

The outlook of fire

The west is prone to wildland fire. Montana is no exception. As wildland fires increase in severity and size, so does the cost of suppression in terms of real dollars and loss of property and natural resources. The professional forestry community has produced a number of documents detailing the reasons behind the increasing severity and costs of fire. They include:

- Extended drought in the west;
- Increased development in the wildland urban interface, the area where development meets the wildland;
- An increase in fuel load in the forest from drought, disease and disagreement on federal forest land management practices;
- Lack of - adequate resources for local, state and federal agencies.

These factors may explain why fires are increasing in severity and cost, but on the Montana landscape there are other issues that increase the complexity of fire suppression. Such factors are:

- Differences in fire suppression policies between federal agencies and state agencies;
- Decreased federal funding for land management activities due to large wildland fire costs;
- Lack of resources to fully fund DNRC initial attack operations;
- Increased gas and diesel fuel costs;
- Uncertainty of the future of industrial and other private forest lands;
- Increased, and often unfunded, utilization of local government resources;
- Rising complexity of fires due to increased size, fire behavior, public expectations, and expanding, WUI;
- Increased competition for national fire fighting resources;
- Widespread effects of poor air quality;
- Inconsistent rehabilitation of burnt lands and watersheds;
- Concern for succession planning of fire management personnel;
- Stress on Montana wildland fire fighters; managers and local government resources;
- Increased budget pressures on federal agencies to manage fire suppression costs, and reduce risk to fires fighters,
- Public expectations for rapid fire suppression and real time information; and

These factors will continue to hamper fire suppression activities. Those pressures remain long after the last fire is declared contained. After on the ground work is completed, the financial side continues. The process of cost sharing with federal partners and obtaining FEMA reimbursement is often not completed within the fiscal year. This creates another set of Montana concerns such as:

- The ability to cash flow the entire cost of fire, prior to obtaining payment from federal partners;
- Ability for DNRC to maintain department operations until a supplemental appropriation can be approved by the legislature;
- The pressure to settle one fire season, while another fire season begins; and
- Stress on the limited number of individuals who are dedicated to the business side of fire.

When all factors are rolled together, the day to day fire suppression and the business aftermath are becoming increasingly difficult to manage, and increasingly difficult for the state to fund. The traditional funding mechanism to pay state costs through a supplemental appropriation was not viable for the past fire season and resulted in a special session to appropriate funds to cover the cost. This raised the question of "Who should pay the state share?" Should it be a combination of?

- Landowners in the wildland urban interface;
- Landowners who benefit from direct protection services and county cooperative assistance; or
- The state general fund.
- The urban centers that benefit from having a wildland urban interface. (The urban center would be the interface without the rural populace standing between them and the wildfire.)
- Insurance companies and other beneficiaries of fire suppression.

Fire season and the associated smoke impacts is a regular part of life in Montana. Given the identified pressures, pending changes and financial issues, the outcome of future fire seasons is uncertain. The state must examine proposals to make changes to the status quo to make an impact on the future success of fire suppression.

Conclusion:

- With limited resources, and fuel and climatic conditions, it is likely that communities will burn, and firefighter and members of the public will be seriously injured or killed.
- Stress of fire season will continue to rise, affecting landowners, firefighters, business owners, state and federal agencies as well as members of the public.

- With limited resources to safely fight accessible fires, the costs for fire suppression and the damage to property and resources will continue to grow.
- Small businesses from tourism to farms and ranches will continue to be impacted as they are unable to be compensated for business losses due to fires.
- Declining fuel reduction funds and lack of landowner incentives to treat fuels will ensure continued risk of complex WUI fires.
- The WUI will continue to increase without adequate controls on land development.
- Differences in fire suppression policies will continue to cause conflict between the state, federal, private and local agencies, thus affecting cooperation of how fires are fought and suppressed.

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