BRIEFING PAPER

Communities-At-Risk[i]: Commitments and Expectations

January 10, 2006

BACKGROUND:

Fire managers have long been concerned with the risk to homes and other structures from wildfire, and the concept of the wildland-urban interface (WUI) has been in the literature for over 50 years. However, it has only been in recent years that we have gained widespread recognition and acknowledgement that, within the WUI, entire communities and their associated infrastructure are now also at risk from the destructive force of wildfire.

This recognition coincided with the emergence of the National Fire Plan (NFP). The NFP was born out of the flames and destruction of the 2000 Fire Season, arguably the worst fire season in the United States since the year 1910. In early August of 2000, then-President Clinton visited the Burgdorf Fire near McCall, Idaho, to see firsthand the wildfire situation in the West. During that trip, President Clinton asked the Secretaries of Agriculture and the Interior to develop recommendations on how to reduce the impacts of fire on rural communities and ensure sufficient firefighting resources for the future. The two Secretaries responded 30 days later with "*Managing the Impacts of Wildfires on Communities and the Environment: A Report to the President in Response to the Wildfires of 2000*".

Congress then supported the President's Report with a budget appropriation for the federal wildland fire agencies in 2001 of nearly $2.9 billion. This first appropriation, the accompanying budget language, and the Report to the President have since become known as the "National Fire Plan". In essence, it is a long-term commitment, founded on interagency and intergovernmental partnerships and cooperation, to enhance the nation's wildland firefighting response, reduce the threat of wildfire to communities and natural resources, restore and rehabilitate lands damaged by fire and, most importantly, increase the safety of the public and firefighters.

In 2001, in order to collaboratively address the threats to communities and the environment from wildfire among all levels of government, tribes, conservation and commodity groups, and community-based groups, the Secretaries of Agriculture and the Interior entered into a partnership with the Western Governors' Association and jointly developed a comprehensive strategy. In August of 2001, "*A Collaborative Approach for Reducing Wildland Fire Risks to Communities and the Environment: 10-Year Comprehensive Strategy*", was completed and signed by the Secretaries and the Governors. This was followed in May 2002 with an implementation plan "*A Collaborative Approach for Reducing Wildland Fire Risks to Communities and the Environment: 10-Year Comprehensive Strategy Implementation Plan*". These two documents now have become part of what we call the National Fire Plan.

Subsequently, in December of 2003, Congress passed the *Healthy Forests Restoration Act (HFRA)*. One of the major purposes of this act is reduce the wildfire risk to communities and municipal watersheds through a collaborative process of planning, prioritizing, and implementing hazardous fuel projects. Further, the Act identifies locally developed "Community Wildfire Protection Plans" (CWPPs) as the means to that end.

KEY POINTS:

- One of the key outcomes of the Implementation Plan for the 10-Year Comprehensive Strategy is the *"MOU for the Development of a Collaborative Fuels Treatment Program"*. This MOU (signed by NASF in 2003) requires, on a state-by-state basis, that:
    1. States, federal agencies, tribes and local partners collaboratively identify communities and landscapes at risk from wildfire, and prioritize them into one of three categories of risk: high, medium, or low.
    2. Based on these priorities, collaboratively identify high priority fuels reduction and ecosystem restoration projects for all lands.
    3. Based on the above, complete a proposed program of work by May 1 of each year that focuses on the WUI and treating acres within states that are actively incorporating state and tribal projects into the program of work.
- Another important outcome of the10-Year Strategy is the *"Field Guidance for Identifying and Prioritizing Communities at Risk"*, developed under the leadership of the NASF in June, 2003. This document, which provides a process and general guidance for assessing and displaying the risks to communities from wildfire, was accepted and transmitted to agency field organizations by the NASF, the Chief of the Forest Service, and the Assistant Secretary of the Department of the Interior in December of 2003.
- The HFRA gives State Foresters an important role in the process for developing Community Wildfire Protection Plans. It identifies the state agency responsible for forest management (along with local government and the local fire department) as one the three entities responsible for agreeing on the contents of locally developed Community Wildfire Protection Plans.
- The HFRA further requires that federal agencies give priority to projects that provide protection to communities at risk or that implement projects defined in CWPPs, and that they spend not less that 50% of the funds allocated for hazardous fuel reduction projects in the WUI.

COMMITMENTS AND EXPECTATIONS;

The NASF formally supports the following actions and encourages each state to make the commitment to:

- Take the leadership in collaboratively identifying communities that are at risk from wildfire in the state and maintain that information in the form of a document (list) or map. Update the list/map as necessary.

- Use the NASF "Field Guidance" to establish and implement a process for assessing and categorizing the wildfire risk to communities in the state. NASF encourages states to identify at least 3 levels of relative risk (e.g. high, medium, or low).
- Comply with the provisions of the "Collaborative Fuels MOU" by annually participating with the federal agencies in prioritizing hazardous fuel reduction projects on all lands within the state.
- To the extent possible, work with local communities and encourage and assist them in developing Community Wildfire Protection Plans.
- Comply with the final, approved federal reporting requirements. (Note: State Foresters are continuing to work with the federal agencies to develop appropriate performance measures. Final, NASF approved performance measures should be available in the near future.)

Further, the NASF supports the following points:

- Maintain lists (or maps) of communities at risk solely at the individual state level, and not in the Federal Register or in the National Fire Plan Operations Reporting System (NFPORS).
- The intent of the risk assessment process is to the compare relative risk to communities from wildfire within a state, not to compare wildfire risk to communities between or among states.
- Prioritize projects; not communities.
- The complexity of a CWPP should be tailored to the actual needs of the individual community and should be as simple and straightforward as possible.
- Performance measures should be limited in number, clearly meaningful in content, and be relatively easily measured.

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[i] The context of the word "risk" in the phrase "communities-at-risk" is different from the traditional use of the word risk in fire management. In the traditional fire management context, risk refers to the probability of ignition. In the context of the National Fire Plan, "communities-at-risk" refers to communities that at are at risk from destruction or damage from wildfire.