

# Border Agency Fire Council

## *Annual Report 2014*



Rainbow Fire Crew in formation during the Bautista Drill.

## Introduction

The Border Agency Fire Council (BAFC) is an organization that is comprised of 29 United States and Mexican governmental agencies and organizations that represent fire protection and law enforcement professionals, emergency responders, natural resource managers, elected officials, and consular representatives in the binational area. The BAFC was formed in 1996 to help save lives, to protect property, and to protect sensitive habitat along the U.S./Mexico international border.

The major goals of BAFC are to:

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

Through collaborative efforts the BAFC has ensured better access to the wild land along the border for emergency responders. Threatened and endangered species and their habitats are now better protected because of the partnership. Member agencies have enhanced communication among responders on both sides of the border, as well as helped educate people in both countries with fire safety messages.

An unprecedented binational mutual assistance plan is thriving 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 the border.

## History

Although the Border Agency Fire Council was formally created during the 1996 fire season, the first meetings were held during the fall of 1995 due to a dramatic increase in wildfire activity in southeastern San Diego County. To address the increase in wildfires effectively, it was determined that binational cooperation was essential. As a result, authorities representing both sides of the border continue to meet regularly to maintain the binational cooperation that started in 1996.

## **Fire Season 2014**

California experienced the driest year on record following two previous drought years. The early May U.S. drought monitor showed that approximately 96 percent of the state was experiencing drought conditions, with 77 percent of the state in extreme or exceptional drought. The U.S. Forest Service expected 2014 to be a very active fire season statewide, due primarily to the drought, and coordinated with the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (CAL FIRE) all year to prepare for and respond to fire incidents. Elevated fire danger had already been occurring in the mid and lower elevation areas where vegetation remains very dry. Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack declared 57 of 58 counties in California as primary natural disaster areas due to drought.

## **CAL FIRE bans burning**

On June 18 CAL FIRE Director Ken Pimlott issued an order to suspend open burning across 31 million acres of state responsibility area in California. The suspended burning order is part of CAL FIRE's continued efforts to mitigate the increased threat of wildfire due to the drought emergency. CAL FIRE had already responded to 2,118 fires that year, a nearly 70 percent increase in the average number of fires for the same time period.

## **U.S. Forest Service increases firefighting aircraft fleet as fire season begins**

The U.S. Forest Service is adding four additional aircraft to its next-generation firefighting fleet, bringing the total number of aircraft to 21 large airtankers (with opportunities to add additional aircraft, if needed) and more than 100 helicopters. The new aircraft supported over 10,000 firefighters for the 2014 fire season.

## **Shooting restrictions**

Beginning May 23 the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) started a Stage III Seasonal Fire Restriction that prohibited recreational target shooting of any kind within all lands managed by the Palm Springs-South Coast Field Office, which includes portions of San Diego County. The BLM lifted the restrictions in December.

## **Training Mexican firefighters**

The Border Protection Wildfire Course, organized and instructed by CAL FIRE, took place in Tecate, Baja California, Mexico. The Rancho La Puerta Fire Brigade attended the training, which is based on the S-130 and S-190 fire behavior courses required for U.S. wildland firefighters. The training, which was conducted May 14 through 16, is allowed through the Mutual Assistance Plan between the U.S. and Mexico.

## Highlights and Issues

The extremely dry conditions along the border did not give the BAFC members an opportunity to conduct a binational fire drill. The drill is intended to help members practice working together on extraction rescues and also test the cross-border communication system. The drill has been re-scheduled for 2015.

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.

## Pest conditions report

*The 2013 California Pest Condition Report* was published by the California Forest Pest Council, a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization. This report gives an overview of the detection of pest damage, primarily by forest insects, diseases, and animals in California. Information about the goldspotted oak borer (GSOB) was included in the report.



Goldspotted oak borer, "Buy it where you burn it" highway sign.

In 2013, 950 coast live oaks were killed by the GSOB in San Diego County and GSOB-infested California black oaks were detected for the first time in Riverside County. A copy of the report is available at: <http://go.usa.gov/KpsB>

## US-Mexico border region: Bridging the cultural divide workshop

The Consulate General of Mexico in San Diego organized a cultural relations workshop that would foster greater understanding among authorities and government agencies of San Diego County and their counterparts in Mexico. The workshop was presented in collaboration with the Mexico-U.S. Philanthropy Border Alliance and with the financial support of the Mexico Tourism Board in San Diego. The workshop was held at the University of San Diego in February. BAFC members that attended the workshop felt they gained a better understanding of cultural differences and similarities and how to be aware of them when working together.



Attendees listen to speaker at the Bridging the Cultural Divide workshop.

## Feral pigs in San Diego County

A presentation on feral pigs was given by Megan Jennings, Cleveland National Forest wildlife biologist, in April. Feral pigs have been detected in San Diego County. The Cleveland National Forest, as well as other landowners and managers in the area, have been impacted by the movement of the pigs.

These pigs have destroyed native habitats, damaged agricultural lands, impacted cultural and historical resources, and are a threat to conserved lands and sensitive species. In an effort to reduce the impacts, an inter-governmental group was formed to come up with a solution as to how address this issue.

An implementation plan, which started in 2014, includes trapping the pigs and monitoring their movements throughout the county. For more information can about the feral pig issue, more information is available on the website at:

<http://www.sdferalpigs.org>



Megan Jennings poses with Assistant Chief Allen after the Feral Pig Presentation.

## 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Wilderness Act

The Cleveland National Forest has four designated wilderness areas. Two of these—the Pine Creek and the Hauser wilderness areas on the Descanso Ranger District—are near the border. Wilderness has benefits for everyone, whether you visit a wilderness or simply appreciate the continued existence of areas where the Earth and its community of life are untrammelled by humans.



Wilderness also provides opportunities for primitive and unconfined recreation, including hiking, horseback riding, fishing, hunting, photography, and off-trail exploration for more information on the Wilderness Act, please visit the website at: <http://wilderness50th.org/>.

## Visits

In a spirit of friendship and cooperation the Consulate General of Mexico in San Diego attends all BAFC meetings. Baja California state government officials, as well as Calexico Fire, attended the April meeting.

## The *Planes* fire and rescue educational activity book

The second *Planes* movie revolves around the transition of a small airplane named “Dusty Crophopper” into the dangerous world of wildland firefighting after he learns he can no longer fly in races. The Forest Service, CAL FIRE, and the National Park Service are creative consultants on the world of wildland firefighting. The activity book includes wildfire facts, a campfire safety guide, an ecology of wildlands quiz, a forest word search, and other activities that will keep children entertained. For information, visit: [http://smokeybear.com/resources/PlanesFireAndRescue-ACTIVITY-BOOK\\_FINAL.pdf](http://smokeybear.com/resources/PlanesFireAndRescue-ACTIVITY-BOOK_FINAL.pdf)



## Santa Ana Wildfire Threat Index

The Santa Ana Wildfire Threat Index categorizes Santa Ana winds based on anticipated fire potential. The index uses wind speed, humidity, and fuel conditions to estimate how severe an event will be in terms of its impact upon the fire environment. The website is in place to help the public determine when it is time for them to evacuate. The website address is: <http://www.santaanawildfirethreat.com>



**BAFC**  
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## USDA- Forest Service - Cleveland National Forest



The Cleveland National Forest includes portions of San Diego, Riverside, and Orange counties. The Descanso Ranger District, which is the southernmost district, lies approximately five miles north of the international border with Mexico. Three years of drought, changing fuel conditions and the resulting unpredictable fire behavior made 2014 a challenging year. By working in partnership with the Border Agency Fire Council, the Cleveland National Forest 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 worked with partners and surrounding communities to encourage everyone to ensure 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 Cleveland National Forest Hazardous Fuels Management program centers on implementing vegetation management projects that will increase the safety of the public and firefighters, as well as reduce the risk to homes and property, during wildland fire events.

Projects include clearing defensible space near and around communities, maintaining fuelbreaks on the landscape along strategic ridges and roads, thinning forest stands, and applying prescribed fire. Work is completed using contractors, Forest Service fire employees, agreements with non-profit organizations and through external grants with fire safe council's.

The Forest tries to implement approximately 2,000 to 2,500 acres of fuels work every year and in fiscal year 2014, 2,323 acres of work across the Forest was completed. Of that, the Descanso Ranger District completed 1,184 acres of fuels work.

The Cleveland National Forest is one of the closest national forests to the international border with Mexico. The forest has many benefits, including:

- 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 San Diego, Riverside, Orange, and Imperial counties.
- It is a model for firefighting mutual assistance and binational cooperation.
- Working on cross-border issues related to invasive insects and animals, such as the goldspotted oak borer and feral pigs.

By working in partnership with the Border Agency Fire Council, the Cleveland National Forest 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 the Monte Vista Inter-Agency Communications Center with the Cleveland National Forest.



CAL FIRE maintains 18 fire stations that house 26 front line fire engines. CAL FIRE supervises 15 to 20 inmate firefighter hand crews in cooperation with the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation based out of four conservation camps located 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 four bulldozer units within the county.

Through a cooperative fire agreement CAL FIRE coordinates the activities and response of the San Diego County Fire Authority. The fire authority provides emergency response from numerous fire stations using a combination of paid, reserve, and volunteer firefighting personnel who provide emergency medical service response 24 hours a day. The fire authority has added the additional chief officers and key staff positions to recruit, train, and supervise operations.

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

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.

Balancing the need to suppress wildland fires with the preservation of the environment has long been a challenge to firefighters. A copy of the book *Environmental Sensitivity and Fire Fighting* is kept 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. Fires in the international border area during 2014 are listed in the table below.

2014 US-Mexico Border Fires			
Date	Incident	Acres	Other
May 28, 2014	Border 4	0	20X20 Spot
June 7, 2014	Border 5	0	100X100 Spot
June 28, 2014	Border 7	0	3 acres in Mexico / 0 in USA
August 16, 2014	Border 8	21	
August 29, 2014	Border 9	0	10X10 Spot
<b>Total Acres</b>		<b>21</b>	

## California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation



The year 2014 marked the 69<sup>th</sup> anniversary of cooperation between the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) and CAL FIRE in the Conservation Camp Program. California 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 program is an active participant in the BAFC. There are four conservation camps located in San Diego County that act as first responders to border fire emergencies. These camps are shown in the table below.

### ***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
McCain Valley (Male)	Boulevard	110 inmates	5
Rainbow (Female)	Rainbow	110 inmates	5

Combined, these camps have the ability to provide 19 hand crews in a very short time to isolate, contain, and mitigate wild land fires. Puerta La Cruz also houses a mobile kitchen unit that is dispatched to larger fires to provide full meal services to the participating agencies.

In 2014, one or more of these camps played a direct role in controlling the five wildfires that occurred on the border between the United States and Mexico. These efforts saved California taxpayers thousands of dollars.

When participants in the program are not fighting fires they provide valuable assistance with various conservation programs, county or state park maintenance, as well as public road maintenance.

## USDI-Bureau of Land Management



The California Desert District of the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) continues to support the cooperative efforts of the Border Agency Fire Council. Cooperative projects over the past year with CAL FIRE have included maintaining critical truck trails that allow fire suppression resources to respond safely to remote wildland fires.

The valuable CAL FIRE water tank system allows for the storage of 10,000 gallons of water in remote locations that are more than one hour travel time each way. Ten thousand gallons of water is enough to fill 20 fire engines. This stored water is essential during the current prolonged drought. Water tanks on BLM Lands were surveyed for function and needed maintenance. CAL FIRE has begun repairing three tanks that were found to be damaged and out of service due to vandalism.

Fuels treatment included the “roadside brushing” or cutting and removal of dead chaparral, resulting in a pleasing mosaic of remaining vegetation. Roadside brushing reduces flame impacts to fire vehicles and crews. Roadside brushing has been accomplished along the Minnewawa Truck Trail, portions of the Otay Truck Trail, Marron Valley Road, the old Marron Road, the Ridge Road in the greater Dulzura community, Rope Road, and the Shockey Truck Trail in the Greater Campo Community. The international fuel break was again maintained between Marron Valley and Doghouse Junction on Otay Mountain.

BLM personnel continue to attend the Border Agency Fire Council meetings and participate on committees in order to operate seamlessly in emergency operations with our cooperators, as directed in the formation of the Border Agency Fire Council. Below is a chart of 2014 fires within the BAFC project area north to Julian, California.

Date	Incident name	Cause
January 20, 2014	Marron	Shooting
February 19, 2014	Buffalo	Construction related
March 9, 2014	Barrett	Vehicle related
March 17, 2014	Bratton	Structure Fire
May 4, 2014	Pink	Shooting
May 7, 2014	Marron	Shooting
May 13, 2014	Campo	Structure Fire
May 13, 2014	Dulzura	Downed power line
May 10, 2014	Featherstone	Unknown
July 3, 2014	Banner	Unknown
July 7, 2014	Wynola	Unknown
August 18, 2014	Border 8	Shooting