

# BORDER AGENCY FIRE COUNCIL Year End Report 2013

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Annual Wildland Firefighter Training in Tecate, Baja California, Mexico.

## Border Agency Fire Council

The Border Agency Fire Council (BAFC) is comprised of 29 United States and Mexican government agencies and organizations representing fire protection, law enforcement, emergency responders, natural resource managers, and elected officials. The BAFC addresses public safety issues pertaining to wildfire along the U.S./Mexico international border.

To stop the flow of illegal immigration, in 1995 the United States government began “Operation Gatekeeper” to tighten border security near Tijuana, Baja California, Mexico. The operation resulted in a new immigration pattern by pushing border crossers to the rugged terrain of eastern San Diego County. People started crossing the border east of Tijuana and a trip that formerly took a few hours along the coast turned into several days and involved a strenuous hike through the rugged back country. People were not prepared for the extreme summer heat or the winter where the temperature drops below freezing at the higher elevations. Many of these people simply did not realize the difficult conditions they would encounter. This lack of knowledge proved to be life threatening.

The Border Agency Fire Council was formally created during the 1996 fire season, with the first meetings conducted in the fall of 1995 due to a dramatic increase in wildfire activity in southeastern San Diego County. Investigators determined that improperly extinguished campfires left by immigrants and torches carried to guide their way at night were causing these fires. Fire agency officials concluded that these two activities were responsible for a significant increase in the number of wildfires and needed to be addressed.

As accidental fires continued, local officials in both countries realized that they were putting their own employees in danger. The problems to be addressed were: emergency response vehicles could not travel safely on the narrow dirt paths; there were no safe staging areas for firefighters; there were no safe landing spots for rescue helicopters; and there was little cooperation between both countries on these border fires.

The Border Agency Fire Council was formed to save lives, to protect property, and to protect the sensitive habitat along the border area. Three major goals of BAFC are:

1. Establish and maintain relationships with U.S. and Mexican government agencies.
2. Strengthen awareness and cooperation on biodiversity.
3. Continue effective fire prevention, suppression, and emergency response.

Through collaborative efforts, the BAFC has improved the environment that runs along the border to allow better access into the wildland for emergency responders. Threatened and endangered species and their habitat are now better protected because of the partnership. Member agencies have enhanced communication among responders on both sides of the border, and have helped educate people in both countries with fire safety messages.

An unprecedented binational mutual assistance plan is in place and working because of this program. This important plan established dispatching and resource utilization procedures that enable participating

agencies to work cooperatively to suppress fires and take appropriate actions on emergency situations on border lands of the U.S. and Mexico.



Photo 1: BAFC Members from left to right: Representatives from Secretaria de Protección al Ambiente del Estado de B.C., Mexican Consulate General, Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, CAL FIRE, & Customs and Border Protection.

## Fire Season 2013

Fire season in southern California started early in 2013. Following an extremely dry winter, as early as April the California Department of Fire (CAL FIRE) began transitioning into fire season by increasing staffing in San Diego, San Bernardino, and Riverside counties. Drier fuel conditions, higher temperatures, and the likelihood of small fires becoming larger fires were a concern along the border. Because of this, agencies relied on safe and aggressive initial attack to be the best suppression strategy to keep wildfires small. While there were many fire starts along the border, none of them grew into large fires.

## Highlights and Issues of 2013

Since 2012 extremely dry conditions and lack of precipitation have been the norm in California. This situation presented urgent problems, including the increased risk of wildfires. According to the 2013 Forest Pest Conditions in California report, on May 1 statewide precipitation was at 75 percent of average, and the snowpack on April 1 was at 40 percent of average, making it the fifth driest in the last 60 years. In response to this drought, in December 2013 the governor of California formed a [Drought Task Force](#) to review expected water allocations, California's preparedness for water scarcity, and whether conditions merit a drought declaration.

These extremely dry conditions along the border and large wildfires throughout California hampered the opportunity for BAFC members to have a binational drill. The drill was intended to help members practice working together on an extraction rescue and also test the cross border communication system. The drill has been re-scheduled for 2014.

In addition, the federal government shutdown in the U.S. in October 2013 resulted in a lapse in government funding. Federal agencies were closed for almost two weeks, with the exception of certain essential services.

The goldspotted oak borer continues to be a topic of concern in southern California. The insect killed approximately 950 coast live oaks in San Diego County. California black oaks infested by the borer were also detected for the first time in Riverside County, making it the first discovery of the species outside of San Diego County.

This summary is only a snapshot of the activities and issues that partner agencies address each year. The BAFC believes its efforts have saved lives and property. This forum allows members to be on alert of potential issues and trends that impact the border area.

### **One Less Spark-One Less Wildfire Prevention Campaign**

Fire agencies launched this fire prevention campaign because they needed public help to prevent wildfires. Research had shown that approximately 90 percent of California's wildfires were caused by people. Whether it is ensuring a campfire or debris burn of leaves and branches is completely extinguished, or keeping a vehicle well maintained to prevent sparks, the campaign showed how Californians could follow a few simple steps to help prevent wildfires. The One Less Spark One Less Wildfire Prevention Campaign was sponsored by the California Wildfire Coordinating Group. Members include: U.S. Forest Service, CAL FIRE, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Bureau of Land Management, Bureau of Indian Affairs, National Park Service, Cal Trans, Fire Safe Council, Cal EMA, and Rural County Representatives of California. More information can be found at:

<http://www.preventwildfireca.org/onelessspark/#sthash.mSyiGONk.dpuf>



### **Recreational Shooting**

As recreational target shooting opportunities were reduced on some lands along the border, specifically on the Cleveland National Forest, shooting enthusiasts began target shooting on other lands. The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) noticed an increase in fires caused by recreational target shooters. Significant efforts have been made by the BLM to educate recreational shooters in the safe and responsible use of public lands.

### **Visits**

BAFC members continue to invite guests to participate in the meetings and to become members of the organization. Representatives from the office of the Secretaria de Protección al Ambiente del Gobierno del Estado de Baja California attended the June meeting and reported that they were in the process of updating their Emergency Mutual Assistance Plan and suggested a binational meeting to coordinate the changes.

## **International Fuel Break**

Otay Mountain, a section of an international fuel break located at the border between the United States and Mexico in San Diego County, California, was completed in 2002 and receives annual maintenance work.

This on-going project has several goals, including:

- Protecting life and property in adjacent communities;
- Improving endangered species habitat;
- Enhancing national security as a result of open areas; and
- Maintaining vegetation growth to a minimum around the border fence.

The ongoing work on the international fuel break is an excellent example of interagency fire mitigation that provides multiple benefits to local communities in both the United States and Mexico. CAL FIRE, Bureau of Land Management, Comisión Nacional Forestal (CONAFOR), and the private Mexican Conservancy Pronatura work in partnership, to protect citizens and habitat from fire. Agencies continue to maintain the fuel break to protect life and property by providing fire suppression control line opportunities.

## **Cold and Warm Weather Rescue Kits**

Fire is not the only threat to human life in this area. Extreme temperatures in the rugged mountainous area of San Diego County in summer and winter have taken lives since the migration pattern changed over the years. During the winter, temperatures drop to well below freezing in the higher elevations. During the summer, temperatures can rise to over 100 degrees. The Border Patrol has placed emergency rescue kits in specially marked underground sites within the area. The kits contain blankets, basic medical supplies, food and water. Kits are maintained annually by the Border Patrol. Agencies continue to provide rescue service to international travelers in distress.

## **Roads & Truck Trails**

BAFC-member agencies and others continue to maintain truck trails and smaller roads in the area. These roads have made a significant difference in getting fire engines and other emergency response vehicles into remote areas. Partner agencies in the maintenance process also include the California National Guard and the US Fish and Wildlife Service.

## **The Natural Resource Protection Guidebook**

The Resource Protection Committee (a subcommittee of BAFC) worked on updating this guidebook. The guidebook is a valuable tool for response agencies that work in sensitive habitat within the BAFC boundaries. The goal of the guidebook is to empower responders to perform their duties and protect the environment at the same time. The guidebook contains an agency contact list with phone numbers matched to map quads, especially for firefighters from outside of San Diego County.

## BAFC Website

The website is posted as a link on the Cleveland National Forest site. This has been effective in reducing paper usage when distributing council annual reports. The website is: <http://www.fs.usda.gov/detail/cleveland/workingtogether/?cid=STELPRDB5281045>

## Partnership with Mexico

Mexico's emergency response agencies have been valued cooperators from the beginning. In keeping with the Mutual Assistance Plan, U.S. and Mexican firefighters remain available to assist each other for wildland emergencies. The U.S. and Mexican consulates also play key roles in the education information process. In addition, Mexican firefighters continue to receive wildland fire training from CAL FIRE. CAL FIRE firefighters recently conducted three days of training in Tecate, Baja California, Mexico.

### Mutual Assistance Plan with Mexico and the U.S.

The BAFC Operations Plan is the parent document that allows the details of the Mutual Assistance Plan to be developed and implemented. A steering committee made up of BAFC members addresses future updates.

This unprecedented Mutual Assistance Plan has continued since 1998. The agreement between Mexico and the U.S. allows emergency responders and ground resources to cross the border to protect lives and property. The Mexican Consulate, Mexican officials and U.S. fire officials review the document annually. This agreement continues to save valuable time in crossing the border without delays and red tape. Emergency responders call immediately to the U.S. and Mexican authorities through their communications network. Responders may proceed directly to the scene for any necessary action without waiting for any approval process.

Air resources are still not allowed to cross the border; but BAFC is pursuing a future change through the U.S. and Mexican consulates to allow aircraft to fly one mile across the border in order to suppress fires in either country. It is a possibility that a new air operations protocol may be established between countries in the future.

### Training Mexican Firefighters

The Border Protection Wildfire Course was attended by the Rancho La Puerta Fire Brigade and took place in Tecate, Baja California, Mexico. The course was organized and instructed by CAL FIRE. The training was based on the S-130 and S-190 fire behavior courses required for U.S. wildland firefighters. Mexican firefighters were trained on the proper use and maintenance of hand tools and how to use chainsaws and other specialized equipment. The training was conducted in May and lasted three days. This training opportunity is allowed through the Mutual Assistance Plan between the U.S. and Mexico.



Photo 2: CALFIRE Firefighter Training in Tecate, Baja California, Mexico.

## BAFC MEMBER REPORTS

### USDA- Forest Service - Cleveland National Forest



The Cleveland National Forest (CNF), located approximately five miles north of the international border with Mexico is California's southernmost national forest. Long term drought, changing fuel conditions and the resulting unpredictable fire behavior, combined with increased human activity made 2013 a challenging year. By working in partnership with the Border Agency Fire Council, the CNF is better equipped for fighting wildfires along the border, because as social and ground conditions change, staying informed on current and predicted conditions in the area helps provide a safer working environment for wildland firefighters and the public.

The Descanso Ranger District (District) worked with partners and surrounding community members to encourage everyone to take part in making sure that community protection against wildfire was addressed. This is because residents, firefighters, homes and other structures are always safer when residents work to protect their own property by clearing brush, trimming trees and removing flammable materials away from their homes and buildings.

The CNF offers many existing and potential benefits to the people who live within a few hours driving distance. The CNF is one of the few National Forests that share the border with Mexico. The forest serves in many capacities by:

- Protecting the viability of plant and animal habitats, natural ecosystems and cultural resources.
- The Descanso Ranger District is a gathering place for families; it is a central location for families living in the municipalities of Tijuana, Mexicali, and Tecate and in the counties of San Diego, Riverside, Orange & Imperial.
- It is a model for firefighting mutual assistance and bi-national cooperation.

By working in partnership with the Border Agency Fire Council, the CNF is better equipped to fight wildfires along the border; protect plants, animals and the watershed, and protect the surrounding communities.

## California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (CAL FIRE)



CAL FIRE protects over 1 million acres of land within San Diego County. To support emergency operation over this area CAL FIRE operates a Monte Vista Inter-Agency Communications Center with the U. S. Forest Service (USFS) - Cleveland National Forest. CAL FIRE maintains 18 fire stations housing 26 front line fire engines. CAL FIRE supervises and fields 19 inmate firefighter hand crews in cooperation with the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation based out of four Conservation Camps located strategically throughout the county. Aerial firefighting resources are based at the Ramona Air Attack base operated by CAL FIRE, home to two air tanker planes and one air attack coordination plane. Additionally CAL FIRE operates 4 bulldozer units within the county. CAL FIRE also, through a Cooperative Fire Agreement coordinates the activities and response of the San Diego County Fire Authority (SDCFA). The SDCFA provides emergency response from numerous fire stations utilizing a combination of paid, reserve and volunteer firefighting personnel who provide Emergency Medical Service response 24 hours a day. SDCFA have added the additional chief officers and key staff positions to recruit, train and supervise operations.

Binational Cooperation and Training - CAL FIRE, participated in the presentation of the annual Wildland Firefighter Training Academy in Baja California, Mexico. Topics included wildland fire behavior and tactics, Incident Command System and emergency medical treatment.

Fuel Reduction and Community Protection - CAL FIRE continues to plan and implement fuel reduction projects, both individually and in cooperation with other agencies. These projects are locally designed to enhance community protection in an environmentally conscious process.

Environmental Sensitivity and Fire Fighting - Balancing the need to suppress wildland fires with the preservation of the environment has long been a challenge to firefighters. A copy of this book is maintained in every firefighting piece of equipment under the control of CAL FIRE and is utilized to insure sensitive areas are protected, to the extent possible, during wildland fire suppression efforts.

### ***Border Fire Incidents for 2013***

<b>Month</b>	<b># of Border Fires</b>	<b>Total acreage burned</b>
<b>May 2013</b>	2	103
<b>June 2013</b>	3	5
<b>August 2013</b>	1	1
<b>October 2013</b>	1	6
<b>Total for 2013</b>	7	115 acres

## California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation



The year 2013 marked the 68th anniversary of cooperation between the California departments of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) and Forestry and Fire Protection (CDF) in the Conservation Camp Program. Our state pioneered the employment of incarcerated individuals in wild land fire protection. Since its inception, the program has expanded into a highly mobile work force engaging in all forms of risk disaster mitigation, pre-fire fuel management, the development and maintenance of fire defense improvements and facilities; and the performance of conservation related projects for local, state, and federal agencies. This program provides convicted felons with the opportunity to give something back to California citizens while paying their debt to society.

In addition to the missions listed above, the Camp Program is an active participant in the Border Agency Fire Council (BAFC). There are four Conservation Camps located in San Diego County that act as first responders to border fire emergencies.

### ***California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation Conservation Camps***

<b>Camp name</b>	<b>Location</b>	<b>Inmate count</b>	<b>Number of crews</b>
Puerta La Cruz (Female)	Warner Springs	132 inmates	5
La Cima (Male)	Julian	90 inmates	4
McCainValley (Male)	Boulevard	110 inmates	5
Rainbow (Female)	Rainbow	110 inmates	5

Combined, these camps have the ability to provide a total of fourteen hand crews in a very short time to isolate, contain, and mitigate wild land fires. Puerta La Cruz also houses a Mobile Kitchen Unit (MKU) that is dispatched to larger fires to provide full meal service to the participating agencies.

In 2013, one or more of these Camps played a direct role in controlling the 3 wildfires that occurred on the border between the United States and Mexico involving nearly 110 acres of wild land. These efforts saved California taxpayers hundreds of thousands of dollars.



When these men and women are not fighting fires or training to fight fire they provide invaluable assistance with various conservation programs, County or State Park maintenance, as well as public road maintenance.

**Photo 3: McCain Valley Camp in Boulevard, CA**

## San Diego County Sheriff's Department



The San Diego County Sheriff's Department is proud to be one of the founding members of the Border Agency Fire Council. Working in partnerships with our communities as well as fellow members of BAFC, deputies assigned to the Rural Law Enforcement Division continue to provide quality service to the citizens of these areas.

Working with our partners in the fire service, we assist in numerous fires that occurred throughout the backcountry portion of San Diego County. These fire emergencies are truly a team requiring effort and partnership with our fire department colleagues in these critical incidents.

The Sheriff Departments' excellent working arrangement with the various fire and law enforcement agencies in the backcountry areas has proved very useful at both fire and disaster scenes. Deputies assigned to the Rural Law Enforcement Division of the Sheriff's Department carry fire turnout gear, extra water for rescue personnel and victims, as well as the ability to utilize common radio frequencies to talk to other agencies.

Adhering to our mission statement of "In partnership with our communities, we provide the highest quality public safety services", the Sheriff's Department continues to support the Border Agency Fire Council and participates in their various projects.

## USDI- Bureau of Land Management



The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) actively supports the continuing efforts of the Border Agency Fire Council (BAFC). BLM's California Desert District is subdivided by the Border Mountains Unit, of the Palm Springs-South Coast Field Office and the Eastern San Diego County Mountains Unit of the El Centro Field Office, both of which are continuing to experience resource impacts related to immigration and smuggling activities.

These impacts most notably include the ignition of wildfires. These fires threaten human life, property and resources. One of the original concerns of the founding members of the BAFC was the realization of the human tragedy involved in the fatal and injurious burnover of people caught on foot in the Border Region during wildland fire events. These injuries were predicted to seriously impact the emergency medical system in the region as well as costing upwards of thousands of dollars to treat the injured. This proved a reality in the Harris Fire in 2007.

BLM's Fire Mitigation activities in the region include fuels treatment and fire prevention activities which include Spanish/English Fire Prevention signing, fire patrol and educational outreach. BLM Fire Responses related to immigration last year were at an all-time low of 3 fires burning 103.3 acres.

However, a new fire cause is emerging over the past four years and that is wildfires caused in the Border Region by the recreational shooter. These fires threaten those in the wildlands as well as infra-structure and the wildland urban interface with communities. Last year BLM Fire Mitigation personnel contacted 273 individuals in shooter fire education. 2013 suffered 4 shooter fires. 2012 suffered 6 fires as did 2011.



Photo 4: CALFIRE suppression of fire on BLM land.

CAL FIRE is BLM's "fire department" in the Border Region under a contractual agreement. This long term agreement has provided guidance under the BAFC to operate as seamlessly as possible. This has been a successful arrangement for many years. BLM Fire provides the Fire Mitigation Education Specialist in the role of Agency Representative- Resource Adviser (AREP-READ). The AREP-READ arrives with the Initial Attack upon the fire incident. This arrangement allows the agencies to improve communications, lessen fire suppression impacts and associated costs and provide the public with superior service.

## USDI- Fish & Wildlife Service



The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's (FWS) Fire Management Program in Region 8 includes National Wildlife Refuges and Fish Hatcheries throughout California, Nevada, and Oregon's Klamath Basin. In San Diego and Orange Counties, FWS manages about 15,000 acres of wildlands on a complex of four National Wildlife Refuges (NWR) that provide 12 critical habitat areas that are home to 21 threatened or endangered species. FWS representatives attend the Border Agency Fire Council to facilitate communication and coordination for fire and law enforcement between all BAFC agencies.

The largest part of the fuels program is creating and maintaining fuel breaks and includes discing and mowing, roadside clearing, and invasive species removal at refuge boundaries.

The zone coordinated supported a number of interagency committees and teams including the Border Agency Fire Council, Forest Area Safety Taskforce, and Border Management Task Force. The zone continues to support numerous fire safe council activities and helps with development of different community wildfire protection plans.

## DHS- Customs and Border Protection



“To enforce the rule of law along the border, enhancing the quality of life of the people we proudly serve.”

The San Diego Sector of the U.S. Border Patrol is responsible for 66 linear miles of the U.S./Mexico border, and nearly 7,000 square miles, roughly corresponding to the boundaries of the County of San Diego. Since the implementation of Operation Gatekeeper in 1994, illegal entries in San Diego County have steadily declined.

The success of Operation Gatekeeper has enabled the San Diego Sector to appropriate more resources to the development of search & rescue teams, anti-smuggling investigative units, public outreach programs, and border safety initiatives. The availability of personnel and resources has enabled the sector to become more proactive and the leader in innovative uses of new technology. San Diego Sector has evolved from the most neglected area of the southwest border to the flagship of the U.S. Border Patrol and a model of effective, efficient, and humane border control.

Border Safety Initiative - The Border Safety Initiative (BSI) began in San Diego in 1998 as an effort to make the international border safer for everyone. BSI addresses related concerns in the following areas: Prevention of illegal entries through potentially hazardous areas, Search and Rescue capabilities and commitments, and interactive support in situations requiring the Identification of deceased persons.

The San Diego Sector issues emergency response supplies to agents as one facet of the Border Safety Initiative. Backpacks were loaded with a variety of items appropriate for summer or winter emergency aid. Each bag is packed with enough supplies for more than one individual. Easily digestible food, such as special granola “trail mix,” dried “tropical fruit mix” and carbohydrate energy gel replaces earlier food items. “Gatorade” is included along with water and electrolyte tablets. Basic medical response supplies as well as first aid guides are included. Additional instant “cold-packs” were added.

## San Diego Gas & Electric



San Diego Gas & Electric (SDG&E) is pleased to be a member of the BAFC and shares the council's commitment to work cooperatively with all agencies involved in protecting life, property, and native habitat in the border area of San Diego County. SDG&E has been an active participant since the council's beginning and became a formal member in June 2005.

SDG&E is always looking for new ways to expand its coordination efforts with public safety agencies. Our goal is to provide for the safety of first responders and the public on both sides of the border, and to facilitate quick & aggressive suppression efforts. Thank you for the opportunity to be a part of this dedicated and vital organization.18

## Comisión Nacional Forestal



Gerencia Regional I

Península de Baja California

The National Commission of Forestry (Comisión Nacional Forestal - CONAFOR) was created as a decentralized federal agency, under SEMARNAT (Secretariat of

Environment and Natural Resources) on April 4, 2001. Its mission is to inspire the participation from Mexican society to make the necessary changes to create new sustainable forestry development policies in Mexico. Its general goal is to develop productive activities and forest conservation and restoration.

According with the Mexico's General Law of Forestry Sustainable Development, CONAFOR is the federal agency responsible for the coordination of the wildfires prevention, detection and suppression in the country, with the assistance of other federal, state and county public administration agencies, including volunteer groups.

## **Border Agency Fire Council Membership**

Twenty-nine organizations and elected officials are active members of the Border Agency Fire Council. Each contributes staff and funds to this unique collaborative effort.

California Board of Forestry and Fire Protection

California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR)

California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW)

California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (CAL FIRE)

California Highway Patrol (CHP)

Comisión Nacional Forestal, B.C., México (CONAFOR)

D.H.S. Customs and Border Protection

Dirección de Bomberos de Tijuana

Director de Protección Civil del Estado, B.C., México

Estatado de Forestal y Fauna Ensenada, México (SEFOA)

Fire Safe Council San Diego

Joint Task Force 6

Mexican Consul General San Diego (Associate Member)

Office of the Governor

Office of Supervisor Dianne Jacob

San Diego County Department of Health Services Agency (DHSA)

San Diego County Department of Planning and Land Use (DPLU)

San Diego County Office of Emergency Services (OES)

San Diego County Sheriff

San Diego Fire and Rescue Department

San Diego Gas and Electric (SDGE)

San Diego Trauma Hospital Administrators

Southern California Watershed Fire Council

Bomberos de Tecate

U.S.D.A. Forest Service

U.S.D.I. Bureau of Land Management

U.S. Attorney's Office

U.S. Consulate General Tijuana

U.S.D.I. Fish and Wildlife Service