FEDERAL FIRE & AVIATION OPERATIONS 2004 ACTION PLAN

(References to the WFSA are highlighted on pages 7-9)

INTRODUCTION:

The purpose of the Federal Fire and Aviation Operations Action Plan is to establish the Chief of the USDA Forest Service and the Secretary of the Department of the Interior's direction for the 2004 fire season. The direction introduces operational expectations, reinforces performance, and clarifies existing policies and procedures. It provides for consistent implementation of policy by Agency Administrators, Incident/Area Command Teams, and fire and aviation management personnel. The plan is also responsive to Administration goals of fiscal integrity and the agencies' goals to deliver a safe, effective Fire & Aviation Management program.

This plan responds to lessons learned, after-action assessments, and formal reviews following the 2003 fire season. It incorporates recommendations from the National Interagency Cost Oversight Teams. The plan is consistent with agency direction for hazard abatement plans and the National Fire Plan.

The plan focuses attention on four areas:

- *Fire operations and aviation safety*
- *Preparedness and suppression operations*
- *Cost containment*
- *Hazardous fuel treatments*

The plan recognizes the wildland fire agencies' capability and experience with emergency response and that they will continue to respond to incidents beyond the normal scope of business. The agencies are prepared to support missions that assist others in need, with focus on assisting others to increase their response capabilities.

The following priorities will guide the commitment of resources for wildland fire management actions:

1. Protection of life

2. Protection of property, natural and cultural resources

Suppression strategies should be chosen to minimize costs without compromising safety.

BACKGROUND:

Firefighters contained more than 97 percent of all new fires during initial action in 2003. That record was achieved despite the volatile conditions that prevailed in much of last year's fire season. The fires that escaped initial actions and grew above 300 acres accounted for the bulk of acres burned and nearly 85% of all suppression expenditures.

SITUATIONAL ASSESSMENT:

The situational assessment is a prediction of the upcoming fire season severity. The latest assessment can be located at the following website:
http://www.nifc.gov/news/intell_predserv_forms/season_outlook.html

CONSISTENT POLICY IMPLEMENTATION:

Several differences existed among the federal wildland fire management agencies in the implementation of the 1995 Federal Wildland Fire Management Policy. Discussions have led to consensus among the five federal wildland fire management agencies with regard to a number of policy issues (Note: Tribally-operated programs may choose to implement some policies differently than the five Federal agencies with wildland fire management programs). The following statements clarify the implementation of agency policy.

- Only one management objective will be applied to a wildland fire. Wildland fires will either be managed for resource benefits or suppressed. A wildland fire cannot be managed for both objectives concurrently. If two wildland fires converge, they will be managed as a single wildland fire.

- Human caused wildland fires will be suppressed in every instance and will not be managed for resource benefits.

- Once a fire has been managed for suppression objectives, it may never be managed for resource benefit objectives.

- The Appropriate Management Response (AMR) is any specific action suitable to meet Fire Management Unit (FMU) objectives. Typically, the AMR ranges across a spectrum of tactical options (from monitoring to intensive management actions). The AMR is developed by using FMU strategies and objectives identified in the Fire Management Plan.

- The Wildland Fire Situation Analysis is to be used to document the suppression strategy from the full range of responses available for suppression operations. Suppression strategies are designed to meet the policy objectives of suppression.

- Wildland fire use is the result of a natural event. The Land/Resource Management Plan, or the Fire Management Plan, will identify areas where the strategy of wildland fire use is suitable. The Wildland Fire Implementation Plan (WFIP) is the tool that examines the available response strategies to determine if a fire is being considered for wildland fire use.

- When a prescribed fire or a fire designated for wildland fire use is no longer achieving the intended resource management objectives and contingency or mitigation actions have failed, the fire will be declared a wildfire. Once a wildfire, it cannot be returned to prescribed fire or wildland fire use status.

FIRE OPERATIONS AND AVIATION SAFETY

Policy: "Firefighter and public safety is the first priority. All Fire Management Plans and activities must reflect this commitment." [1]

Principles:

- *Firefighter safety comes first on every fire every time.*
- *The Standard Firefighting Orders are firm; we don't break them, we don't bend them.*
- *Every firefighter has the right to a safe assignment.*
- *Every Agency Administrator, every Fire Manager, every fireline supervisor, and every firefighter is responsible to ensure that established safe practices are known and observed.*

Intent: Firefighter safety is the first priority. Firefighter safety is a core value and will not be compromised in the conduct of ground and/or air operations. Operational decisions must be based on implementation of risk assessments and subsequent mitigation measures considering the probabilities of exposure, long-term consequences and fire danger trends.

Proactive suppression tactics that are planned and implemented to mitigate risks, and which provide an operational advantage are favored over reactive or passive tactics that increase exposure of firefighters over time. We all have a role in fire operations and aviation safety. Discussions about the responsibilities and expectations that surround firefighting safety must be addressed in pre-season preparedness meetings and annual refresher training.

Objective: Implement established safe operating practices on every incident.

Direction:

- *Incident Commanders **MUST** define clear and concise control objectives (e.g. road, river, fuel type break, or other perimeter objective) on every wildfire. This is critical during initial/ extended attack actions as a means of recognizing the onset of transition fire dangers. When control objectives are exceeded, immediately delay, modify, or abandon any firefighting action. Fireline supervisors will assess the new situation; form a plan that mitigates identified risks, brief the firefighters on strategy/tactical change, and then implement appropriate actions.*
- *Continue the implementation of agency specific hazard abatement plans as appropriate.*
- *Unit preparedness for management oversight, supervisory control, and crew levels will be commensurate with observed and predicted fire danger. Ensure leadership, supervision, and operational capacities are not over-extended.*
- *Personnel will be closely monitored for cumulative and acute fatigue while involved in driving, incident, and support operations. Fatigue countermeasures will be proactively implemented as necessary to ensure firefighter effectiveness and safety. Incident operations driving and hours of work will comply with the National Wildland Coordinating Group (NWCG) driving and work/rest standards.*
- *Appropriate span of control will be maintained for managers, supervisors, and firefighters at a ratio commensurate to the incident and unit fire situation, magnitude, and complexity.*

- *Use of the NWCG Risk Management Process is paramount in every fire operation. Violation of established safe operating practices and procedures may be grounds for disciplinary action.*

PREPAREDNESS AND SUPPRESSION OPERATIONS

Policy: "Agencies will ensure their capability to provide safe, cost effective fire management programs in support of land and resource management plans through appropriate planning, staffing, training, equipment, and management oversight." [2]

Principle: Where hazardous fuels dominate the landscape, establishing a strong, decisive initial action capability is a key component in minimizing large fire suppression costs. As fire danger levels increase and suppression resources become scarce, initial action capacity must be maintained as the most certain means of preventing new costly wildfires.

Intent: Initial and extended attack operations will generally be the mobilization priority over large fires. All efforts will be made to utilize predictive services, anticipate threats, and pre-position protection resources.

At National Preparedness Levels Four and Five, critical resources will be allocated and re-allocated by the National Multi-agency Coordination Group (NMAC), based on observed and predicted fire danger intelligence.

All units will be trained, staffed and ready to meet operational demands. Staffing levels will be adjusted, based on observed and predicted fire danger in order to maintain protection capabilities. Staffing levels will be coordinated with adjacent cooperators.

Personnel will be trained, qualified, and certified for the positions that they are assigned. All employees will be available to support fire emergencies to the best of their ability and capability.

Objective: Staff USDA Forest Service preparedness resources at the same level as 2003. Staff Department of the Interior agencies preparedness resources within FY2004 budget constraints. A 98% initial/extended attack success rate remains the goal for the USDA Forest Service; a 95% initial/extended attack success rate remains the goal for the Department of the Interior.

Direction:

- *Fire Management Plans will be updated utilizing the new interagency template..*
- *Effective organizational capability will be sustained by maintaining management, supervisory, and crew staffing skills. Coaches or mentors will be pre-identified for support, where they may be needed.*
- *Managers will assure personnel assigned to fire duty will be appropriately trained, qualified and physically fit prior to their deployment.*
- *Staffing levels and drawdown plans will be adjusted, based on observed and predicted fire danger. Severity funding requests will be submitted and approved prior to the pay period for which they are planned. Severity requests will be coordinated with cooperators to most effectively maintain management oversight, supervisory controls, and resource capabilities.*

- *Units will be prepared to hire and train AD employees and local/volunteer fire department personnel to meet local and, as appropriate, national needs. Training and availability of State and local fire departments, including volunteers, will be coordinated.*
- *Preparedness Plans, Mutual Threat Plans, Memorandums of Understanding, Cost Share Agreements, and other plans will be reviewed and updated prior to fire season.*
- *Multi-agency Coordinating Group (MAC) members will be pre-identified. National Weather Service and Predictive Services support will be ready prior to the start of fire season. MAC Groups should include individuals with coordination and command experience. Prior to fire season, MAC Groups will establish prioritization criteria for incident allocation and re-allocation of resources. Agency Administrators will provide a formal Delegation of Authority to MAC Groups that include agency objectives and agency expectations. Prioritization criteria will be included in the Delegation of Authority.*
- *Service and Supply Plans will be completed and associated Emergency Equipment Rental Agreements (EERA) will be in place prior to fire season.*
- *Pre-season simulations, including Wildland Fire Situation Analysis (WFSA) development, will be conducted.*
- *Fire prevention plans and activities should address the increasing threat of human caused fires. Fire Prevention Education Teams should be used, when appropriate.*
- *Cost efficiencies must be considered when prepositioning and mobilizing resources.*
- *Incident Commanders **MUST** define clear and concise control objectives on every wildfire. This is particularly critical during Type 3/4/5 incident operations as a means of recognizing the onset of transition fire dangers.*
- *Airtankers will be pre-positioned by Geographic MAC/NMAC, based on projected fire danger levels, in the context of values to be protected.*
- *Airtankers will be utilized primarily for initial and extended attack. Airtanker use on large fire will be determined on a case-by-case basis, or when lives or communities are at risk.*

COST CONTAINMENT

Policy: "Fires are suppressed at minimum cost, considering firefighter and public safety, benefits, and values to be protected, consistent with resource objectives." [3]

Principle: Agency Administrator oversight and involvement during the decision-making process is critical for containing suppression costs.

Intent: The primary criterion for choosing suppression strategies is to minimize costs without compromising safety. Planned and actual suppression costs must also be commensurate with the values to be protected. They must be included and displayed in the Wildland Fire Situation Analysis (WFSA).

It is inappropriate to expend suppression dollars with the explicit objective of achieving resource benefits even though resource benefits may result in some areas of the fire.

Indirect suppression strategies are viable alternatives in many situations. Prior to selecting such a strategy carefully weigh the implications on safety, cost and escape potential. When fire danger trends are rising, the selection of these strategies must be carefully scrutinized.

Long-duration wildfires where large numbers of firefighting resources are being committed need to be closely evaluated by National Interagency Cost Oversight Teams.

Objective: Expend only those funds required for the safe, cost-effective suppression of the incident.

Direction:

- *Agency Administrators are responsible for financial oversight. This responsibility cannot be delegated. See Table 1 following this section for approval thresholds.*
- *Maintain a minimum of two inter-agency National Interagency Cost Oversight Teams.*
- *When fire danger trends are rising, the long-term consequences of indirect suppression strategies, including final fire cost, will be considered in the initial action decision.*
- *Produce WFSA alternatives that display a full range of appropriate management response options. All alternatives must be developed with strong emphasis on cost accountability based on the values to be protected, with due consideration given to a minimum cost alternative.*
- *A suppression cost objective will be included in the Delegation of Authority to the Incident Commander. Revision or amendment of the WFSA is required if incident cost objectives are exceeded.*
- *Incident suppression cost objectives will be included as a performance measure in Incident Management Team evaluations.*
- *An Incident Business Advisor (IBA) must be assigned to any fire with projected suppression costs of more than $5 million. An IBA is advised for fires with suppression costs of $1-5 million. If a certified IBA is not available, the approving official will appoint a financial advisor to monitor expenditures. The IBA reports directly to the responsible Agency Administrator.*

- *Wildfires involving multiple jurisdictions require mutually approved cost apportionment agreements. These agreements should be implemented by the Incident/Area Commander based upon direction specified in the Delegation of Authority.*
- *Local Agency Administrators have the authority to approve WFSAs within suppression cost thresholds identified in Table 1. Decision-makers at the higher organizational levels will certify those WFSAs that exceed identified thresholds. In certifying suppression costs, decision-makers share the fiscal accountability associated with outcomes.*

Table 1: Agency Administrator WFSA Approval and Certification Thresholds

	BIA	*BLM*	*FWS*	*NPS*	*USFS*
Local Approval Level	*$2,000,000 Agency Superintendent*	*$2,000,000 Field/District Manager*	*$2,000,000 Refuge Manager*	*$2,000,000 Park Superintendent*	*$2,000,000 District Ranger* *$2,000,000-$10,000,000 Forest Supervisor*
Regional/ State Certification Level	*$2,000,000-$5,000,000 Regional Director*	*$2,000,000-$5,000,000 State Director*	*$2,000,000-$5,000,000 Regional Director*	*$2,000,000-$5,000,000 Regional Director*	*$10,000,000-$50,000,000 Regional Forester*
National Certification Level	*More than $5,000,000 Director*	*More than $5,000,000 Director*	*More than $5,000,000 Director*	*More than $5,000,000 Director*	*More than $50,000,000 Chief*

HAZARDOUS FUELS TREATMENTS

Policy: "Hazardous fuels are treated, using appropriate tools, to reduce the risk of unplanned and unwanted wildland fire to communities and the environment." [4]

Principle: The most effective means of reducing large fire suppression costs, protecting community values, restoring forest and grassland health, and improving firefighter safety, is an aggressive fuel treatment program. Treatments are particularly important in fire-dependent ecosystems, where prolonged fire exclusion has resulted in over-accumulated fuels. The agencies will continue to emphasize fuel treatments in high priority areas where communities, watersheds, and critical resources are at risk.

Intent: The President's Healthy Forests Initiative, the 10-Year Comprehensive Strategy, the Healthy Forests Restoration Act and the National Fire plan establish goals for reducing hazardous fuels. Reducing risk to firefighters, communities, municipal watersheds and restoring the health of public and tribal lands are the central themes of these initiatives.

The safest, most effective wildfire protection strategy is predicated on an aggressive fuels reduction program using a variety of mitigation methods (including mechanical, biological, chemical, prescribed fire etc). In fire-dependent ecosystems, the use of prescribed fire, at ecologically appropriate intensities is an essential means of restoring forest health conditions. Mechanical hazard mitigation treatments may often be required before prescribed fire projects can be implemented within acceptable limits of social, economic, and ecological risk.

Prescribed fires and wildland fires that aim to achieve resource benefits must be accompanied by supporting NEPA compliant plans.

Objective: Treat approximately 3 million acres of hazardous fuels on federal and tribal lands.

Direction:

- *A high priority will be given to achieving fuels treatment projects through the fire season.*
- *Re-distribution of targets and funds between Agencies and Regions may occur in order to maximize project accomplishments.*
- *Identification of FY05 hazardous fuels projects will be completed by May 1, 2004, using specific agency collaborative prioritization processes.*

SUMMARY:

Today's fire management program is among the most challenging of all resource activities. Not only are natural resources at stake, but the health and safety of employees and communities may also be determined by what we do, and don't do. These challenges can only be managed successfully with adherence to established safe practices, procedures, attention to critical fire behavior risk thresholds, and sound judgment. At the peak of activity, when suppression demands are great and resources are scarce, agency administrators and fire managers must maintain a high level of situational awareness, anticipate needs, and actively lead.

However, over the long-term, an aggressive fuel treatment program is the surest means of ensuring firefighter and public safety, reversing wildfire costs, and restoring healthy, resilient forests and grasslands (*Wildfire Suppression: Strategies for Containing Costs, NAPA Report, 09/02*).

We will continue to pursue an accelerated fuels treatment program. Programs that focus on restoration of fire-dependent ecosystems and better integrate fuel management, forest health, wildlife, range, watershed, and other available dollars will be more aggressively explored.

In addition, the traditional role of fire resources is changing. Agencies are being counted on to support non-fire incidents. Homeland security may also be a future consideration in allocation of agency resources.

The few steps outlined in this action plan are intended to increase margins of safety and preparedness with the aim of reducing the costs, losses, and damages that have become more common as fuels have built up in areas where people live.

In preparation for the 2004 fire season, we must commit to being prepared and reduce costs without compromising safety.

Footnote:

1. *Draft Interagency Strategy for the Implementation of the Federal Wildland Fire Management Policy, Table 2, Item #1*
2. *Draft Interagency Strategy for the Implementation of the Federal Wildland Fire Management Policy, Table 2, Item #10*
3. *Draft Interagency Strategy for the Implementation of the Federal Wildland Fire Management Policy, Table 2, Item #11*
4. *A Collaborative Approach for Reducing Wildland Fire Risks to Communities and the Environment, 10-Year Comprehensive Strategy Implementation Plan, May 2002, Goal Two- Reducing Hazardous Fuels*