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Federal Interagency Wildfire Response Framework

Wildfires are unplanned fires in vegetated landscapes. Where a wildfire begins determines jurisdiction for wildfire response. Because wildfires often cross jurisdictional boundaries and may impact nearby communities, there is an established framework for interagency coordination for wildfire response activities. This framework also allows for resources to be deployed to areas of greatest critical need during periods of high wildfire activity.

This CRS product summarizes the interagency and intergovernmental framework for responding to wildfires. Specifically, it addresses wildfire response jurisdiction; response strategies; and type, deployment, and reporting of resources (i.e., Preparedness Levels). It also provides references to additional resources. For information on the federal government's emergency and disaster declaration process and resources, see CRS Report WMR10001, *CRS Guide to Federal Emergency Management*.

Jurisdiction

The federal government has the responsibility for wildfires that begin on federal lands; states are generally responsible for wildfires that begin on nonfederal (state, local, and private) lands, though state responsibility frameworks vary considerably and are beyond the scope of this product. Where land ownership is comingled, response efforts may be managed jointly across multiple federal, state, tribal, or local agencies. At the federal level, the Department of the Interior (DOI) manages wildfire response for more than 400 million acres of national parks, wildlife refuges and preserves, other public lands, and Indian reservations. The Forest Service (FS), within the U.S. Department of Agriculture, manages wildfire response across the 193 million acres of the National Forest System. FS also is designated as the lead agency for wildfire response under the National Response Framework.

Although wildfire origin determines jurisdictional responsibility, there are circumstances in which a different governmental entity may handle the on-the-ground response activities or provide resources and support. Various agreements, contracts, and compacts for mutual aid and cooperative fire protection establish the parameters for sharing or exchanging resources and the applicable roles, responsibilities, terms, and conditions, including cost reimbursement provisions. Some states or local entities have contracted with the federal government to provide direct wildfire protection services, essentially hiring the federal government to respond to state-responsibility wildfires. As another example, some areas have defined protection areas that may not align with jurisdictional boundaries and may include a mix of land ownership types. Under this model, the entity assigned to a certain protection

area is responsible for responding to a wildfire within that area, regardless of jurisdiction.

Response Strategies and Phases

Federal wildfire policy is to evaluate the risks to firefighter and public safety and welfare—and to natural, ecological, and cultural values to be protected—to determine the appropriate response. Depending on the risk assessment, the initial federal response, known as the *initial attack*, may range from monitoring to aggressive suppression tactics. Wildfire suppression includes all the activities intended to extinguish a fire, prevent or modify fire movement, or manage a fire for resource management objectives (e.g., habitat restoration), as supported by the area's fire management plan (FMP). FMPs identify values and resources within the area that could be at risk and outline strategies, tactics, and alternatives for achieving resource management and protection objectives.

If the initial attack does not achieve the management objective within the designated operational period (generally, the first 24 hours), or if the fire increases in complexity or severity, the fire enters an *extended attack* phase. This phase of the fire may require different response strategies and the mobilization of additional resources. During extended attack incidents, the responding agency coordinates with the relevant state and local agencies on emergency management matters, including public health, safety, and evacuation decisions and notifications.

Wildfire Suppression Resources

The resources mobilized for wildfire suppression include personnel (e.g., firefighters, incident command and support staff), heavy equipment (e.g., fire engines, water scoopers), aviation assets (e.g., helicopters, single engine air tankers, tactical planes), and miscellaneous equipment and support resources (e.g., radios, weather equipment, food vendors, mobile showers). *Incident management teams* (IMTs) consisting of specially trained personnel are assigned to more complex incidents to provide a centralized command structure and operational, logistical, and administrative support. Resources may be federal, tribal, state, local, or, in some cases, privately contracted.

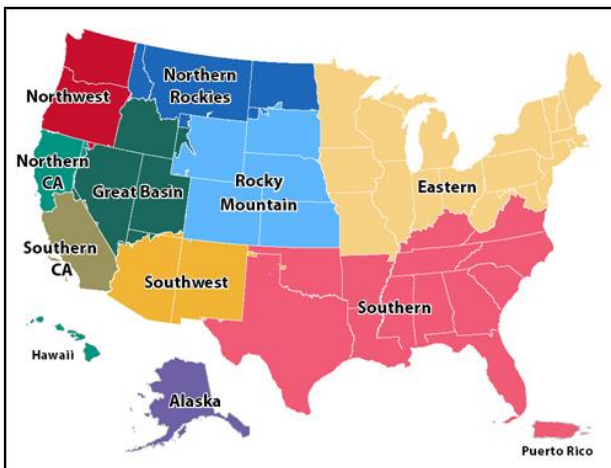
Resource Mobilization

The mobilization of wildfire response resources is based on a tiered, bottom-up coordination system that proceeds from local to regional and finally national coordination. Local dispatch centers receive initial reports of wildfire incidents within their defined geographical areas and deploy resources, either under the principle of closest available resource or according to pre-identified areas of responsibility (as defined in the various agreements and contracts), based on initial attack strategies.

If a wildfire incident increases in complexity or if extended attack requires additional resources, the local dispatch center transfers resource requests to regional centers, known as Geographic Area Coordination Centers (GACCs, see **Figure 1**). The GACCs coordinate resource allocation, prioritization, and mobilization within their defined regions. Each GACC includes regional-level representatives from the DOI bureaus, FS, and relevant state agencies. GACCs also provide regional-level fire information and forecasts.

If all resources within one or more GACCs are assigned to ongoing incidents and more resources are required, then resource prioritization and mobilization decisions move to the National Interagency Coordination Center (NICC), based at the National Interagency Fire Center (NIFC), in Boise, ID. The NICC coordinates and mobilizes resources from throughout the country to position resources in the areas of greatest critical need as determined by the National Multi-Agency Coordinating Group (NMAC). NMAC consists of national-level representatives from the relevant DOI bureaus, FS, U.S. Fire Administration, Federal Emergency Management Agency, and National Association of State Foresters. NMAC bases resource prioritization decisions on protecting human life; maintaining initial attack capability across the GACCs; and protecting communities, property, and natural and cultural resources. NMAC also coordinates the request for surge resources through the Department of Defense or international resources, as discussed below.

Figure 1. Geographic Area Coordination Centers



Source: CRS, using data from the National Interagency Fire Center.

Requesting and Activating Military Resources

NMAC may request military resources for additional, or surge, support when civilian resources are committed or not reasonably available. Military resources may include personnel and/or aviation assets. For example, certain military aviation assets can be equipped with modular airborne firefighting systems (MAFFs) and provide aerial firefighting support upon request and activation. For more information, see NIFC, *Military Use Handbook*, 2021, and NIFC's Military Support History website.

International Resources

Under specified conditions, the United States may provide and receive support from other countries, including

personnel, equipment, and aviation assets. NMAC coordinates these requests, sometimes in consultation with the U.S. Agency for International Development. In particular, the United States operates under bilateral agreements or arrangements with Australia, Canada, Mexico, and New Zealand.

Preparedness Levels

Preparedness Levels (PLs), which range from 1 (lowest) to 5 (highest), indicate the commitment of wildfire resources (but do not indicate fire danger or risk). Factors such as fuel (i.e., wildland vegetation), weather conditions, and fire activity also contribute to the PL determination. The higher PLs indicate significant commitment of shared resources among and between the GACCs. For example, PL5 indicates at least 80% of the country's firefighting personnel are committed to an incident. NMAC reports the level of resource use through the nationwide PL, and GACCs report regional PLs.

Issues for Congress

The federal interagency wildfire response framework may raise several interrelated issues for Congress, including the sufficiency of coordination, resource availability, resource allocation prioritization and decisions, and financial considerations, among others. Of particular concern may be the extent that resource requests go unfulfilled, either at the regional level or the national level. For example, 23% of all nationwide resource requests made to NICC in 2022 were reported as unfulfilled (NICC, *Wildland Fire Summary and Statistics Annual Report*, 2022). Unfulfilled resource requests may impact the government's ability to achieve the stated fire management objectives.

For More Information

The information herein is largely drawn from two sources, both of which are updated annually:

- *National Interagency Mobilization Guide*, and
- *Interagency Standards for Fire and Fire Aviation Operations*, often referred to as the *Red Book*.

Information on ongoing fire incidents and resource commitments is available from the following sources:

- The *National Incident Management Situation Report* (IMSR, also referred to as the *SIT Report*) provides a daily (or weekly, at PL1) summary of nationwide fire activity, with more information on fires of national significance (e.g., fires exceeding more than 300 acres and other criteria), and year-to-date statistics.
- Ongoing, incident-specific information, including evacuation orders and maps, is available from inciweb.nwccg.gov.

For an overview of nationwide fire activity over the previous five years, see CRS In Focus IF10244, *Wildfire Statistics*. For more general information on wildfire response, see CRS In Focus IF10732, *Federal Assistance for Wildfire Response and Recovery*.

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