

# THE LEARNING CURVE

## FIVE LESSONS LEARNED AND EFFECTIVE PRACTICES WESTERN STATE FIRE MANAGERS AUGUST 2006 – 9<sup>TH</sup> EDITION

### SAFETY

#### *Cross-Training Local Fire Departments Brings Results*

The states of Arizona and Hawaii have placed significant efforts into the training of local fire departments in the wildland fire curriculum at the statewide level.

The Arizona State Land Department is a relatively small organization with only 50 employees. The personnel from these trained fire departments form the operational arm of Arizona's wildland fire effort. They successfully cross-train 750 to 1000 fire department personnel each year. This provides a pool of 200-500 responders at any given time. The Department provides fire departments with training from the National Wildfire Coordinating Group (NWCG) curriculum, including S-130/190 Firefighter Training and Introduction to Wildland Fire Behavior, I-100 Introduction to the Incident Command System, most 200 level operations courses, S-260/261 Interagency Incident Business Management and Applied Interagency Incident Business Management and S-390 Introduction to Wildland Fire Behavior Calculations.



*Photo Courtesy of Dyan Bone*

In the state of Hawaii, the Division of Forestry and Wildlife (DOFAW) personnel have also been training with their cooperating county fire departments using NWCG training materials. Courses have included S-110/130 Basic Firefighter, S-234 Ignition Operations, S-190 Introduction to Fire Behavior, S-233 Tractor/Plow Boss, S-215 Fire Operations in the Wildland/Urban Interface, and Strategy and Tactics. To date, DOFAW has included 225 fire departments in the training.

#### **Lesson Learned:**

Arizona State Land Department personnel note that their training curriculum fosters a spirit of cooperation among the departments. It also enables the departments to work together more safely and seamlessly, during wildfire suppression efforts.

Hawaii also credits their training efforts with reducing safety issues and problems, allowing for more organized operations during wildfires. Hawaii DOFAW emphasizes, “Always invite your fire department to any agency training.”

## **PLANNING**

### ***Collaboration Pays Off***

The Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation (DNRC) benefits from significant participation in the state’s wildland fire protection provided by the members of local government fire districts. Collaboration between the DNRC and local government provides the state’s citizens with a high level of fire protection at very low cost.

Local government involvement includes representation on the regional interagency wildfire coordinating group, the Northern Rockies Coordinating Group (NRCG). The Montana Firewardens Association and the Montana Fire Chiefs Association both represent local government interests on the NRCG. In addition, a standing Wildland Committee facilitates input and communication between the DNRC, the Firewardens Association, and the Fire Chiefs Association.

The Montana DNRC also assists all 56 of the state’s counties with wildfire protection through its County Coop Fire program. Through this program, the DNRC provides training, equipment, and fire suppression assistance.



*Photo Courtesy of Montana DNRC*

### ***Lessons Learned:***

The DNRC model for providing fire protection, in cooperation with local government, has proven itself effective for protecting Montana’s citizens, their property and the state’s natural resources. Through this cooperative arrangement, 50 million acres of state and private land wildfires in Montana are afforded wildfire protection, requiring only a minimal investment from the state’s taxpayers. The DNRC believes that when compared to other states, their service delivery model produces a low cost, effective means of suppression and builds strong interagency relationships.

### ***Insurance Policies and Suppression***

In Oregon, state law mandates that private landowners of forestland maintain responsibility for providing fire protection. These landowners pay the costs of basic fire protection on a local district budget basis to the Oregon Department of Forestry (ODF). This district assessment, charged per acre, covers prevention, detection, readiness and fire suppression through the extended attack stage.

#### ***Lessons Learned:***

To cover the costs of fires that exceed the capacity of regularly budgeted resources, the landowners contribute funds to a statewide emergency fire fund which is further supplemented by State of Oregon general funds and a commercial insurance policy that currently adds another \$25 million to the capacity of the emergency fire fund. Buying commercial insurance for emergency fire costs represents a practice unique to Oregon. The insurance, obtained through a broker, is provided by various companies from the world insurance market, with Lloyd's of London underwriting the largest share of the policy. The insurance premium is funded in a 50/50 partnership between forest landowners and the State of Oregon General Fund.

Once large fires occur, Oregon's citizens effectively receive immediate access to \$50 million to fund fire suppression operations. Forest Landowners pay the first \$15 million expended from the State's large fire suppression account, funded from a combination of acreage assessments, harvest tax, improved lot surcharges, interest earnings and fire cost reimbursements collected from parties responsible for prior fires. The State then pays the next \$10 million of suppression costs. Together, these obligations represent the annual deductible portion of the State of Oregon's insurance policy. Once the deductible is met, \$25 million in insurance becomes available through the insurance pool. If the \$50 million fund is expended, the burden then falls back to Oregon's General Fund.



*Photo Courtesy of wildlandfire.com*

Recently, the ODF increased the deductible to drive down the premium costs. The savings were used to re-invest in initial attack resources. ODF funded five helicopters and two heavy air tankers on a severity basis, and the costs to preposition crews and engines.

## **COMMUNICATION**

### ***“Stone in the Pond” Concept***

A primary challenge in the Kansas wildland urban interface is simply educating people about the implications of allowing woody growth and annual grasses to invade the defensible space around homes.

In Kansas, vegetation has long been controlled by fire. Historically, Kansas’s ranchers and farmers burned extensive acreage on an annual basis. However, urban encroachment into what were historically pasturelands decreased the scale and frequency of prescribed burning in the state.

In addition, a preference for large lot zoning has created a fuel problem that did not historically exist in Kansas. Eastern redcedar is now encroaching on residential properties, which are too large for the owners handle the encroachment problem. Eastern redcedar, actually a species of juniper, is the only native evergreen tree in Kansas, and grows throughout the state. With the absence of fire, redcedar tends to encroach into uncultivated areas and poorly managed grasslands. While it can be controlled with fire, burners can only achieve an effective burn of redcedar under relatively severe burning conditions. Consequently, there exists a fear of burning in redcedar in developed tracts. In addition, social pressures make it difficult to conduct burning operations in the wildland urban interface. With annual prescribed fire taken out of the equation, the balance between smaller annual fires and large, catastrophic fires became an issue for the people of Kansas.

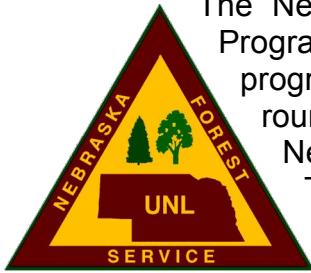


*Eastern Redcedar*

### ***Lesson Learned:***

The Kansas Forest Service feels that they may be behind the curve in educating landowners, because wildfire has not been a problem in Eastern Kansas until recently. However, they are currently adjusting their efforts through the use of the Firewise-Kansas program, and associated fuel reduction projects. Kansas uses what they refer to as the “stone in the pond” concept in starting *Firewise - Kansas* with a small lakefront community with 90 homes and one small fuel mitigation project. This first Kansas-Firewise community will be officially recognized on September 16, 2006 with a community celebration and dedication ceremony. Following the recognition of this first community, Kansas will expand Firewise to additional locations in the state.

### ***“Partners in Prevention”***



The Nebraska Forest Service (NFS) conducts a Fire Prevention Program, of which they are very proud. The NFS started their program 30 years ago, and have since developed it into a year-round program involving 100 of the 500 communities in Nebraska, and 6 fire prevention cooperatives across the state.

The agency's Fire Resource Manager for Prevention and Public Education visits local fire departments to help them establish comprehensive fire prevention programs. These programs are tailored to meet local, community specific needs.

As part of the agency's overall fire prevention program, the NFS started an initiative called "Partners in Prevention" six years ago. The Partners are an organization comprised of personnel from the NFS and volunteer firefighters. The NFS is a small organization relative to western states and, in Nebraska, 98% of wildland fire personnel are volunteers. Consequently, volunteers provide most of the manpower for the Partners in Prevention effort.

Involvement in the Partners requires volunteers to work only 10 hours per year, but in reality, Nebraska's prevention volunteers typically devote hundreds of hours. As a result of their efforts, the Partners received the Bronze Smokey Bear Award in 2004. The Partners received the Bronze Smokey before a group of 1800 people at the annual statewide fire school, and that recognition sparked a lot of interest in, and enthusiasm for, the program.

The NFS and the Partners in Prevention organization have earned a national reputation for innovation and successfully implementing a comprehensive fire prevention program requiring only modest financial resources. Consequently, NFS and Partners personnel are in demand, as other fire organizations invite them in to teach about the Nebraska approach. That approach can best be described as focusing on proactive fire prevention, as contrasted from fire safety, which Partners personnel contend supplies the focus of most "fire prevention" programs.

#### ***Lesson Learned:***

The agency believes that the greatest impact Nebraskans can have in the area of fire protection is through fire prevention. The Nebraska approach focuses on action at the local level, and avoids the notion that good fire prevention is about spending money. The Partners choose, instead, to focus on employing the community's capacity. As an organization, Partners in Prevention succeeds because people believe and trust those from their own community. The Partners volunteers travel around to other volunteer fire departments, helping them start-up their own fire prevention cooperatives.

The NFS pays Partners volunteers to attend national level fire prevention meetings each year, providing the volunteers with both a high profile opportunity to advance the program, and an energizing, fun experience.

Each year, the NFS and Partners in Prevention develop a unique fire prevention theme for the year, unifying members in their cause. For example, in partnership with Affiliated Foods, the NFS and Partners in Prevention graphically promoted their fire prevention theme on five million plastic grocery bags distributed in 13 Midwestern states. This effort provided excellent exposure and public relations at no cost to NFS or the Partners in Prevention. The bags were valued at \$96,000.

The NFS and Partners in Prevention mail out 100,000 pieces of fire prevention material each year. In addition, the NFS purchases fire prevention material in mass quantities to take advantage of volume discounts. They then sell these prevention materials, on a cost recovery basis, to Nebraskans interested in promoting fire prevention.

The NFS and Partners in Prevention also produce public service announcements using students from high school speech classes. This strategy has proven effective because parents and community members enjoy hearing their own children and friends on radio, talking about fire prevention.