire or not, many times it is our Forest Service employees who respond and stand with you to assist those communities directly impacted. For that, I am extremely proud!

## **Economic Impacts**

Today, the economy is in tough shape no matter where you live. Times are tough for all of us—federal, state and local. We need to work together to be able to make a difference—need to find ways to get the job done in the more efficient, cost-effective manner to each of us.

The US Forest Service has some programs that can and have assisted many of your agencies and communities in the past. Last year, the Federal Excess Personal Property Program (FEPP Program)—a program which allows the loan of Forest Service-owned property, including much-needed equipment and supplies in support of preparedness and pre-suppression missions on federal, state, and community lands, provided nearly 122,000 line items with an acquisition cost of close to \$45 million—all of which went to local fire departments through their respective state forestry agencies.

Today, 50 states and 5 territories participate in the Federal Excess Personal Property program. For that, I am extremely proud!

Through the Federal Firefighter Property Program, state cooperators acquired more than 800 vehicles in 2008 with an original acquisition cost of over \$36 million. Currently, there are 24 states which have signed agreements with the Forest Service in order to participate in the Federal Firefighter Property Program. Last year, roughly \$68 million in equipment was distributed to those 20 states. In one case, the Forest Service was able to help the Pennsylvania Bureau of Forestry with acquiring 591 lighting units, providing a cost savings of more than \$400,000 to the state agency. And for that, I am extremely proud!

Today, given the state of our economy, our need to work together and for volunteerism is more vital than almost any other time in the recent memories of any of us sitting here in this room today. The wildland fire situation is not going away; in fact, predictions for the future are for bigger, longer fire season, across all regions of the United States. To be successful, we need a collaborative framework for fire governance (local, state, tribal and federal) that promotes stronger intergovernmental fire and emergency management planning, prevention, and mitigation efforts. Memorandums of understanding, cooperative fire agreements, and interagency policies need to be strengthened and maintained, and the integration of municipal fire departments, volunteer organizations, and other agencies outside the federal government will be required to meet our side-by-side challenges of the future.

At the same time, capital assets of state, local, tribal, and volunteer fire departments that are a critical part of fire preparedness will continue to play an increasingly important role. As you all know, different equipment and training are required for a wildland fire

response than for an urban or structure fire response. Where these situations intermingle is in the wildland urban interface—those communities closest to our public lands. It becomes a mixed bag of equipment types and firefighter skills. As more and more people move into these areas and the land base increases, fire response agencies are compelled to not only equip, train, and staff for the structure fire situation, they are obligated to train for all situations, urban and wildland, alike. This type of hybrid fire response organization becomes exorbitantly expensive to maintain, commonly leading to redundancies along jurisdictional borders. Realignment within the fire governance mission strategy could focus agency specialization on the type of fire that is directly in line with that organization's land management purpose.

Instead of all jurisdictions training and equipping their departments to fight all types of fire, a greater level of specialization is likely to happen and result in an increased level of efficiency of operations. Progress may be achieved should wildland agencies return more to their basic wildland fire protection responsibilities while tribal, local, and volunteer fire response organizations would continue their emphasis on their first responder priorities of structure suppression, vehicle accidents, and basic life support as outlined in the governance realignment mission strategy. It's time we look at all avenues to survival. We need to work together and be the masters of our own outcome.

### **CLOSING COMMENTS:**

I believe it was Benjamin Franklin at the signing of the Declaration of Independence who said, "We must all hang together, or most assuredly, we shall all hang separately." Given the threats and risks of the escalating wildfire challenge, the way forward must aspire to ensure that the efforts of all stakeholders in fire management reinforce and proliferate so that the whole will be greater than the sum of our parts!

Again, thank you for the opportunity to speak to you today; and thank you for all you do in the service of our country.

--Tom Harbour, Director  
Fire and Aviation Management  
U. S. Forest Service