

A Biscuit Fire Review News Release -
Mega-fires study urges retaining resources
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BETH QUINN

GRANTS PASS -- Northwest forest managers should expect more "mega-fires" like last year's 500,000-acre Biscuit fire and should keep more firefighters and equipment at home rather than sending reinforcements to distant wildfires, federal fire officials say.

That's one recommendation in the first big picture review of the most expensive fire in U.S. history, which erupted in July when hundreds of firefighters from the Siskiyou National Forest and U.S. Forest Service Pacific Northwest Region 6 were battling blazes elsewhere in the West.

Other suggestions include relaxing federal safety rules to allow greater flexibility in using helicopters, overhauling management of private contractors and purchasing to insure against fraud and waste, and extending the assignments of fire management teams to a minimum 21 days to lessen turnover during critical stages of fires.

Experienced fire managers agree that had one of the Siskiyou forest's 20-member ground crews not been fighting fire in New Mexico and a regional aerial attack team not been fighting fire in Colorado, the five small fires now known as the Biscuit fire probably would not have merged into Oregon's largest blaze in 137 years. The fire threatened 17,000 residents of four Illinois Valley towns.

"The ability to implement strategies on the Biscuit fire was directly related to firefighting resource availability," the review concluded. "Opportunities to halt the fire spread had to be forsaken because of limited resources. As a result, the fire grew larger and threatened more communities on both the western and eastern perimeters."

Experts say it's difficult to determine what effect the recommendations might have once a new fire season starts.

"It is obviously important to try to maintain that at-home resource," said David Rittenhouse, a retired supervisor of the Boise National Forest who led the five-member review panel. "At what point and what criteria you use is the question. I don't think you can make an absolute equation."

Fire managers from federal and state agencies will take up the question in meetings this month, hoping to find a way to factor in the potential of small fires in tinder-dry forests choked with fuel to become "mega-fires" into a list of priorities that sends firefighters to protect human lives and communities first.

"We need to look more carefully at what the minimal level of staffing is that we won't go any lower than, given the weather and fuel situation," said Laurie Perrett, director of fire and aviation management for USFS Region 6.

Such a change would be a departure for federal fire managers, who currently offer mutual aid on a national scale, sending firefighters and equipment across the country as fires erupt. And, in the end, keeping firefighters at home today could mean less help tomorrow.

"If everybody does that, what happens when we need a lot of help from the rest of the country and they're holding on to their minimum staffing? In the extended-attack, large fire arena, there's going to be more hurt," Perrett says. "It's kind of a no-win situation."

Unlike at the federal level, keeping firefighters at home at times of greatest fire danger rather than allowing resources to be drawn down to help elsewhere is a longstanding policy of the Oregon Department of Forestry.

"We do not allow drawdown one iota where it will affect our initial attack," said Greg Gilpin, retired forester for Forestry Department's Grants Pass unit. "I can say, 'No.' "

Since 1999, the nation has increased the number of full-time fire service employees by a third, but 80 years of fire suppression have left federal lands heavy with fuel and the number of large fires grows each year. Last year Colorado and Arizona each had a fire that burned more than 400,000 acres

"Over the past couple of years we have been building up. We've made significant strides in being able to do initial attack and stop a horrendous number of fires," said Lou Woltering, supervisor of the Six Rivers National Forest in California, which saw 65,000 acres burn in the Biscuit fire. "At what level we finally need to get to? I don't know the answer."

<http://www.oregonlive.com/news/oregonian/index.ssf?/base/news/104591909257720.xml>

FYI - to clarify some comments made by the reporter.
Laurie Perrett
Director, Fire and Aviation Mgmt.

For the record - the article on Mega-Fires is very simplistic from my perspective. I spoke with Beth Quinn for a half hour on all aspects of the Biscuit Review but she focused on a small piece for the article.

One sentence in the article is simply false - "Other suggestions include relaxing federal safety rules to allow greater flexibility in using helicopters,..." Ms. Quinn and I spoke a lot on this topic, but my thoughts are not reflected in the article.

We will continue to follow all federal safety rules and standards. Where we have flexibility within standards - we want to effectively communicate the spectrum so that we have clarity and appropriate use within the flexibilities allowed.

She further suggests - - "Experienced fire managers agree that had one of the Siskiyou forest's 20 member ground crews not been fighting fire in New Mexico and a regional aerial attack team not been fighting fire in Colorado, the five small fires now known as the Biscuit fire probably would not have merged into Oregon's largest blaze...." I question where that fact came from, or from what authority? What reporters fail to recall is that we had hundreds of fires in the PNW when the Biscuit fires were small. We sent scarce federal resources to the fires that had the greatest potential to harm life, homes and communities. As her article further quotes from the Biscuit Fire Review - "The ability to implement strategies on the Biscuit fire was directly related to firefighting resource availability."

The thing that she got right is that we need to review minimum fire fighting resource draw-down levels on each unit (by preparedness level) to ensure that we do not dip below these levels. We will also review PNW minimum draw-down levels for geographic area security. We have several opportunities this spring to discuss this further.

Laurie Perrett
Director, Fire and Aviation Mgmt.