



NATIONAL WILDFIRE COORDINATING GROUP

National Interagency Fire Center
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MEMORANDUM

Reference: NWCG#030-2010

To: NWCG Committee Chairs and Geographic Area Coordinating Group (GACG)

From: NWCG Chair *William Raage*

Date: July 8, 2010

Subject: Additional Guidance for Communicating about Managing Wildland Fire in light of Changes in Policy Guidance and Terminology

NWCG has developed the attached “Communicating about Managing Wildland Fire in light of Changes in Policy Guidance and Terminology” to help you talk about managing wildland fire. This communication tool recognizes the recent changes described in the 2009 Guidance for Implementation of the Federal Wildland Fire Management Policy and offers additional guidance on how we respond to and talk about fire. It is not meant to replace the first NWCG Memorandum, NWCG#024-2010, on consistent terminology posted at: <http://www.nwcg.gov/general/memos/nwcg-024-and-a-2010.pdf>.

Our goal is to communicate with the public using consistent approaches and themes, and communicate internally using consistent terminology, resulting in better understanding and support of wildland fire management. This understanding and support includes state and local agencies that provide for rapid and aggressive initial response to wildfires with the intent of minimizing damage and fire size on lands they protect, while also serving as active and involved partners on lands under federal protection.

The most effective way for us to communicate about fire with the public is to educate ourselves about what to say and how to say it, and allow each agency and partner to address its own audiences. Use plain language, without jargon or technical terms, to tell the story of how and why we manage fires.

Interagency communication and collaboration helps agencies manage multi-jurisdictional fires. Collaboration among federal, state, and local agencies is a year-round process, beginning when

we plan for a fire season, continuing through fire response and management, and concluding with after season reviews.

We do not propose to announce changes in policy guidance or terminology directly to the public because many of these changes are technical, internal to our bureaucracy, and do not enhance our ability to tell our story and interact with them. Instead, we propose helping the fire community frame and share fire messages, recognizing the recent policy guidance update. The attached communication tool will help agencies tell their fire response story.

Each fire season, the National Interagency Fire Center External Affairs Group identifies themes for communicating with all audiences including the public. The themes can be found at: http://www.nifc.gov/fire_info/PIO_bb/Season_Messages/2010_Themes.pdf

Attachment:
Communicating about Managing Wildland Fire in light of
Changes in Policy Guidance and Terminology

cc: NWCG Executive Board

Communicating about Managing Wildland Fire in light of Changes in Policy Guidance and Terminology

2009 Guidance for Implementation of Federal Wildland Fire Management Policy: What You Should Know

Current Federal Wildland Fire Management Policy was established in 1995 and updated in 2001. Guidance for carrying out the policy came out in 2003 and 2009 in response to various governmental reviews of wildland fire management. These reviews confirmed that the Wildland Fire Management Policy was sound, but that guidance for implementing the policy needed to be clarified and updated.

The most recent update, *Guidance for Implementation of Federal Wildland Fire Management Policy*, was issued in February 2009. In April 2010, NWCG issued a memorandum (NWCG#024-2010) releasing the new terminology. Excerpts include:

For both our internal and external audiences, we need to keep our terminology simple and continue to focus on telling our story versus getting caught up in explaining the difference between unplanned and planned ignitions and between wildfires and prescribed fires.

The simplest way to approach our story for wildland fire is to describe our actions by telling our cooperators, regulators, and the public what we are doing operationally, why we are taking these actions, and how these actions affect firefighters, the public and the social, ecological, and economic communities.

We should remember:

- Every fire requires a response and decision on how to deal with it.
- Initial action on human caused fires will be to suppress the fire while providing for firefighter and public safety, limiting damage and loss, and minimizing costs of the fire.
- The interagency nature of our work requires the involvement and participation of cooperators, both state and local agencies, in planning for and potentially helping us with our fire response actions.

Below is important information from the recent guidance and changes in terminology that will help you tell the story of wildland fire management to the public. The 2009 Guidance provides fire managers maximum flexibility for dealing with naturally occurring wildfire:

- Actions taken on a fire provide first for the safety of firefighters and the public. Fire management also takes into account the protection of homes and resources. Fire management objectives are established in Fire and Land Management Plans.
- We can manage fires using a broad range of actions, from full suppression to allowing a fire to take its natural course.
- With rare exceptions, state and local agencies support and carry out wildfire suppression programs that provide for rapid and aggressive initial response to wildfires with the intent of minimizing its spread. Federal agencies manage wildfires on federal lands considerate of protecting communities and other state or private resources.
- Interagency communication and collaboration enable agencies to manage multi-jurisdictional fires.
- We use technology and information, including a new tool called Wildland Fire Decision Support System (WFDSS) to assist in determining management actions.
- Fires managed for multiple objectives may have suppression resources concentrated on portions of the fire that are threatening lives, homes, critical infrastructure such as power lines, or other high-value natural resources. Fire managers may use less aggressive or minimal actions in other areas where the fire is accomplishing a benefit.

Terminology Changes: What You Should Know

Effective communication about fire is about telling a story. Removing jargon and addressing the “who, what, when, where, why, and how” helps others understand why we manage fires the way we do. Keep in mind these tips to avoid pitfalls:

- Under previous guidance, we talked about “wildland fire” being wildfire, wildland fire use, or prescribed fire. Now, we simply recognize wildland fire to be either wildfire (unplanned ignitions) or prescribed fire (planned ignitions).
- Under the new 2009 Policy Implementation Guidance, two terms became obsolete: wildland fire use and appropriate management response. Talk about these concepts by explaining incident objectives and acknowledging that many fires may have benefits—fire effects with positive outcomes.
- Fires can now be managed for multiple objectives, which may change as conditions on the fire change. So, talk instead about the current management objective(s) for a fire and the strategies and tactics being used to achieve them.

- Fires are no longer pigeon-holed into types such as “suppression fires” or “resource-benefit fires.”
- “Use of wildland fire” is an acceptable term meaning the management of wildfire or prescribed fire to meet objectives in land and resource management plans. Discuss where fire will be used to protect, maintain, and enhance resources consistent with management objectives.