



Success Stories from the Western Region

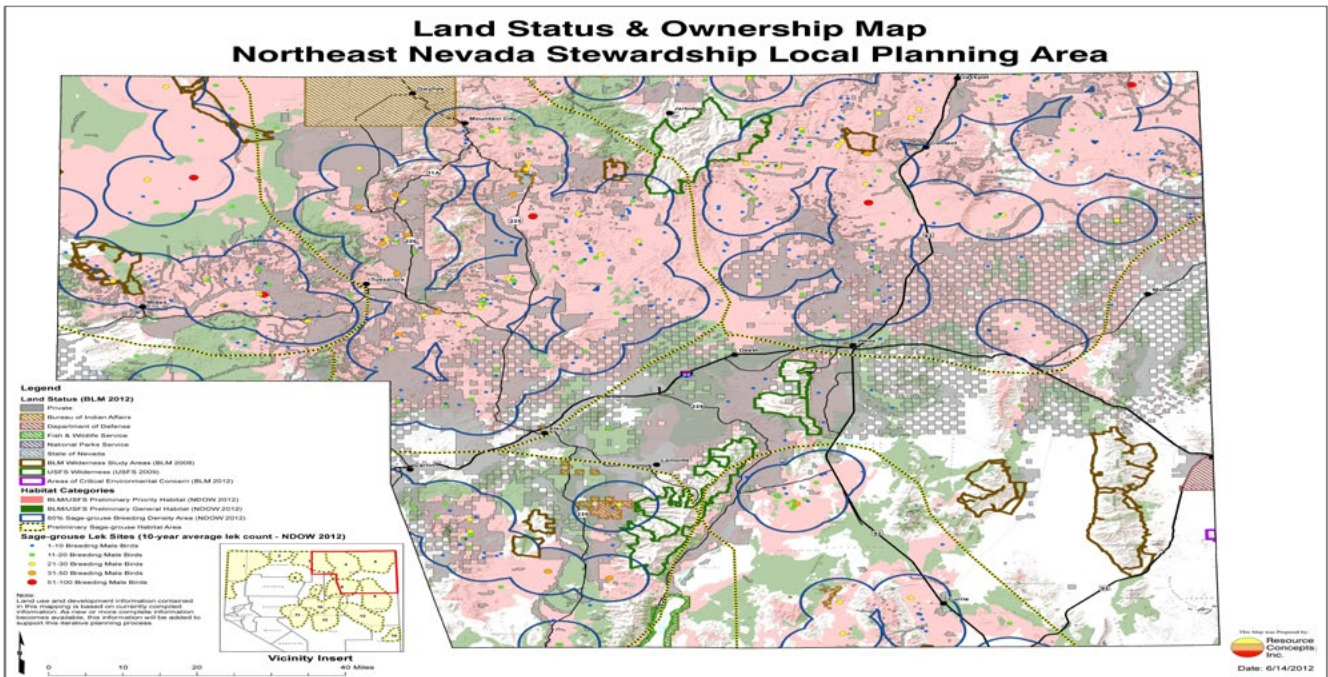
Northeast Nevada Interagency Fire Management

“Our mission is to provide a motivated, safe, and professional workforce with core values of duty, respect, and integrity to manage all aspects of fire to achieve Nevada’s goal of healthy, productive, sustainable ecosystems.”

Northeast Nevada is a place of contrasts. Elevations range from about 4,000 to 12,000 feet above sea level. The landscape varies from broad valleys, to mesas, to mountains. Average annual precipitation, much of it as snow, ranges from six inches on the valley floors to over 20 inches on the higher mountains. Summer thunderstorms usually produce dry lightning but little or no rain to moisten the ground and vegetation. Daytime temperatures range from 85° to 105°F during the summer. Relative humidity is often below 10%. Northern Nevada has a history of extreme fire behavior.

The Northeast Nevada Interagency Fire Management Program has fire suppression responsibility for 12.5 million acres (8.5 million acres of public land) under the jurisdiction of the Elko District, Bureau of Land Management (BLM); Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest (Mountain City, Ruby Mountain and Jarbidge Ranger Districts), US Forest Service (USFS); Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) Eastern Nevada Agency; the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service’s (USFWS) Ruby Lake Refuge; the Duck Valley Indian Reservation of the Shoshone–Paiute Tribes, and privately owned lands under the jurisdiction of the Nevada Division of Forestry (NDF).

Much of Northeast Nevada is in federal ownership, laid out in the familiar, but unwieldy, “checker-board” pattern found in those parts of the West where railroads were given land in every-other-section, 640-acre blocks as an incentive to extend their lines into previously unserved areas. While it was a successful strategy in terms of stimulating more rapid settlement of the West and significant economic development based on extraction or utilization of an area’s natural resources, it also produced a formidable management challenge for the federal agencies charged with stewarding their portions of the fragmented landscape. Sales, exchanges, and/or divisions of some of the railroad sections enabled some consolidation of federal lands in later years, but usually also led to an increase in the number and diversity of landowners in an area. A willingness and ability to work with one’s neighbors became a virtual necessity.



And it still is. As one BLM representative says, “The lines are kind of blurred when we fight fires. We have our annual operational plans and dispatch zones, but we never know whose land it is until we get on scene and get the lat-long.”

The BLM’s Elko District is one of the busiest in the agency for initial attack due to the area’s high fire occurrence frequency and fuel types. For many years the average was about 150 fires per season for approximately 100,000 acres. From 1999 through 2001, however, the average was about 300 fires per year, with roughly 1,000,000 acres burned in all. It was that increase in activity that led to the realization that a strong, year-round interagency effort was essential, and in addition, that there was a need to bridge the gap that existed between fire managers and incident management teams on one hand, and the local community, grazing permittees, and similarly concerned stakeholders on the other.

To more efficiently and effectively deal with the growing workload, an interagency dispatch center was created to serve the BLM, USFS, BIA, and NDF. Because NDF also provides medical services, it is an all-risk dispatch center. The center manager’s position is funded 50/50 by the BLM and USFS.

The BLM, USFS, and BIA are interagency partners through Service First¹. Together their fire suppression resources include:

- 11 Type 4 Engines
- 1 Type 6 Engine
- 1 Type 3 Helicopter with a 10-person Crew
- 1 Type 1 20-person Hotshot Crew
- 1 Type 2 Initial Attack Crew (BIA – call when needed)
- 1 Fire Dozer
- 1 Air Tactical Group Supervisor (with platform)



The Service First interagency partners plus the NDF, USFWS, and Duck Valley Tribe constitute the Northeast Nevada cooperators. A local multi-agency coordination group (MAC) serves as a forum “to review and discuss matters of mutual interest and to develop plans to ensure a coordinated approach is taken relative to wildland fire protection,” and “an adequate number of resources are available to meet anticipated needs and to allocate those resources most efficiently during periods of resource shortages and fire activity.” The MAC is a forum for:

- sharing incident status information;
- incident prioritization;
- resource acquisition, allocation, relocation, and demobilization;
- contingency planning;
- state and federal disaster response;
- political interfacing;
- information sharing to media and agency heads; and
- identification and resolution of issues common to all parties.

At about the same time that the interagency dispatch center was being planned, a severe fire season placed a strain on both firefighters and community members, leading to complaints from local citizens that they were not being kept adequately informed of the status of fires in the area, that firefighters weren’t being aggressive enough, that they did not seem to care about the local resource, and did not use available local knowledge to benefit the suppression efforts.

In response, the Local Liaison Program was established. A liaison is selected from among community members who volunteer to serve. In essence s/he works for the administrator of the agency that has jurisdiction over the fire response. The liaison’s role is to provide local knowledge to out-of-area firefighters and fire managers, to communicate with and educate the firefighters about local issues, work with the Incident Commander and Resource Advisor to provide input to the Incident Action Plan, and to in turn communicate with and educate the local affected community about the relevant strategy, tactics, and firefighting policies in effect.

Liaisons may be paid for their services if they wish, and will also be reimbursed for related expenses (fuels, cell phone use, etc.) Personal protective equipment and some training are provided to them to ensure their safety while performing their liaison duties. The liaison’s instructions say,

You will be asked to attend the initial briefing for the Incident Management Team, and attend their regularly scheduled planning and coordination meetings. During these various meetings and conversations, you are expected to be honest and open, help the process rather than hinder it, and remember that you are speaking for ALL of the local community and not just looking out for your own personal interests. There is no job description for “Liaison”, and learning how to do it takes time and experience. Please ask questions, ask for help, and let us know how to help you.

The liaison program has been extremely successful, and has led to better understanding, communication, and working relationships between the fire community and local residents and permittees. The lessons learned in the program’s development have been incorporated in the BLM’s Earning Bridges: Strategies for Effective Community Relations Before, During and After the Fire, an excellent handbook that can be helpful not only to members of the fire community, but also to anyone wishing to engage effectively in local collaborative efforts in natural resource-based communities.



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BLM Elko District Fire Management:
<http://on.doi.gov/elkofire>

Earning Bridges may be found at:

http://www.blm.gov/pgdata/etc/medialib/blm/wo/Information_Resources_Management/policy/ib_attachments/2007.Par.23468.File.dat/ib2007-075attach1.pdf

¹Service First is a partnership authority among BLM, USFS, the National Park Service (NPS), and USFWS. The program's website describes it as "a way for the agencies to explore alternative methods of delivering one-stop customer service to the public, sharing people and resources, and harmonizing similar work. Service First's "toolbox " includes co-location of personnel, collaboration (shared positions, combined training programs, integrated resource teams, etc.), shared staff (which may include dual delegation of authority), and administration (interagency agreements, direct transfers of funds from one agency to another, etc.). For more information, go to <http://www.fs.fed.us/servicefirst/index.shtml>

