

WILDLAND FIRE PREVENTION TEAMS IN TEXAS

By Jeffrey Tunnell

Situation

In the spring of 1998, the Texas Forest Service realized that a drought was building in Texas and that a severe fire season was in the making. “Fire Siege 1996” - when 100 homes and 100 vehicles were burned – was still fresh in everyone’s memory. At that time, the Texas Forest Service made a commitment to the people of Texas: “ **We will never let another Fire Siege 1996 occur in Texas.**”

Between March 3rd and May 31st, the trend in human-caused fires seemed to increase steadily all over the state. Without some type of intervention, fires requiring suppression action would be more than the fire departments and the Texas Forest Service could handle. Results could be as devastating as, if not worse than, the 1996 fires.

Fire behavior analysts and fuels specialists confirmed the Texas Forest Service concerns that central Texas was ripe for disastrous fires. The Keetch-Byram Drought Index (commonly known as the KBDI) is a measure of soil moisture which ranges from 0-800, with 0 being saturated soil and 800 being a lack of any moisture. The KBDI which should have been in the 200-300 range in the spring was at a dangerous 500-plus level. Live fuel moistures which should be more than 200 percent in the spring were less than 100 percent. Texas faced a severe wildfire threat even greater than in 1996. Determined to prevent a disaster instead of waiting for one to occur, Texas Forest Service took an innovative approach to the threat by activating fire prevention teams throughout the state.

The Prevention Team Concept

National Wildland Fire Prevention/Education Teams were developed to respond to severe wildland fire threats or situations that could result in large losses of life, property, and natural resources. In the past, wildland fire prevention was often overlooked when forces were mobilized for severe fire conditions. The purpose of these teams is to assist local agencies in the prevention of human-caused fires and to minimize property losses through owner education.

The first national fire prevention team effort was started in the Southwest area of the United States in response to the Southwest Fire Management Board's (a group of interagency fire managers) need to reduce human-caused fires in their area. An assessment of the situation was made of ongoing fire prevention programs, and it was determined that an accelerated and enhanced program could make a difference.

Fire prevention teams involve working together with local units to:

- Do fire risk assessments
- Determine the severity of the fire situation
- Facilitate community awareness and education in fire prevention (including prescribed burning)
- Coordinate the announcement of interagency fire restrictions and closures
- Coordinate fire prevention efforts with target groups, agencies, and elected officials
- Promote public and personal responsibility regarding fire prevention in the wildland/urban intermix
- Plan for fire protection

A team is organized according to the needs of the requesting unit and typically consists of a team leader, one or more fire prevention specialists, a public affairs specialist, and other technical specialists such as operations, logistics, and finance. Team members usually rotate every 2 or 3 weeks for as long as the severe situation lasts or the requesting unit needs additional help.

The Texas Mobilization

Texas Forest Service prevention teams were already working early in the year when conditions in the heavily populated I-35 corridor, which runs from San Antonio north to Dallas-Ft Worth, started to become critical. In mid-May, Texas requested a National Fire Prevention Team to be placed in Austin to augment the state teams. Team members came from the USDA Forest Service, USDI Bureau of Land

Management, USDI National Park Service, and the States of Alaska, Idaho, New Mexico, Utah, and California. The National Fire Prevention Team became part of an interagency overhead team situated in the Austin City Emergency Operations Center. The overhead team was in charge of wildland fire operations and logistics for all suppression and prevention activities in Texas.

The National Fire Prevention Team set up operations on May 27, 1998. The initial core team helped local organizations complete a fire risk assessment, assisted in the design and implementation of an accelerated fire prevention campaign, and identified the need for additional personnel to staff satellite operations. By June 10th, the first satellite team was operational in San Antonio. By July 1st, either State or National Fire Prevention Teams were in place in Abilene, Amarillo, Austin, Conroe, Dallas/Ft.Worth, Lufkin, San Antonio, and Waco. The statewide effort was divided into East and West Zones.

A Declaration of Emergency was granted by President Clinton which allowed the Federal Emergency Management Agency to release funds to be used for immediate attack on fires that did start. Along with the wildland fire prevention teams, firefighting resources such as fire engines, hand crews, helicopters, air tankers, and overhead specialists from across the nation were brought in and placed in staging areas. The State of Texas also activated some National Guard resources, such as blackhawk helicopters, transport vehicles, and support personnel, to help in the effort.

The Texas Plan

- ◆ Mobilized national/state fire prevention teams - the most massive effort of its kind ever in the nation.
- ◆ Mobilized national/state assessment teams to evaluate and monitor fire risk in every county across the state.
- ◆ Developed and implemented a staging and mobilization plan for the entire state.

- ◆ Eequested a Presidential emergency declaration to enable federal funding for staging mobilized resources.

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- ◆ Integrated all available firefighting and prevention resources including Texas Air National Guard, Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT), 40,000 volunteer firefighters, paid firefighters, the USDA Forest Service, Civil Air Patrol, USDI National Park Service, USDI Bureau of Land Management, USDI Bureau of Indian Affairs, USDI Fish and Wildlife Service, Texas Department of Public Safety and Division of Emergency Management, and other local, state and federal agencies.
- ◆ Committed to attack all fires while small to protect firefighters, homes, and lives, and prevent disasters
- ◆ Enacted bans on burning in more than half of Texas's 254 counties.

The Wildland Fire Prevention Team Effort

The mission of the National Fire Prevention/Education Team was to provide assistance to the Texas Forest Service and local fire departments in their efforts to reduce the number of human-caused wildfires in order to protect lives, property, and natural resources, and to reduce the costs and losses associated with the fires that did ignite. This mission was to be achieved by:

- Informing Texas residents and visitors to the State of the extreme fire danger.
- Generating interest in preventing wildfires.
- Educating the various publics about fire safety and encouraging actions that would reduce the number of ignitions, increase protection for property, and reduce the danger of injury or death to residents and firefighters.

As the team members were assigned to various locations throughout the State of Texas, they began their efforts by contacting the local officials and fire organizations. They made fire risk

assessments and determined the severity of the local fire situation. Once these were done, a prevention plan, including a communication plan, was developed to meet the needs of the area.

Educational efforts included public service announcements and interviews with the media, demonstrations to fire departments and fire marshals, presentations to community groups, and meetings with elected officials. The communication plan ensured that all the relevant parties were included in the information campaign.

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emphasis was placed on the wildland/urban interface and fireworks with the approaching 4th of July holiday weekend. The statewide theme chosen for the 4th of July was “Big Fires Start Small - Don’t Blow It.” The team actively communicated this message to radio, TV, and print media. Flyers were printed and distributed at fireworks stands, television personalities used the theme in their broadcasts, and public affairs officers used it in all communication to citizen groups.

Accomplishments of the team(s) included:

- Bilingual inserts that were placed into utility bills and other public distributions that explained to homeowners how to make their property more likely to survive a wildfire.
- Fire safety flyers developed with the ‘Brush Fires and Texas’ theme that were placed at points of entry into the state, such as welcome centers and tourism offices, and Chamber of Commerce offices.
- A fireworks campaign developed in partnership with the fireworks association which volunteered to place safety messages produced by the Texas Forest Service in every package sold.
- Daily updates of the fire and drought situation on the Texas Forest Service internet web pages.
- Prevention messages placed on electronic billboards, restaurant placemats, the internet, and at local fire departments.

- Participation in community outreach programs and special events for the public.
- Presentation of “Fire Safe Community Awareness” programs to homeowner associations, 4-H leaders, county councils, and rural and volunteer fire departments.
- Development of partnerships with federal, state, and local agencies, businesses and utility companies.
- ◆ A campaign through radio, TV, and print media, with interviews, newstories, features, press events, appearances on talk shows, and articles for magazines and newsletters.

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A major part of the Texas plan was to involve local fire departments as much as possible. The prevention team contacted more than 200 fire departments to see what help was needed and to present examples of what the prevention team could provide. The team displayed samples of wildland fire prevention materials and programs that were available and how to obtain them.

Team members pointed out training that could increase the fire department’s effectiveness both in their prevention efforts and in wildland firefighting. “Fire Safe Community Awareness,” a program that utilizes slides of the local community showing good and not-so-good examples of defensible space, was used to educate not only firefighters but community members and homeowners.

Considerable effort went into demonstrating to local fire departments the need for fire reporting and investigations. A good fire prevention program needs to be based on actual causes of fires, when and where they occur, and hazards and values at risk. If local departments don’t record their fires, they will be unaware of the severity of their situation.

Visiting with local county officials resulted in lightening the workload on overtaxed local fire departments. Team members displayed statistical results of a decrease in human-caused fires in counties where burn bans were in place, and thus were able to convince officials of the need to ban burning in counties that do not do so traditionally.

Summary

Results from the fire season indicate that fire prevention actions implemented did, in fact, reduce the number of fires and helped reduce losses from fires that did start. In addition, the program provided valuable innovations and experience to fire departments across the State of Texas. Certainly, fire prevention was established as an important and valued part of fire management in the Texas Forest Service and local fire departments.

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As Texas Forest Service Director Jimmy Hull told Governor Bush and Vice President Gore, “The Texas Plan is working. It is not only working, but gaining national attention and establishing a new, positive standard for rural land fire protection in America.” Being proactive in fire management when a serious fire hazard develops saves both money and resources in the end. It reduces *the risk put on firefighters every time they respond to a fire*. It reduces property loss, and it reduces natural resource loss. The best fire to fight is the one that never starts.