

Southwest Idaho Wildfire Prevention and Education Team

Final Report

October, 2000

Introduction

At the request of the Boise National Forest, and in cooperation with the Bureau of Land Management's Lower Snake River District and the Idaho Department of Lands, a National Fire Prevention and Education Team was mobilized in Boise, Idaho, August 1, 2000. The team originally consisted of Team Leader Randy Eardley and team members Rich Olsen, Nancy Wiggins, and Venetia Gempler. As the project progressed, additional team members included Margaret McCaffrey, Warren Grandall, and Tammy Wilson.

Issue

Southwest and central Idaho, like much of the West, began experiencing extreme fire conditions early in the 2000 fire season. There had been little moisture in the region since spring and the Palmer Drought Index showed moderate to extreme conditions across the area.

Fuel conditions in the Boise National Forest were drier than ever recorded. Accumulations of lower-elevation rangeland fuels were at a 5-year high, fully cured, and extremely dry. The forest had experienced one large fire, burning more than 1,000 acres in Garden Valley, which is both a popular recreation area and home to hundreds of full- and part-time residents in a scattered interface area. The Horn Creek Fire was human-caused.

Although many large fires were and would continue burning in Idaho and throughout the West, the Boise National Forest, the Lower Snake River District BLM, and the Idaho Department of Lands in southwest Idaho, had remained within the eye of the hurricane. At the time of the team's mobilization, and with the exception of the Garden Valley fire, these agencies had experienced only an average fire load. However, given the severe conditions, a history of large fire activity in mid- to late-August, a continuing forecast of hot and dry weather, as well as the limited availability of initial attack resource, the potential existed for major fires to occur.

Status and Actions Prior To Team Mobilization

From the beginning of the fire season, patrols in the Boise National Forest had discovered several hundred abandoned or untended campfires, including up to an estimated 100 in a week. Those numbers were continuing to add up even as fire conditions worsened.

Elsewhere, by mid July nearly 25 percent of the fires in the Lower Snake River District BLM were attributed to vehicle or equipment-related causes.

In a coordinated interagency effort, the Idaho Department of Lands, Bureau of Land Management and U.S. Forest

Service implemented fire restrictions July 20, addressing campfires and smoking. These restrictions were followed by a second stage of restrictions, implemented August 5, addressing hours of operation for equipment and off-road vehicle travel.

Additionally, both the Idaho Department of Lands and the Boise National Forest rescinded all private firewood cutting permits until weather and fuel conditions improved. The Department of Lands also imposed a mandatory 1-hour site patrol following equipment operation.

There was some preliminary discussion of banning early season hunts using muzzle-loaded weapons. This ban would later be implemented and then rescinded during the course of imposing restrictions.

The implementation of the Stage 2 Restrictions resulted in some initial confusion among the public and the media regarding what was allowed where and when.

Team Mobilization

Given the severe conditions and potential for catastrophic fires to occur, the prevention and education team was mobilized to implement a focused and comprehensive public information and education campaign. The audience for this campaign included the general public; specific user groups such as hunters, off-road vehicle users, and campers; and home and property owners in the broad urban/wildland interface throughout the area.

A list of objectives were developed by the interagency partners (see below). The goals for the team were to minimize the number and severity of human-caused fire starts; to further educate home and property owners about strategies to minimize their risk of loss to wildfire; and to educate and enlist the help of the general public regarding fire prevention.

Objectives:

The following objectives were developed and agreed upon by the principal agencies and the team.

- X Reinforce education efforts regarding the current Stage II Fire restrictions and ensure that the message to the public is consistent for all cooperating agencies.
- X Reduce the high occurrence of abandoned campfires.
- X Communicate to the public the fire risks associated with off-road vehicle use.
- X Communicate with hunting publics regarding the fire danger and risks relative to the upcoming hunting seasons.
- X Establish and educate a prevention team for the Boise National Forest to continue prevention work after the Team has gone.
- X Raise the awareness within, and educate other public organizations about the threat of wildfires.
- X Reinforce the Urban/Wildland interface campaign that has been promoted in southwest Idaho by focusing on homeowner activities.
- X Increase the overall public awareness regarding the fire conditions, fire potential, and the risks posed to firefighters, the public, and natural resources.
- X Incorporate, where possible, messages about natural resources and fire rehabilitation.

Team Actions

The following actions were undertaken and accomplished by the team during its tenure in Boise, which ran from

August 2, 2000 to September 7, 2000. These are presented in no particular order of priority, importance, or accomplishment:

- X Held an initial meeting with representatives of the Boise National Forest, the Bureau of Land Management, the Idaho Department of Lands, Bureau of Reclamation, and Idaho Fish and Game to discuss the team, team objectives, and to make initial contacts.
- X Revised an existing “frequently asked questions” brochure about fire restrictions to utilize clear, concise, and inclusive language to explain current restrictions. This brochure would become a mainstay of the team’s literature, with revisions and redistribution to address changes in the restrictions as they were implemented.
- X Developed handout/mailed cards with prevention messages on one side and concise restriction language on the other. These were used in a variety of ways, including placed on countertops, inserted in envelopes or other mailers, handed out in the field by rangers and others. They were also distributed through local bookstores as bookmarkers. These cards were revised, reprinted, and redistributed as the restrictions changed.
- X Printed both the brochures and cards. Distributed them to information stations set up around the Boise National Forest for the weekends, ranger district offices, and law enforcement personnel. Also distributed to store counter tops at off-road vehicle shops, outdoor clothing and outdoor gear shops, sportsman’s shops, bookstores, gas stations, and car rental outlets.
- X Developed a one-page color flyer presenting the restrictions, and differences among agency lands, using clear and concise language. These were distributed through retail outlets, Fish and Game vendors, ranger district offices, and posted at a variety of locations including stores, rest areas, and visitor centers.
- X Enlisted the help of private reader-board owners to include fire prevention messages on their reader boards. Received cooperation from nearly every reader-board owner along the Interstate 84 corridor from the Oregon border to Mountain Home, east of Boise, as well as prominent reader boards in Boise, including at Boise State University.
- X Enlisted the assistance of the Department of Transportation, and coordinated with them for the placement of mobile reader boards on major highways leading into wildland areas. These reader boards were highly visible to public land users and displayed fire prevention messages
- X Set up and staffed a fire prevention booth at the Mountain Home Air Force Base air show during the weekend of August 5-6. Distributed restriction and fire information along with general fire prevention material.
- X Participated in two joint press conferences of all land management agencies to address and clarify fire restriction issues.
- X Distributed *Living With Fire* and *Wildfire Strikes Home* literature to homeowner associations in key forest interface areas.
- X Posted the *Frequently-Asked-Questions* brochure and copies of restrictions on the Boise Interagency Dispatch Center’s web page and the Boise Interagency Logistics Center’s web page. This material was re-posted each time it was revised or updated.
- X Provided talking points regarding the public’s help in preventing additional fires for use during President Clinton’s visit to Boise and the Burgdorf Junction Fire.
- X Provided a packet of homeowner information to George Lennon, national spokesman for the USFS, for

background information and use during the President's visit.

- X Provided a packet of information regarding homeowner safety and fire prevention to Governor Kempthorne's office, along with a list of prevention talking points for use during the wildfire crisis.
- X Wrote a script and produced a television public service announcement acknowledging and thanking the public for their help in reducing the number of human-caused wildfires during this crisis season. Re-edited a second, existing PSA to reflect the Prevention and Education Team. Purchased time to air these spots during a local television station's documentary about the 2000 fire season.
- X Developed a list of messages and talking points for announcers at the Caldwell Night Rodeo, Boise Hawks baseball games, and local horse races and football games. Distributed these to the appropriate officials and announcers at each event.
- X Contacted Pete Zimowsky, editor of the Idaho Statesman's Outdoor page, about including fire prevention messages in either an article or in a fire prevention box that would appear daily or weekly in the Outdoor section of the paper. Met with Pete, who subsequently wrote a lengthy article about fire prevention and fire restrictions, published in the weekly Outdoor publication insert.
- X Coordinated with the Boise National Forest and Idaho Department of Fish and Game regarding prepublicity about closures in the forest and the impact on hunting seasons.
- X Placed a sign order for signs addressing the fire restrictions and expedited its delivery. Provided signs for the BLM and the Southern Idaho Timber Protection Association. The Boise National Forest seemed to have a sufficient supply.
- X Coordinated with a local citizen's group in the community of Crouch who planned their own fire prevention/information roadside stop for the weekend prior to Labor Day, and during the Labor Day holiday weekend. Provided them with talking points and handout materials. Wrote and distributed a press release about this citizen involvement, and assisted the media in covering the story.
- X Made several attempts to coordinate with a local Spanish-speaking radio station to air public service announcements regarding fire prevention. Due to internal issues at the station, this was not accomplished this year but the team developed some ideas to reach this audience in the future. (Included in the recommendations)
- X Delivered a speech regarding fire and fire prevention issues at a luncheon hosted by the Capitol City Kiwanis Organization.
- X Posted fire prevention notices at Department of Transportation rest areas along Interstate 84 and at Visitor's Centers.
- X Met with BNF's South Zone FMO to discuss issues related to Atlanta Days, an event attended by several hundred people in a remote area of the forest with little developed camping. Discussed having a fire prevention technician at Atlanta throughout the weekend.
- X Coordinated with Idaho Power Company regarding fire restrictions in their campgrounds; and the posting of fire prevention material at the those campgrounds.
- X Met with representative of the Boise City Fire Department to discuss the team's role and coordination with local prevention efforts.
- X Drafted a letter enlisting the public's help in fire prevention for distribution through company newsletters and other corporate communication channels. Established contacts within local major corporations.

- X Wrote a guest opinion/editorial regarding fire prevention issues. Published in the Idaho Statesman, August 30, 2000.
- X Joined KIVI-Channel 6's weather segment for two spots during the nightly news, aired live from Boise's "Alive After Five" celebration in downtown Boise. Discussed fire conditions and fire prevention issues.
 - Attended a Boise Hawks baseball game and had Smokey throw out the first pitch. Smokey visited people throughout the stands as team members delivered fire prevention messages. The field announcer read a fire prevention script and devoted one inning to fire prevention messages .
 - Visited local saw shops and off-road vehicle dealers to answer questions and provide hand-out material for them and their customers.
 - Coordinated with the Idaho Department of Fish and Game to insert fire restriction and fire prevention messages into their newsletter and other communications with both their publics and their vendors. This information was updated as needed to address impacts on hunting seasons and hunting activities.
 - Delivered fire prevention messages (along with Smokey Bear visits in some cases) at a variety of local events, including a rodeo, a rodeo breakfast, a jazz festival, and the local fair.
 - Wrote and mailed a letter to the presidents/directors of 45 civic organizations and special interest groups (e.g. equestrian associations, biking organizations, Kiwanis, etc.) enlisting their help in getting fire prevention messages out to their members.
 - Wrote and mailed letters to rural fire departments throughout southwestern Idaho offering information concerning fire prevention and crisis evacuation.
 - Provided information to the Idaho Statesman, the Idaho Press Tribune, and other area newspapers for articles regarding homeowners in the wildland/urban interface and steps they can take to better protect their own property.
 - Coordinated with local Red Cross volunteers to hand-deliver homeowner materials door-to-door in high-impact urban interface areas. Volunteers delivered hundreds of packets this way. Wrote and distributed a press release regarding the Red Cross's interest and participation in fire prevention efforts.
 - Provided homeowner literature and materials for a Forest Service townhall meeting at Terrace Lakes, north of Garden Valley in a wildland/urban interface area.
 - Conducted several media interviews regarding fire restrictions with radio, television, and newspapers. These were done and redone as the agencies and state transitioned through a variety of changes in the fire restrictions, both going into restrictions and backing out of them.
- X Established a toll free phone number and recording for people to call and leave an address to receive homeowner information and other fire prevention materials.
 - Contacted a local volunteer coordinator who is involved in annual community-wide projects and laid some groundwork for a possible large-scale volunteer day to assist elderly and infirm members of the public living in wildland areas with making their homes more firewise. This effort may take place in the Spring of 2001.
 - Attended the "Music on the Mountain" music festival at Bogus Basin, the local ski area. Coordinated with the sponsors to have fire patrols along the road leading to, and at, the ski area. Distributed fire prevention handouts.

Sponsors announced fire prevention messages between music sets.

- Designed a quarter-page ad addressing the fire restrictions, what was allowed, and thanking the public for their cooperation in preventing human-caused wildfires. This ad was published twice during the Labor Day weekend.
 - Assisted the Idaho Department of Lands in conducting and hosting the annual Run to Tablerock, a run sponsored by the Treasure Valley Interagency Fire Prevention Cooperative. Team members assisted with advanced signups, compiling packets of information for the participants, and logistics during race-day. The team assisted in getting fire prevention messages and visibility to all run participants.
- X Wrote copy for interpretive cards to be used with an existing wildland/urban interface home display. The information cards will allow the display to be used as an informational tool even when it is not accompanied by a fire prevention specialist.

Results and Statistics:

Measuring the effectiveness of a fire prevention and education campaign is difficult at best. There is currently no available method to gauge specific behavioral changes among the public, and whether or not such changes resulted in the prevention of a wildfire ignition at any given time.

However, that being said, there are certain indicators from which inferences can be made regarding the effectiveness of prevention and education efforts. The most notable indicator is the change in the number of human caused fires before, during, and after a prevention campaign.

Figures from the Lower Snake River District BLM and the Boise National Forest for the months of June, July, and August 2000 reveal the following:

Human-Caused Fires

<u>Lower Snake River District BLM</u>	<u>Boise National Forest</u>
June 27	June 6
July 29	July 15
August 11	August 3

Another notable indicator is the reduction in the number of abandoned or unattended campfires discovered during the season. According to fire officials within the Boise National Forest, patrol staff had been discovering hundreds of such fires, reaching a peak of approximately 100 in a single week. This trend continued even after the implementation of fire restrictions began July 20. By the third week in August, however, after the team had been in place for three weeks, the number of abandoned and unattended campfires had dropped to approximately 6 per week.

To what degree these reductions in human-caused fires and abandoned campfires can be attributed to the team's work may be a point for discussion. Certainly, implementing the fire restrictions played a major role in reducing the number of human-caused fires. However, the teams efforts in informing both specific and general audiences about the restrictions were critical to their effectiveness. It can be said unequivocally that the team significantly and successfully increased the number and variety of prevention messages reaching numerous audiences in the public.

Recommendations:

The following recommendations were identified by team members while serving on the Southwest Idaho Fire Prevention and Education Team. The team's goal in offering these recommendations is to provide input that may help enhance and further existing wildland fire prevention and education efforts, and to forge new ground in presenting a cooperative and cohesive interagency program to the public.

Fire Restriction Policy and Implementation

Issue: Although there was an interagency plan in place to implement fire restrictions, it was followed only loosely at best. The quickness with which the implementation levels changed; the addition of land-specific restrictions outside the plan; and a lack of a notification checklist, among other elements resulted in significant confusion among internal audiences, and both frustration and bewilderment among the public, contractors, and other land users.

Recommendations:

All parties and land management partners need to meet to review and improve the existing fire restriction plan. This process should include a facilitator and assess the plan in terms of what worked, what didn't, and why during the 2000 fire season. The following are some elements to consider:

- X To be effective, restrictions need to be consistent among all agencies and clearly stated. In revising the restriction plan, the partners need to recognize that restrictions can be both a tool to address immediate fire concerns as well as a means of achieving longer-term objectives related to educating the public and other land users about fire causes and risks.

- X Terms and definitions within the plan need to be concise and consistent with related literature. For instance, using the term "designated roads and trails" on BLM land may not coincide with what appears on "maps normally distributed by the agency." In this same vein, the term "open fire" creates some confusion on all lands.

- X The restrictions should be tied to clear and documented threats. The success of this element ran the gamut this past season, ranging from campfire restrictions (geared toward successfully reducing or eliminating the number of abandoned fires) to prohibiting muzzle-loaded weapons (which no agency could document as a fire cause or problem). The latter created some confusion among hunters and difficulties at the Idaho Department of Fish and Game.

- X Enforcement issues such as who, where, and how the restrictions are enforced need to be clearly identified. There is currently some confusion regarding enforcement on private lands.

- X The plan should include a notification checklist similar to the checklist of factors justifying the restrictions. One individual or designate should be identified and responsible for the appropriate notifications to ensure there are no lapses or oversights among internal audiences. Past lapses have had a cascading effect, e.g. when public contact representatives have erroneous or outdated information, they unknowingly pass that on to interested publics, who spread it among their peers.

- X Build a timeline into the plan regarding moving into and out of the different stages of restrictions. There was considerable confusion created this past season by moving from one level of restrictions to the next, and then

adding and removing restrictions, all within a few days. There needs to be enough time allowed for adequate internal and external notifications. This can perhaps be best addressed by all agencies taking a longer view of expected conditions and restriction goals, and then allowing enough time for them to be effective before moving to another level.

Boise National Forest Prevention and Education Program

Issue: While recognizing budget and personnel limitations, there has been a conspicuous lack of Forest Service participation in interagency fire prevention efforts in recent years which has lessened the overall impact and effectiveness of these efforts. Given the number of human-caused fires and the increased urban-wildland interface areas in the forest, a focus on prevention and education is warranted.

Recommendations:

- X Consider making fire prevention and education a priority, recognizing that the prevention of a single fire may save a career's worth of dollars for a prevention specialist.
- X With the current focus on fire programs, and the subsequent increase in funding that is anticipated for all fire programs -- including prevention, education, and outreach -- this may be an opportune time to bolster the forest's program.
- X Clearly define the duties and roles for a lead fire prevention specialist on the forest and support this position. Having these duties as collateral functions of another position has not been effective.
- X Consider taking an active role in the Treasure Valley Interagency Fire Prevention Co-op to help rejuvenate that organization and further the goals of area-wide prevention and education.

Developing a more active fire prevention cooperative

Issue: Although once active, the Treasure Valley Interagency Fire Prevention Cooperative has fallen dormant. As a result, opportunities to enhance each partner agency's prevention and education programs are likely being missed. Also, in the event a national team is mobilized again in this area, contacts and relationships already established by the cooperative would enhance and facilitate the team's effort.

Recommendation:

- X Partner agencies should consider resuming regular cooperative meetings and activities. If nothing else, this group can serve as a venue for sharing ideas, projects, materials, and other information which may be useful to each agency and the group as a whole.
- X In light of the expanding urban-wildland interface throughout the area, and the increasing recreational use of public lands, consider redefining, or refining, the role of the cooperative in public fire education and prevention.
- X Consider using the cooperative to create an urban-wildland interface program addressing homeowner and protection issues that would be useable throughout central and southwest Idaho.
- X Consider using the cooperative to develop a series of canned slide or PowerPoint presentations on a variety of fire-related topics including such themes as recreation, survivable space, vehicles, and fire fuels management. These could be offered to local civic groups, associations, clubs, or other organizations, with a member of the cooperative serving as the spokesperson/presenter.

X This cooperative could also serve as a source of fire prevention materials and information for internal audiences. For example, brief workshops or training could be offered through the cooperative for internal audiences, from receptionists to recreation specialists and all field personnel.

Expanding The Target Audiences

Issue: Not all pertinent audiences are being reached using current methods.

Recommendations:

X There is a large Hispanic population in southwest Idaho that has not been reached by current fire prevention and education efforts. Although team members made several attempts to work with local Spanish radio broadcasters to get Public Service Announcements translated and aired, none were successful. There are other avenues which can and should be pursued, however. These include contacting and coordinating with the Idaho Migrant Council and the Idaho Hispanic Business Association. There may also be some contacts within the university which may be helpful and should be researched.

X As the population of southwest Idaho continues to grow, there is concomitant increase in urban-wildland interface areas throughout the region. Although some ongoing programs (foothills literature delivery, public service announcements, etc.) are successful, they are reaching a relatively small percentage of urban-interface property owners. There is an opportunity to expand an information/education campaign to nearly every corner of the area, including the Kuna, Emmett, Payette and Weiser areas, as well as Pine, Featherville, Wilderness Ranch, Terrace Lakes, Clear Creek, and other areas. Some suggested avenues to reach this audience include:

Work with the local rural or volunteer fire departments in these areas to deliver information door-to-door and hold well-publicized community meetings to present homeowner and firewise information.

Red Cross volunteers were a tremendous benefit in delivering homeowner information to remote areas and communities during this year's fire crisis. This avenue for assistance has tremendous benefits and should be pursued and used in the future if possible.

Seek opinion-leaders or other civic-minded individuals in each community, present homeowner information to them, and seek their advice and assistance in sharing it with the community. These leaders may be mayors, commissioners, or community activists. One example of the latter was the team's work with the Garden Valley citizen's group who wanted to be proactive in fire prevention.

Incorporate some homeowner information in school programs presented in these areas.

Continue developing and airing public service announcements addressing homeowner issues.

Pursue establishing a group similar to Fire Safe Councils found elsewhere in the country. These groups might include insurance, development, real estate, building material, and landscape representatives. The focus would be to create a comprehensive advocacy for homeowner safety regarding wildland fire.

Attend home and garden shows with the existing tabletop and stand-alone displays to discuss landscaping and building with firewise concepts in mind.

X The team established some good working relationships with the Idaho Department of Fish and Game. These relationships should be continued and built upon. Given that wildland fire has an impact on wildlife habitat and the hunting community, there are many issues of common interest to Fish and Game and fire educators, and their shared audiences.

X With the growth in southwest Idaho's population has come an increase in the number of people using the public lands for recreation of all types. Provide some basic fire prevention and education training and materials to all field-going personnel who encounter members of the public. These field-going staff members would include recreation techs, geologists, archaeologists, wildlife biologists, botanists, foresters, law enforcement personnel, and others.

Conclusion

During its tenure in Boise, the Southwest Idaho Fire Prevention and Education Team demonstrated that a focused, interagency prevention effort can be effective in a number of ways. In meeting the identified objectives the team accomplished many things, including the following: significantly increased the public's awareness of fire conditions and hazards; met the educational needs of a broad spectrum of home and property owners in urban/wildland interface areas; facilitated and broadened the public education campaign regarding fire restrictions; and established valuable contacts and relationships within the communities around the area, among many other accomplishments.

Although there are no means by which to say a specific fire on a specific day was prevented, the team's information and education strategies played an integral role in keeping the public aware and in reducing the overall number of human-caused fire starts. Along with those reductions came a reduced risk to firefighters, reduced resource and property losses, reduced suppression and support costs, and reduced risks to the public.

Finally, perhaps one of the most notable accomplishments of the team was to lay the groundwork for future efforts in fire prevention and education. The strategies implemented by the team, and the contacts the members established, can serve as a base or benchmark from which to continue building a successful, broad-based program in southwest Idaho.

Overall, this team was able to demonstrate, as team's elsewhere have done, that a group of people working together on a focused mission can achieve tremendous results, both in the quantity and quality of achievements.