



NEWS RELEASE

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USDA Forest Service Northeastern Area ready to respond to western wildfire season

NEWTOWN SQUARE, Pa.—As the eastern spring fire season winds down, the Northeastern Area State and Private Forestry is gearing up to work with area partners to provide support to western states for the upcoming western wildfire season.

Nationally, about 70,000 communities in the United States are at risk from wildfire. In the last 10 years, wildfires have burned nearly 28,000 homes, businesses, and other buildings. Smoke from extreme fires can affect the health of millions of people.

“Wildfires threaten power grids, railroads, and highways, affecting people’s ability to work,” said Agriculture Secretary Tim Vilsack during a June 17 press briefing in Washington, D.C. “Fires destroy neighborhoods and businesses and alter landscapes, reducing property tax receipts that fund schools, hospitals, and local infrastructure.”

Billy Terry is the Assistant Director of the Cooperative Fire Management Program for NAS&PF. Terry’s program helps provide interagency fire support between the 20 states served by the NAS&PF and those of western states. According to Terry, the shifting of resources from one geographic area to the next is an annual occurrence that takes place with the seasons.

“Our job in the NAS&PF is to make resources available to states as needed in order to help them improve their capability to protect the public,” he said.

Despite their typically wetter seasons, eastern states also have fire seasons. Some of the fires can be just as intense as those out west, according to experts. The onset of the western wildfire season emphasizes the need for cooperative fire assistance from eastern states.

“Right now, things here are slowing down, so eastern state resources are becoming available,” said Terry. “Eastern states are beginning to list their crews as available

to respond to federal or state fires in other parts of the country. This happens every year. It's standard operating procedure."

"In the east, under normal conditions, there are two fire seasons each year, spring and fall," he added. "During abnormal conditions, the eastern fire season could run through the summer."

The recent spring fire season in the east was normal. There were a number of large fires in Michigan and a large fire in New Jersey. Several thousand fires were recorded. On average, there are about 10,000-12,000 fires a year throughout the 20 states served by the NAS&PF, Terry said. The states range from Maine to Minnesota and West Virginia to Missouri.

States have provided cooperative wildfire support to federal and other state operations for many years, said Terry. The states are a large piece of the national fire response program that benefits everybody.

Northeastern Area Association of State Foresters President Jim Barresi agreed. "The states have long been cooperators with the USDA Forest Service in national wildfire campaigns."

Each year, the NAS&PF facilitates the mobilization of fire responders. It has the lead in the Northeast for getting state responders paid, trained, and qualified and entered into the dispatch system for federal responses.

The United States has a common system for training and qualifying people that allows the sharing of resources among agencies, state and federal, across the country. Often, 25-40 percent of the firefighters on a given fire are state responders.

"Our job is to make sure that the states are in the qualification system and their resources are listed for dispatch," Terry said. "The NAS&PF establishes the agreement between the Forest Service and individual states that allows them to be reimbursed for costs incurred in helping to control fires on federal lands or fires that are under federal control."

The Reciprocal Fire Protection Act of 1955 authorizes the federal government to reimburse states for any costs incurred in assisting federal agencies in suppressing fire on federal lands.

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