

Office of the Secretary

For Immediate Release
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**Assistant Secretary Scarlett Announces WFLC Innovations
That Will Strengthen Wildland Fire-Fighting**

WASHINGTON--Assistant Secretary of the Interior Lynn Scarlett, chair of the interagency Wildland Fire Leadership Council, today announced major innovations that the council will implement to fight wildland fires. In FY 2003, more than 54,000 fires were fought 9,736 of them on Department of the Interior lands.

"I have just returned from a tour of various forested areas in Arizona, Oregon and California that underscored the need for the decisions made by the council during our Oct. 16 meeting in Hon Dah (Ariz.)," Scarlett said. "Although the number of fires is down from the previous fiscal year, we find that after decades of fire suppression, fuels on forested lands have built up to the point that fires are larger, less predictable, and more severe in their impacts."

Scarlett noted, however, that the projects she visited near Hon Dah, AZ, before the WFLC meeting and in southern Oregon and northern California afterwards--demonstrate the success of community-based solutions to managing the impact of wildland fires while creating local economic benefits. "With creativity and persistence, we can design projects that reduce hazardous fuels and protect communities," she noted. The WFLC field tour in Arizona was hosted by the White Mountain Apache tribe. The Oregon and California tour was hosted by Sustainable Northwest, a Portland-based nonprofit that promotes environmentally sound economic development in communities throughout the Northwest.

The interagency Wildland Fire Leadership Council is composed of representatives from the Interior Department and the Agriculture Department, the Federal Emergency Management Agency, the Western Governors Association, the National Association of Counties, the Intertribal Timber Council and the National Association of State Foresters. Council decisions on Oct. 16 included:

1. Convene Blue Ribbon Panel on Cost Containment: The council will convene an interagency Blue Ribbon Panel to examine how to contain the costs of large fires. The Interior Department spent \$311.3 million on wildfire suppression during the past fiscal year, while the Forest Service spent \$1.02 billion. Many factors contributed to the high cost of fire suppression in 2003, including prolonged drought in the West; the need for agencies to support each other in fighting fires, the hot, dry conditions in northern Rocky Mountains; the concentration of 2003 fires in forested areas where fires are difficult and expensive to contain; the increased need to protect structures in the "wildland urban interface" areas, the need to protect local property and economic values (i.e. tourism at Glacier National Park, and the high cost of deploying resources to prevent the spread of large fires. "We will put together a panel of representatives from state, local, federal and tribal governments and incident team members. We will ask them to review the facts and advise us on what measures should be implemented,"

says Tim Hartzell, Director of the Office of Wildland Fire Coordination at the Department of the Interior.

2. Adopt Near-Term Actions to Help Local Communities Prepare and Fight Large Fires:

The council called for near-term actions to improve management and the computerized system for processing requests for help as well as actions to improve cost-effectiveness. The fire directors are to keep the Blue Ribbon Panel advised of these actions.

3. Implement Prototype LANDFIRE Computerized System Developed by Forest Service and Interior: The Interior Department and USDA Forest Service developed LANDFIRE, a new computerized model that documents field conditions, risks and hazards. Although it is still a prototype, it was deployed in Montana and the team was impressed with its ability to identify areas most at risk for fire and focus in on them closely (areas down to 30 meters in size) for accurate prevention and treatment. The council decided to move forward to implement LANDFIRE nationwide.