## Interagency Coordination and Cooperation

### Introduction

No federal or state firefighting agency is able to handle their full fire load alone. Interagency coordination and cooperation is the norm. Initial attack of all wildfires is based on the “closest forces” concept. That means regardless of ownership and regardless of the agency of a given resource, whoever is closest to the fire will respond to it. For example, when the Sheep Springs Fire on the Deschutes National Forest was first reported, an engine from Oregon Department of Forestry was the first responder.

Interagency cooperation and coordination extends to incidents or events other than wildfires. For example, interagency cooperation and coordination were key to managing the Rainbow Family gathering on the Malheur National Forest in late June and early July and for managing crowds and events associated with the August 21 total solar eclipse across Oregon. Appendix E provides more detail on planning for the August eclipse.

As the number of simultaneous fire starts increases and fires grow in size, firefighting resources from many agencies respond. In addition, the management objectives and the strategies and tactics used to manage the fire are coordinated across agencies when fires affect or threaten to affect more than one jurisdiction.

To aid interagency coordination and cooperation, the National Interagency Coordination Center created a national mobilization guide (Mobe Guide). The five federal firefighting agencies along with the National Association of State Foresters (NASF), National Weather Service (NWS), the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), the U.S. Fire Administration, and several other cooperating agencies helped to create the standard procedures outlined in the Mobe Guide. The Northwest Coordination Center also has a geographic Mobe Guide tiered to the national guide and local units, such as Central Oregon Fire Management Services, may also have a local Mobe Guide. Each year the various Mobe Guides are reviewed and updated as needed to reflect changes in the mix of available firefighting resources and changes in firefighting policies and direction.

### Prioritizing Fires and Firefighting Resources

The single overriding priority in all wildfire responses is the protection of human life, both the public and firefighters. If on a new fire or an active part of an on-going fire, the firefighting resources cannot work with a reasonable assurance of their safety, the decision-makers usually do not place those people at risk. As a result, a fire or portion of a fire may not receive the type of response that outsiders may think should occur.

National, regional, and local considerations for setting priorities between fires and for firefighting resources include:

* Protection needs for communities and community infrastructure, other property and improvements, and natural and cultural resources;
* Maintenance of initial action capability;
* Limiting costs without compromising safety, and
* Meeting suppression objectives

In addition, at the national level priority setting considers support to any National Response Framework taskings, such as responding to hurricanes. For example, in 2017, not only were there a large number of large fires across the western U.S., but firefighting resources were also supporting hurricane relief efforts in Texas, Florida, the U.S. Virgin Islands, and Puerto Rico.

The National Multi-Agency Coordination Group, or NMAC, determines which geographic areas are in what priority order for firefighting resources and directs the availability of national-level resources such as smokejumpers, hotshot crews, heavy helicopters, large airtankers, and Type 1 incident management teams (IMTs). When the fire load reaches certain levels, geographic area MACs perform much the same functions in prioritizing individual fires and fire complexes and managing Type 2 IMTs. Subgeographic areas may also establish mini-MACs to prioritize local fires and firefighting resources.

On August 4, the fire agencies in Oregon and Washington activated a NW MAC to support the increasing number of large fires and fire complexes and assist in coordinating management of the August eclipse preparations. The MAC Support met at the Northwest Coordination Center every day until September 24, or for 52 days. Primarily using the daily ICS-209 forms submitted by each fire or fire complex, the MAC Support created a daily score sheet for each fire and the NW MAC used those scores to inform the priorities. The NW MAC also took into account some social and political factors not easily captured in the 209s, as well as Incident Commander updates, fire prediction models (FSPro), estimated weather events, the newly developed all lands quantitative risk assessment, anticipated fire movement and exceedance probability curves. Generally, the fires or complexes with higher scores were prioritized higher than fires or complexes with lower scores. These priorities were also sent on to NMAC for their use in setting priorities between geographic areas.

Several factors influence the priority a fire or fire complex has on any given day. All things being equal, backcountry fires have lower priority than front-country and wildland-urban interface fires, and front country fires that are not threatening homes, businesses and community infrastructure have lower priority than fires that are threatening homes, businesses, and community infrastructure. Fires that are relatively inactive and spreading slowly get a lower priority than fires that are spreading rapidly. A fire that suddenly spreads from out of the backcountry usually rises in priority. When fire growth generally stops or becomes minimal and the firefighting effort switches to predominantly mop-up, a fire tends to drop in priority. The changing priorities of several fires in 2017 illustrate some of these factors.

Chetco Bar Fire was a lower priority fire until August 20. The fire was restricted to the Kalmiopsis Wilderness with generally slow spread rates and very high safety risks due to the combination of steep, inaccessible terrain and the number of snags from previous fires. It would occasionally increase in priority as the management team instituted protection measures for various resources at risk and fire behavior flared up with changes in fire weather. However, on August 20, it shot up in priority as a major spread event took it out of the wilderness and into the wildland-urban interface and commercial timberland. Chetco Bar remained near the top in priority through all of September.

Indian Creek Fire in the Columbia River Gorge started out as a high priority due to its high visibility and the level of social and political interest in the National Scenic Area, Bull Run watershed, and high value infrastructure. It quickly dropped in priority due to lack of access and generally minimal fire spread. It even disappeared as a priority for resources between August 18 and September 2 as it largely had all the resources it needed. On September 3, it reappeared on the priority due to its proximity to the newly started Eagle Creek Fire and a sudden increase in fire spread. However, by September 6 it disappeared from the priority list again as it had be engulfed by the Eagle Creek Fire.

Horse Prairie Fire was a low priority on its first day, but quickly rose to a high priority as it spread rapidly in private and public commercial timber and spotted owl habitat. It remained a high priority for resources until fire growth essentially stopped and intensive mop-up began.

Diamond Creek Fire in the Pasayton Wilderness was initially a relatively high priority fire, in part because it was not competing for priority with many other fires. Once the Okanogan-Wenatchee National Forest developed a management strategy for this fire and while fire growth rates remained slow, it dropped in priority and disappeared from the priority list for much the same reasons as Indian Creek Fire disappeared. Once it began moving towards private property and homes outside the wilderness and ran into British Columbia, it increased in priority.

At the peak of firefighting activity nationally in early September, the Northwest was competing nationally for an extremely limited pool of available firefighting resources. In early September, there were a maximum of 140 large fires, primarily in the Northwest and Northern Rockies, with a maximum of 17 Type 1 IMTs, 25 Type 2 IMTs, 2 Area Commands, 2 NIMO teams, 581 crews, 1,924 engines, and 222 helicopters committed to incidents, including hurricane relief. By mid-September, rains finally returned to the Northwest, allowing many fires to drop off the priority list as they were declared contained. Fires began to move up in priority in late September primarily because there were simply fewer fires.