



## **Success Stories from the Western Region**

### **Operational Aspects of AIWFMP Implementation**

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The size, the landscapes, the fires, the people, and the evolution of land management authorities contributed to the creation of the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) –Alaska Fire Service (AFS) in 1982. The framework of interagency coordination and cooperation established in Alaska years ago continues to support today's policies and programs.

The Cohesive Strategy's three goals – restoring and maintaining healthy landscapes, creating fire-adapted communities, and fire response – present great challenges and great opportunities for making a positive difference in addressing wildland fire problems and costs. From the onset of the Alaska fire program, the social and political environment was conducive to developing an interagency program. As the land management jurisdictions and associated authorities changed due to legislative actions, the AFS focused on wildland fire response for the Department of the Interior (DOI) land managing agencies and, as directed by law, Alaska Native lands.

Policy direction in DOI Manual 620 delegates the BLM to “maintain and operate the DOI wildland fire suppression organization in Alaska with the primary intention of providing cost-effective suppression services and minimizing unnecessary duplication of suppression systems for DOI agencies. BLM will also provide consistency in State and Native wildland fire relationships and provide statewide mobility of wildland fire resources.”

The DOI agencies (including AFS), the U.S. Forest Service (USFS), and the State of Alaska, Department of Natural Resources (DNR), which is responsible for wildland fire on State, private and municipal lands, have a Master Cooperative Agreement, the Alaska Interagency Wildland Fire Management Plan (AIWFMP) and agency-specific administrative unit plans that direct fire responses.

The Master Agreement and supporting exhibits delineates the roles of each agency in facilitating wildland fire management activities to protect the public, firefighters, and identified sites from wildland fire and to provide an opportunity for Jurisdictional Agencies to accomplish fire-related land use and resource management objectives in a cost-efficient manner, consistent with the policies of the DOI, the USFS, and the Alaska DNR. Jurisdictional Agencies (the DOI agencies, the USFS, departments and divisions of the State of Alaska, and Alaska Native regional and village corporations) are responsible for all planning documents (i.e. land use, resource and fire management plans) for a unit's wildland fire and fuels management program. The Jurisdictional Agencies are responsible for setting the strategic fire direction and fulfilling their internal agency-specific requirements. For consistency, the terms and definitions contained in the AIWFMP have been integrated into the unit fire management plans.

Alaska is divided into three Protection Areas. Within each Area, each Protection Agency agrees to act as an agent of the other and provides wildland fire protection services to all the Jurisdictional Agencies within their

Protection Area. These services include all management actions intended to protect identified values from a fire, extinguish a fire, or alter a fire's direction of spread. Management actions for the protection of identified values include, but are not limited to, surveillance, mapping, and site actions. The Protection Agencies are the BLM-AFS, the DNR, and the USFS.

Upon discovery, the Protection Agency is responsible for determining, verifying, and documenting the incident location, the Jurisdictional Agency, management option designated, and cause. The initial response is implemented based on the management option designation as described in the AIWFMP. Operational control of wildfire incidents is the responsibility of the Protection Agency. The Protection Agency assigns the Incident Commander and provides supervision and support including oversight, direction and logistical support for all wildfires. If the fire complexity requires the assignment of an Incident Management Team Type 1, 2 or 3, the Delegation of Authority is jointly developed and signed by the affected Protection and Jurisdictional Agency representatives. Decisions for extended response, non-standard responses, and escaped prescribed fires are documented using the Wildland Fire Decision Support System (WFDSS).

WFDSS decisions document the strategic objective and management constraints, the fiscal component and the course of action. Decisions require collaborative efforts by the entities responsible for each of those components to arrive at viable decisions. In WFDSS, decisions will be approved by each entity: the primary responsibilities are for:

- The Jurisdictional Agency(s) to identify the strategic objective and constraints,
- The fiscally responsible agency to provide cost oversight (AFS has fiscal approval authority for DOI and Alaska Native lands), and
- The Protection Agency to develop implementable courses of action to meet objectives and budgets.



**AFS Fire Camp**

*Photo Credit: BLM-AFS*



The Protection Agency is responsible for fulfilling daily interagency incident reporting requirements and completing the final fire report, which is provided to the Jurisdictional Agency. The Protection Agency and the Incident Management Team, when assigned, are also responsible for the release of operational and public safety information to the media and public during the initial response to and during ongoing wildfires. (Policy questions are referred to the Jurisdictional Agency.)

Fire business management and accountability for costs are the responsibility of the Protection Agency managing the incident. There is no billing between federal agencies for expenses incurred on wildfires on federal lands. Each federal agency has the option to recover costs incurred in support of DNR incident assignments. The billing figures for each incident are determined by two factors: the managing agency at the point of origin and the initial actions upon discovery. AFS is fiscally responsible for the costs of wildfires on DOI managed lands and Alaska Native lands other than those in southeast Alaska; DNR is fiscally responsible for costs of wildfires on State, private and municipal lands; USFS is the responsible party for costs incurred on National Forests and Alaska Native lands in southeast Alaska.

The billing criteria are intended to attribute fire suppression costs to the agency which has taken the risk of allowing a fire to burn without suppression action other than surveillance or site-specific protection, during the stages when it can be most easily suppressed. Therefore, when the initial action upon discovery is an effort to extinguish the fire, the costs will be apportioned based on the acres burned and the associated fiscally responsible agency. When the initial action upon discovery is surveillance, or site-specific protection, all costs incurred are attributed to the agency on whose land the fire originated and billed to the party that is fiscally responsible.

The AFS budget is not dependent on the BLM fire management program. The 1982 Secretarial Order that created AFS recognized the economic and operational benefits of non-duplication of suppression services and statewide mobility of suppression forces. The AFS budget for fire management is approximately \$20 million annually. The bulk of this (\$13.5 million) covers wages for 90 permanent full time staff members and approximately 225 career seasonal and 90 temporary personnel in fire management and support. Aircraft contracts account for another \$3.7 million. Actual expenditures on fires are not included in the budget, as they are paid out of a different fund and are highly variable from year to year depending upon the fire load.

There are currently 72 village Emergency Firefighter (EFF) crews that are supposed to be available for fire-fighting in Alaska: 44 sponsored by AFS and 28 by the State of Alaska, Department of Natural Resources, Division of Forestry. The use of these crews is highly variable, depending on the number, timing, and locations of fires. Annual wages to crews varied from less than \$600,000 to over \$13,000,000 during the decade from 1990 to 1999. These wages include monies earned for fighting fire both within Alaska and the Lower 48.

While the Master Agreement, its exhibits, the AIWFMP and administrative unit documents provide the direction for fire response, it is the people – the advocacy and support of the regional and local agency fire program staffs – who make the AFS a success story.

