

National Fire Plan

Northwest Area Command Cost Containment and Accountability

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As federal and state agencies struggle with another severe wildland fire season in Montana, the public might ask; what are our managers and firefighters doing to meet the objectives of protecting public lands and addressing fire fighter and public safety? They are also questioning the suppression of fires threatening communities, containment of those fires in the more remote areas, and curious about how agencies are addressing the cost of these activities.

In 2002 the Biscuit Fire cost the American public much more than the \$150 million spent for suppression cost. Tax payer dollars paid the bill for burned area rehabilitation. Agencies are expected to manage large fire suppression costs through budgets appropriated to them by Congress. When large fires start and un-appropriated costs accumulate, the additional money has to come from somewhere. The money is taken from other funded projects like hazardous fuel reduction, trail maintenance, recreation management and land acquisition. Federal agencies are expected to balance their checkbooks. Forest Service Chief, Dale Bosworth, feels that cost containment is an important objective in holding ourselves accountable for the dollars spent suppressing wildland fires. Today federal and state agencies are working hard to manage cost of suppressing large fire.

The following are examples how the Northwest Area Command (NWAC) has accomplished cost containment during the Fires of 2003 in the Flathead Valley Area.

- NW Area Commander, Rex Mann, requires daily reports from Incident Commander (IC) on how they are managing cost. Incident Management Teams (IMT) are expected to use a daily cost containment analysis checklist for guidance.
- Mann and Cathy Barbouletos, Mic Holm and John Dahlberg, agency administrators, work daily on the strategy for fire suppression and the management of fire use fires to provide for specific objectives to the IC. These clear objectives allow the IMT's to focus resources and reduce overall cost of their incident.
- Daily prioritization of resources. NWAC was able to successfully share resources such as aircraft and helicopters, thereby reducing significant cost of ordering additional aircraft and helicopters when IMT's need them.
- Regular assessment of resources and demobilization of non-critical resources are evaluated continuously by IMT's and members of the NWAC.
- The Area Commander carefully manages the work/rest ratio, which offers them the flexibility of extending the IMT's and NWAC staff, thus saving expensive mobilization cost.
- NWAC created a Joint Information Center (JIC), which established a centralized contact point for all fires. This created less conflict of information and eliminates the need of individual fire phone banks.

The NWAC team makes it a priority to manage and where possible reduce cost on all large fires under its management, successfully addressing the National Fire Plan. "The days of the blank check for fire fighting are over. We must be prudent in managing the cost of large wildland fires" states Mann. Mann emphasizes "A more important message to tell is the only real solution to preventing large fire costs is to prevent the new fires from getting big." It is paramount that local, state and federal agencies continue to develop the relationships and collaborative partnerships that will foster the understanding to take action to reduce the hazardous fuels through aggressive fuel treatments and utilization of fire use fires. This strategy is the only long-term solution to reducing wildland fire cost. *For more information on the National Fire Plan and how you can reduce hazardous fuels, visit our website at: <http://www.fs.fed.us/r1/nfp>*