

FAQ: Ordering contract resources for wildfire response



Why are we hearing about contract resources sitting unused as more than 2 million acres of Oregon have burned?

Currently, the single, biggest limitation on ODF's ability to get every available person and piece of equipment out on the line is that we don't have enough qualified, mid-level fire line managers to do it safely and effectively. The key positions we're talking about are:

- Single-resource bosses—Supervise a single crew, engine or piece of heavy equipment
- Task force leaders—Supervise up to five single-resource bosses (can be a mix of resource types)
- Division group supervisors—Supervise up to five task force leaders

Why does the lack of those government resources mean contractors can't get out there and fight fire, especially when they've put in the work to get into the state/federal ordering system?

Short version: We can't and won't put people out on these fires without the appropriate supervision needed to respond safely and effectively.

These mid-level managers are making large and small operational decisions every day, any of which could put people's lives at risk—firefighters and the Oregonians we're all trying to protect. For effective operational communications, decision making and, most importantly, safety, one manager can only supervise so many people (span of control). The national standard for optimal span of control is 5 to 1. There's a national shortage of these critical positions. Recent reports showed more than 400 requests for mid-level managers from across the country that couldn't be filled because there just aren't enough of them in the system.

Why don't we have enough of those mid-level managers available if they're so important to wildfire response?

Because it takes years for people to gain the depth and breadth of experience to get qualified. With so much of the state's wildfire workforce comprised of seasonal employees, it's difficult to keep people coming back year after year without offering the stability of permanent employment. It typically takes 3-5 years to get qualified as a single-resource boss, followed by 7-10 years for task force leader, and another 10-12 years to reach division group supervisor.

This is one of the reasons the reciprocal agreements ODF has with many other states are so important to Oregon's complete and coordinated system. Many of the out-of-state resources we bring in every fire season are "overhead," which includes the mid-level managers needed to get more resources on the line or to replace the exhausted managers who have been fighting fire for two weeks or longer.



Ok, so when you are able to call in more contract resources, will I get called up?

So far this year, ODF has only been responsible for ordering resources for three large fires: Akawa Butte, East Evans Creek, and Brewer (until it merged with the Rowe Creek Complex).

ODF and the federal government each have their own agreements with contractors and ordering systems. For every fire, one agency is the “paying agency.” Which agency it is depends on factors such as whose jurisdiction the fire started on or who has the most acres involved. If the paying agency is USFS or WFS, ordering will go through their Virtual Incident Procurement (VIPR) system. If the paying agency is ODF, ordering will happen through incident resource agreements (IRAs) with contractors. The paying agency has ordering and operational control; however, that agency also carries the full suppression costs for that fire until they get reimbursed by other entities whose lands were involved (if the fire is burning on more than one jurisdiction). That reimbursement process is time consuming to navigate and can take years to close out.

ODF orders up IRA contract resources based on need, location, and availability.

- **Need**— Every fire needs different resources to fight it. Fires burning in steep topography may not need many dozers because of the challenging terrain but will probably need aviation and hand crews to get line around the fire.
- **Location**—We default to the “closest-forces” concept, filling resource needs with those closest to the area of the incident.
- **Availability**—If we call a contractor and don’t get an answer, we move down the list to the next option. There isn’t the time to wait for a call back. If we need five crews, the first five who answer when we call are getting ordered up.

If ODF is out of a particular type of resource under our IRAs, we can call up resources from VIPR. Our federal partners are able to do the same using our IRAs. If you have questions about VIPR ordering, your VIPR agreement status, or anything else VIPR related, you’ll need to contact the USFS VIPR vendor support team at SM.FS.vipr@usda.gov. They also have a vendor support webpage available [here](#).

Since 2022, the number of IRAs we’re managing each fire season has tripled. With that dramatic increase in available resources, it’s even more important to have fair and transparent ordering processes to ensure equitable access to work for everyone in today’s much larger pool of contractors. We’ve identified some potential opportunities for improvement to our ordering processes that we’ll be exploring further in the off season.

