



2004 FIRE PROGRAM REVIEW



"STEWARDSHIP IN FORESTRY"



2004 Fire Program Review

In 2004, the Oregon Department of Forestry conducted a sweeping review of the state's wildfire protection program. The department is recognized as one of the premier wildland firefighting agencies in the West - So why review the Protection from Fire Program? It has been over 40 years since the structure of the program was extensively reviewed. In that time, the character of the state's wildlands has evolved and so has firefighting. The changes include:

- buildup of forest fuels
- climatic shift that has intensified fire behavior
- expansion of the wildland-urban interface
- tightening budgets
- evolving business practices and legal requirements
- advancing technology
- reduced availability of fire overhead - decline in workforce capacity
- loss of institutional knowledge about firefighting among agencies and landowners

The Fire Program Review seeks to adapt the program to these changes. This will ensure the continuation of efficient, cost-effective protection for Oregon's forest resource, which provides benefits that include clean water and air, timber supply, jobs, wildlife habitat and recreation.

The Fire Program Review began with a narrow focus. Concerned with rising firefighting costs, the 2003 Oregon Legislature directed the department to study its fire funding mechanisms. State Forester Marvin Brown expanded the review to encompass all facets of the Fire Program.

Collaborative process

At the outset of the review, fire managers recognized the need to draw on the knowledge and experiences of a broad range of individuals and organizations. The department contracted with the Institute for Natural Resources at Oregon State University for help in designing the review process. A steering committee was formed, with the membership including representatives of industrial and family forest landowners, resource agency administrators, governor's office staff, academics, elected officials and others with an interest and stake in the future of Oregon's forests. The Institute provided technical and editorial assistance to the steering committee throughout its deliberations.

Desired outcomes

The steering committee's first order of business was to craft a set of desired outcomes for the review. These include:

- greater protection of forests and homes
- reduced wildfire size and intensity
- better management of forest fuels
- sufficient funding
- well-trained workforce
- maintenance of firefighter safety
- efficient and effective business systems
- enhanced firefighting technology
- better and more coordinated community defense strategies
- close cooperation with other firefighting agencies
- promotion of a favorable regulatory climate

Targeting issues

To ensure adequate attention to key elements of the program, the steering committee formed six work groups. Each was assigned a specific focus: Budget Note No. 3/Funding, Forest Fuels and Hazard Mitigation, Fire Protection Coverage, Business Systems, Fire Prevention, and Workforce Capacity. For nearly a year the work groups gathered information, consulted with subject matter experts, held public meetings and met with interested individuals and organizations throughout the state. Then they deliberated to complete their assigned task: Each group drafted a report or, "white paper," which recommends actions the department could take to maintain and improve the Fire Program.

With the completion of the work group reports, the steering committee took on the role of "editor in chief," pulling together key recommendations from the various reports and harmonizing them into a comprehensive report. This document was finished in March 2005.



Ideas into action

To put the Fire Program Review's recommendations to work, the department developed an implementation plan. Completed in March 2005, the plan complements the steering committee report by listing a set of specific actions the department will take to fulfill the recommendations. It assigns responsibility for each action and establishes a timeline for completion.

With the delivery of its final report to the Board of Forestry in April 2005, the steering committee will have accomplished its primary task. But the committee will continue to meet to oversee the implementation of its recommendations. This monitoring function will extend over the next several years. Many of the action items are already underway; some will be completed in the next biennium; while others may be phased in more gradually. In the meantime, the department will brief the steering committee on the progress of implementation and inform stakeholders and the public through status reports.

Work groups

During the Fire Program Review, the six work groups carried out the vital work of collecting information, gathering the ideas and opinions of stakeholders and the public, and synthesizing this input into specific proposals to effect positive change. Below is a brief description of each work group's focus area and the recommendations it put forth. The work group reports, Oregon Fire Program Review final report (including the complete set of recommendations), and the department's implementation plan are available on the department's website, <http://www.oregon.gov>, and on the Institute for Natural Resources site, <http://www.inr.oregonstate.edu/>.

Budget Note No. 3/Funding Group - In 2003, the increasing severity of Oregon's fire seasons and rising cost of firefighting elevated fire funding to a priority issue among elected officials. That year, the Legislature directed the department (via a budget note) to form a work group to "ensure that sufficient funds are available to reasonably respond to anticipated emergency fire protection needs over time." The group included legislators, forest landowners, a member of the Emergency Fire Cost

Committee, and officials from the Department of Administrative Services and the Legislative Fiscal Office.

Topping the budget work group's task list was the funding mechanism for large fires, incidents that require a major commitment of personnel and equipment and can cost millions of dollars to control. The group analyzed the Fire Program's funding sources and the formula for generating revenue. The current system of funding the Fire Program was found to be basically sound but in need of fine-tuning to maintain the revenue base into the future.

Even a casual windshield survey of the state reveals many tangible signs of Oregon's rapid population growth. The effects of this expansion also show up in wildfire statistical trends. Several decades ago during the forest industry's boom period, landowners typically caused most of the non-lightning fires in the course of their forest management activities. Today, the general public, chiefly through recreational pursuits, is responsible for starting half of all human-caused fires. The work group recommended modifications to the fire funding formula to reflect this shift in fire causation. The changes would distribute responsibility for Oregon's coordinated fire protection system more equitably between forest landowners and the public.

Also, this gradual move toward a 50-50 sharing of large-fire costs would help ensure adequate budgets in the future.

The most effective way to hold down suppression costs is to control fires at small size. With this fact in mind, the work group recommended adjusting budget priorities to maximize prevention, readiness and initial attack.

Over the years, Oregon's one-of-a-kind wildfire insurance policy has shielded the State General Fund from paying out millions of dollars for suppression costs incurred during severe fire seasons in excess of the landowners' deductibles. 9/11 created instability in insurance



markets worldwide. That event, coupled with successive difficult fire seasons in Oregon, made it difficult for the State even to purchase catastrophic-loss insurance. The industry has stabilized since then, but higher premium rates remain. The work group conducted a cost/benefit study and concluded it makes financial sense for the State to continue to buy fire insurance. By increasing the deductible, the cost of coverage could be reduced substantially. The group's recommendation calls for reinvesting savings on the premium to improve initial-attack capability as a way to offset the higher exposure to risk.

House Bill 2327 encompasses the recommendations of the Budget Note No. 3/Funding Work Group that require changes in law and statute in order to be implemented. Rep. Susan Morgan (chair of the group) introduced this legislative package during the first week of the 2005 Oregon legislative session.

Forest Fuels and Hazard Abatement Group - Oregon's forests and demographics have changed. The Fire Program must adapt to this new reality if it is expected to continue providing high-quality wildland fire protection for the resource and the citizens of the state. This group took on the increased fire risk stemming from the buildup of forest fuels and expansion of the wildland-urban interface. Such challenges can only be resolved through coordination among local, state and federal forest landowners; rural homeowners; fire agencies; the insurance industry and other key stakeholders. Several regional and national strategies have already been developed to deal with fuel buildup and urban sprawl. But a lack of coordination among these programs has confused the public and hindered implementation.

The work group devised a statewide strategy to gain coherence of federal, state, and local fire and fuels management programs. The group's recommendations to the department provide a starting point for landscape-scale solutions to the increasing threat of large-scale wildfires to forest landowners, natural resource values, communities and forest health.



The Forest Fuels Group saw the community wildfire protection planning currently underway in Oregon as key to reducing the fire risk to the interface. Several recommendations would increase department support to this process. The group made significant progress on a statewide wildfire risk assessment to help communities prioritize fuel-reduction treatments. It also identified other actions to increase community involvement in reducing wildfire risk, provide technical resources to local governments, and facilitate access to federal grants for fuel-reduction work.

With so many fuels projects both large and small underway across the state, systematic assessment is essential to measure progress. The group called for closer tracking of forest fuel conditions, including follow-up monitoring of such projects and developed guidelines for re-treatment in order to maintain prior investments in fuel reduction. A recommendation for better coordination among participating agencies and communities in the collection and maintenance of fuels data that would provide baseline data for planning efforts was strongly endorsed.



Fuel-reduction projects yield tons of wood waste that is often simply burned onsite. The Fuels Group advised the department to form a standing workgroup to identify ways to stimulate Oregon's fledgling biomass industry, and to collaborate with its partners to draft legislation designed to achieve that end. A strong market for this potentially valuable byproduct would strengthen the incentive for landowners to conduct more thinning and brush-clearing projects in overgrown forests. These efforts could also provide some economic relief to rural Oregon communities.

Fire Protection Coverage Group - The linked challenges of unprotected lands and the need for structural protection in an expanding wildland-urban interface are straining Oregon's fire protection system. The work group recognized early on that resolution of this problem will take years to achieve. Its recommendations lay out a road map for the department to follow in working with counties, communities and landowner organizations to expand the coordinated statewide system of structural and wildland fire protection. Substantially reducing the extent of unprotected lands that border forest protection districts is an important objective, with the ultimate aim to bring all lands in the state under some form of fire protection.

Expanding fire protection coverage in Oregon to unprotected lands will require an unprecedented level of cooperation and collaboration at all levels, from local governments to federal

resource agencies. The Protection Coverage Group proposes that the Department of Forestry hitch onto an existing effort - community fire planning - and add improved fire protection to the objectives of that process.

Rangeland fire protection associations have proven effective at extending protection to lands that pose a fire risk to forestlands. As part of a larger effort to establish relationships with all parties affected by the wildfire threat, the work group recommended the department assist in the maintenance and development of rangeland fire protection associations.

Expansion of the fire protection system will require the department to seek help from non-traditional partners as well as its familiar cooperators. All of these stakeholders must be brought together to define their roles in an expanded fire protection system, the group said.

Business Systems Group - As with any modern endeavor that provides services, purchases goods and hires people, Oregon's Fire Program could not function without a robust administrative infrastructure. To make it function more smoothly, the work group identified several ways the program could reduce paperwork, cut overhead costs and become more fiscally efficient. An automated fire finance processing system is under development, and some field-testing has occurred. It will speed up payment for suppression resources and reduce the flow of mailings and faxes currently used to conduct fire business. The increased automation will also enable closer monitoring of expenditures and payments received, with dual outcomes of greater accuracy and tighter fiscal accountability.

As the recommendations from the Business Systems portion of the review are implemented, many of the individual actions and steps that occur will be part of the larger agency-level Forestry Business Improvement Initiative begun in 2004. A comprehensive examination of all Department of Forestry business systems and processes, it will span multiple programs and organizational units. This approach will ensure that results from program-specific examinations

such as the Fire Program Review are well coordinated and comprehensively considered for the entire organization, with the aim to produce maximum efficiency and avoid creation of redundant or competing processes.

Fire Prevention Group - It almost goes without saying that the best way to reduce firefighting costs and the loss of lives, property and resources is to prevent fires from starting. Experience in other states has shown a direct cause-and-effect relationship between stepped-up prevention efforts and a significant drop in the incidence of human fire starts. Citing this link, the work group advised the department to sharpen and strengthen its prevention outreach. Statewide planning should occur with an aim to deliver consistent wildfire prevention programs to the public. As a crucial first step, an in-depth study of the department's existing prevention activities should be conducted. This would yield an accurate assessment of their effectiveness and help target prevention messages to key fire causes.

The role of the prevention program within the department's Fire Protection Division should be enlarged, the group advised. Reallocating duties of existing personnel, as workloads allow, would boost the prevention outreach. Looking outside the department, the Prevention Group cited the benefit of expanding citizen involvement in wildfire prevention programs. This would foster a better awareness of the role of each individual in preventing wildfires.

Workforce Capacity Group - The entire wildland firefighting community, Oregon included, is faced with the impending loss of its most important resource: people. The fire workforce is aging, and recruitment has not kept pace with retirement. In addition, the number of timber industry woods workers is declining. The work group tackled these challenges on several fronts. It recommended changes to firefighter training and certification standards for non-department personnel that would streamline the recruitment procedure, enabling fire managers to bolster their suppression capability quickly in times of need. An internal survey should be conducted, the panel said, to identify critical gaps in overhead

position staffing. This information would help the Fire Program target recruitment and training to fill key fire positions.

The Workforce Capacity Group didn't have to look far to find one source of fire personnel that has declined significantly in recent years. Expansion of the department's overall mission and increased job specialization have resulted in reduced involvement of agency personnel in fire. The report calls for renewed emphasis on participation of all employees in fire protection and support to better utilize this internal resource.

Private firefighting contractors have become an essential component of the Pacific Northwest's wildland fire protection system. In a typical season, Oregon fields upwards of 5,000 contract firefighters. The Department of Forestry administers a fire crew agreement for the federal and state wildland fire agencies of Washington and Oregon. The task of monitoring contract compliance and work performance of these hand crews has burgeoned with the unprecedented growth of the contract firefighting industry. The work group recommended that Fire Program funding and staffing be maintained at a level sufficient to effectively oversee this key resource.

More info

For more information on the 2004 Oregon Fire Program Review, go to <http://www.oregon.gov/ODF/FIRE/FireProgramReview.shtml> or <http://www.inr.oregonstate.edu/>.

Also, you may contact the Oregon Department of Forestry by phone or regular mail:

Fire Program Review
Oregon Dept. of Forestry
2600 State St.
Salem, OR 97310
(503) 945-7200



"STEWARDSHIP IN FORESTRY"

GALLEY PROOF

Job # _____42279_____ Proof # _____1_____

Customer Representative _____ Phone # _____

Contact person _____Mary Gorton____ Phone #(503) 378-3397x235

Fax #____**(503) 373-7789**____

Please check your proof carefully. **Use a different color ink when marking changes. Put a sticky note on the edge of the paper (for multiple pages).**

You must return this proof by _____ in order to meet your scheduled delivery date. Alterations will affect the cost of your job, and the scheduled delivery.

SIGN RELEASE BELOW

Released for printing
with no revisions _____
Signature Date

Released for printing
indicated revisions _____
Signature Date

Make indicated revisions and
submit another proof _____
Signature Date

Return this proof and your originals to;
Publishing and Distribution Services
550 Airport Rd., Salem, OR 97310

Printing Division use only

All revisions
have been made _____
Signature Date