



Los Padres National Forest Update

Implementation of the National Fire Plan

August 2002

Addressing Fire Risk

An average of 20,000 acres are burned annually by wildfire in Los Padres National Forest. While there are many positive ecological benefits from periodic fire in chaparral ecosystems, such as rejuvenation of watersheds and wildlife habitat, wildfires within the “urban wildland interface” can be catastrophic. Some of the largest and most destructive fires in California’s history have occurred within or adjacent to Los Padres National Forest. A variety of efforts to manage fire effectively in Los Padres have been underway since the Forest was established over a century ago. During the past two years, the National Fire Plan has brought to the Forest new resources that have significantly enhanced our fire management capacity.

Fire Preparedness

Fire preparedness is a key component of the Los Padres National Forest fire management program. Along with building an efficient firefighting workforce, ensuring effective coordination with local fire agencies is a top priority. To that end, the Forest manages 27 mutual aid cooperative agreements and participates actively in such efforts as the “Santa Barbara County South Coast Response Team”, an interagency task force established to plan and map essential “pre attack” elements such as radio communications, evacuations, access, resource staging areas, etc.

Los Padres National Forest’s FY02 fire preparedness budget increased by nearly \$4 million over the FY01 budget of \$10.2 million. New funding has resulted in the hiring and training of additional firefighting resources to: 1) prevent and detect fires; 2) provide prompt initial attack; and 3) provide more resources when there are several large fires burning at once. The fire organization has expanded from 219 positions (FY01) to 292 positions. New resources this year include:

- fire engine and crew at Fort Hunter Liggett (Monterey County)
- 20-person hand crew at Fort Hunter Liggett (Monterey County)
- fire engine and crew at Pine Canyon Station (Santa Barbara County)
- fire engine and crew at Santa Ynez Airport (Santa Barbara County)
- type II helicopter with 7-person helitack crew at Santa Ynez Airport (Santa Barbara County)
- 10-person helishot crew at Santa Ynez Airport (Santa Barbara County)
- water tender at Los Prietos Station (Santa Barbara County)

- fire engine and crew at Rincon Station (Santa Barbara County)
- water tender and crew at Casitas Station (Ventura County)

This brings the total firefighting resources in Los Padres National Forest to the following: 22 fire engines, 2 water tenders, 3 helicopters, 1 helishot crew, 1 hotshot crew, 1 hand crew, 2 bulldozers, 1 air attack plane, 1 air tanker, and 14 fire prevention patrols.

FY03 is scheduled to be the last year in the Forest's three-year expansion program to attain the "Most Efficient Level" (MEL) organization. The FY03 budget includes the following: 3 additional fire engines (Ventura County and Kern County); 1 Type II helicopter with 7-person helitack crew and 10-person flight crew at Fort Hunter Liggett (Monterey County); and 1 water tender at the Pine Canyon Station (Santa Barbara County), for a total of 43 new firefighter positions.

The Forest faces significant challenges in building and maintaining its MEL organization. The high cost of living in the central coast area is a barrier to recruitment. Also, facilities to house and support the expanded fire organization are currently inadequate. Where feasible, old stations are being upgraded, and cooperating agencies are helping to position and house our firefighting resources. The National Fire Plan budget for the MEL buildup does not provide the funding needed for infrastructure support of the new firefighting resources. The Forest is not sufficiently staffed to meet associated engineering, telecommunications and contracting needs.

Hazardous Fuels Reduction

Efforts to reduce wildfire risk within and adjacent to Los Padres National Forest are multi-faceted. They include prescribed burns and other hazardous fuels reduction treatments both within and adjacent to the Forest, and active participation in local Fire Safe Councils to help "at risk" communities be more fire-safe.

The Los Padres National Forest's 5-year fuels program is consistent with the National Fire Plan strategy with its emphasis on reducing hazardous fuels near inhabited areas. The Forest in FY02 accomplished prescribed burns on approximately 6,500 acres of national forest land. The larger projects this year included the 1,282 acre Sage-Aliso Burn and 5,082 acre Diablo Burn in Santa Barbara County. In the Monterey County area of the Forest, hazardous fuels were cut and piled on 7 acres in the Coast Ridge area and on an additional 14 acres elsewhere on the Monterey Ranger District. Work also continued on the cooperative Shelf-Foothill Project behind the community of Ojai in Ventura County, including 100 acres of "cut and pile" work.

The FY03 fuels program is expected to achieve results comparable to FY02. The Forest is currently positioned to complete eight prescribed fire projects in Monterey County, Ventura County and Santa Barbara County and has seven projects in the analysis phase for Monterey, Santa Barbara, Ventura and Kern Counties. The Forest's intent is to expand the program over the next three to five years with a 10-year goal of 10-12,000 acres per year.

The cost per acre of prescribed fires in interface areas is considerably higher than projects in backcountry areas. Treating fuels around neighborhoods requires considerable labor-intensive preparation work, as well as more conservative and expensive fire tactics during project implementation. Also, environmental analyses must be completed for all projects regardless of size and location.

Assistance to Communities at Risk

Local fire departments and Fire Safe Councils were invited this year to submit Economic Action Grant proposals for funding hazardous fuels treatment and biomass utilization projects. Five projects requesting \$231,000 were submitted. Three projects were approved for \$114,000, as follows:

- \$40,000 to the City of Monterey for a wildland fuels reduction/biomass utilization program.
- \$19,000 to the Carpinteria-Summerland Fire Department for a vegetation mitigation equipment project.
- \$55,000 to the City of Santa Barbara to develop a wildland fire plan.

In addition to the Economic Action Grants, the Forest received \$178,000 in Community Protection Grant funds. Altogether, there were 10 requests for these funds and three projects were approved:

- \$97,500 to the Ventura County Fire Protection District for the Shelf/Foothill and Sisar hazardous fuels reduction projects.
- \$41,000 to the Monterey Fire Safe Council for the Big Sur hazardous fuels reduction project.
- \$40,000 to the Pine Mountain Club for a fuel hazard reduction project.

Private entities and cooperating agencies are very interested in National Fire Plan grants as a way to address their hazardous fuels problems. One significant concern of private landowners and local Fire Safe Councils is that they do not have the financial capacity to do the required environmental analysis and consultation with National Marine Fisheries Service and/or U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service for land disturbing activities.

The 2002 Fire Season

It has been a busy fire season in Los Padres National Forest and we are expecting fire activity to increase as we move into our traditional “peak season” in September and October. During the period from June 30 through August 27, Los Padres firefighters responded to 108 fires within the Forest and our mutual response area. Our new fire resources, both on the ground and in the air, have played a crucial role in attacking fires early and keeping them small. Beyond the noticeably improved initial attack capability, the additional resources made a significant contribution during the early season “Wolf Fire” helping to keep what could have been an enormous and very destructive fire to a relatively small 21,500 acres.

For Further Information

If you have questions regarding the implementation of the National Fire Plan in Los Padres National Forest, please contact Patrick Pontes, Fire Management Officer, at (805) 961-5741, or Kathy Good, Public Affairs Officer, (805) 961-5759.