

Legacy Records Guidance

Federal policy of January 2005, identifies/protects fire incident records that document the history and management of wildland fire on Federal lands. Fire incident records of historical value document the challenges faced by fire managers, their response, actions and the results. Such records have long-term/permanent historical value and are retained in the National Archives in perpetuity. Other fire records have temporary administrative value and are retained for 7 years.

Background

The Interagency Wildland Fire Records Project, a joint effort between the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) and federal fire agencies to protect fire records, revised the Federal fire records schedule and developed a process to protect older (legacy) fire records from deterioration and damage. The objective is to ensure valuable fire information is available to managers in the future.

To comply with agency and federal policy, units must identify fire records that are no longer needed for current business purposes. Permanent records less than 20 years old must be organized, inventoried and transferred to the closest regional Federal Records Center (FRC). Permanent records 20 years old or older should be transferred to the closest regional National Archives branch. Transfer to NARA facilities solves several problems:

- Records are often stored in substandard conditions and/or are in danger of loss or unauthorized destruction.
- Records are often disorganized, stored in more than one location, and the information they contain is generally inaccessible to managers.
- Many records no longer have an immediate business need; agencies can reclaim valuable storage space in offices and warehouses.

Direction and Guidance

Complete information, agency guidance and a variety of tools to manage incident records are available for download on the NWCG website, <https://www.nwcg.gov/notices#records>, under Incident Records.

Additional information and staff records training and guidance in fire records management is available from agency records managers and NARA. To contact NARA Records Management Program staff at your closest regional NARA facility go to <http://www.archives.gov/locations/>

Steps for Processing Legacy Fire Records

1. Make an Initial Assessment:

The first step is a survey of the unit's backlog of legacy fire records so a staged plan for transfer can be developed.

- What volume of old fire records does the unit have?
- Where are they located?
- What years are represented in the backlog?
- What is the condition of the records?
- How protected are they from environmental hazards and pests?

2. Determine Needs:

Familiarize staff with fire records retention policies and why the preservation of this historical information is essential to the mission of the agency. Determine staffing and training needs for performing the actual work.

- Those trained previously in managing legacy fire records can train/supervise subordinate employees in local units to do this work.
- Legacy records “strike teams” can travel to neighboring units to assist.
- Agencies can use contractors (trained non-federal employees supervised by agency staff) to do work.

3. Prioritize the work:

Begin with fire records that are most valuable, at greatest risk, and needing immediate attention. On units with large backlogs of historical fire records, give priority to:

- Records documenting fires where significant lessons were learned, natural resources affected, and/or private property destroyed.
- Records at risk because stored in unsafe or otherwise inappropriate locations.¹
- Records most fragile due to age or poor condition.
- Records containing important information not obtainable from any other source.
- Records stored on units with a serious lack of space.
- Records stored on units where a move is planned within the next 36 months.
- Records on units with the largest concentration of historical records and/or from individual incidents with the largest quantity of documentation.

4. Develop a Project Plan:

A *Project Plan for Legacy Records* has been developed and is available through Forest Service and DOI records managers to help in planning and implementing the processing of legacy fire records.

¹ Includes locations subject to daily or seasonal fluctuations in temperature or relative humidity, pest infestations, or disasters such as floods, hurricanes or fires. For prioritization, records housed in steel filing cabinets in a locked facility with sprinklers are safer than records in cardboard boxes stored in a wooden warehouse with no security or fire suppression systems.