BLM Fire and Aviation
2020 Public Information Officer Talking Points

These Bureau of Land Management (BLM) Fire and Aviation talking points provide current material for Public Information Officers (PIO) and other BLM employees. PIOs may use this material to communicate with media and the public about fire and aviation activities and wildland fire management. This document will be updated mid-summer and in the fall to ensure consistent and accurate information distribution, though please contact NIFC external affairs with questions at 208-387-5050.

2019 Fire Season

- The 2019 fire season was below normal for number of reported wildfires, at 75 percent of the 10-year average.

- There were 50,477 wildfires reported nationally, compared to 58,083 wildfires reported in 2018.

- The number of acres burned was also below normal in 2019, at 4,664,364 acres, which is 67 percent of the 10-year average, and far below the number of acres burned in 2018 (8,767,492).

- Of the nearly 4.7 million acres burned last year, 2.5 million of them burned in Alaska, accounting for more than half of the nation's total burned acreage.

- When compared with the 10-year average, only Alaska experienced above average acres burned, which was 194 percent above normal.

- All other geographic areas saw below average acres burned: Southwest (78 percent), Northern California (48 percent), Great Basin (42 percent), Eastern (38 percent), Southern Area (38 percent), Northwest (28 percent), Rocky Mountain (24 percent), Southern California (20 percent) and Northern Rockies (15 percent). Only 27 fires and complexes exceeded 40,000 acres in 2019, which is 21 fewer than 2018.

- A total of 963 structures were reported destroyed by wildfires in 2019, including 444 residences. This number was well below the annual average of 4,642, including 2,826 residences per year.

- California accounted for the highest number of structures lost in one state, with 569 structures lost, including 315 residences, in 2019. Alaska lost the second highest number of structures in one state with 149, including 57 residences.

- With the BLM Alaska Fire Service providing suppression services across more than half of the State of Alaska, including much of the Interior where the largest fires occurred, the BLM's share of the nation's total burned acreage nearly doubled in comparison to 2018 and prior years.

- Nationally, in 2019, 2,046 fires burned 2,024,554 acres (43 percent of all acres burned nationally) on BLM-managed public lands.

- An estimated total of $1.59 billion was spent for federal wildland firefighting nationally in 2019. Of the total, BLM spent $3.27 million on wildland fire suppression.

- COVID-19 - Updated wildland fire response and COVID-19 information and materials can be found on the NIFC PIO Bulletin Board.

Budget

- The 2018 Wildfire Suppression Funding and Forest Management Activities Act became effective in 2020 to address Department of the Interior (DOI) and USDA Forest Service wildland fire management funding.

- The Omnibus Bill provides a new funding structure from fiscal year 2020 through fiscal year 2027. Beginning in fiscal year 2020, DOI and U.S. Department of Agriculture will have $2.25 billion of new budget authority. The budget authority increases by $100 million each year, ending at $2.95 billion in new budget authority by fiscal year 2027.

- This new budget framework delineates consistent wildland fire program management funding to alleviate "fire borrowing," from other land management programs.

- The fiscal year 2020 appropriation added back the $10.6 million that was reduced from the BLM preparedness program in 2019, providing DOI with $333 million for fiscal year 2020. A $5 million increase was provided to the DOI's fuels program, which is now at $194 million. The DOI's Burned Area Recovery (BAR) and fire facilities programs remain at $20.4 million and $18.4 million respectively.

Safety

- Within BLM, safety is a priority of every program, from the most basic training to the most complex fireline operations. The safety of firefighters and the public is always the top priority.

- The BLM fire program experienced no fatalities in 2019 for the third year in a row. However, the national interagency wildland fire community experienced the tragic loss of nine individuals in 2019. These fatalities included contractors, municipal, state, local government, and federal firefighters.

- The BLM fire safety program continues to approach every wildland fire accident review with a focus on organizational learning and reoccurrence prevention.

Wildland Firefighter Mental Health

- BLM's top priority is the mental and physical safety of all wildland firefighters.

- BLM's goal is to provide mental health support for all wildland fire personnel, both on and off the fire line.

- In 2019, the National Wildfire Coordinating Group (NWCG) sanctioned a mental health subcommittee dedicated to providing support for wildland fire personnel.

- While the mental health subcommittee remains focused on delivering relevant and effective resources to the fire community, an additional task includes revising a preparedness publication for firefighters and their families.

» This preparedness publication is intended to support new and existing employees and their families as they navigate their firefighter career field.

» This is still a draft document, which means it will likely change before it's final - it has not been officially distributed to wildland fire personnel, though the goal is to have it finalized and distributed by spring of 2020.

- The BLM is also facilitating pre-incident education for BLM fire programs in each state. The training covers mental wellness, suicide awareness, and prevention.

Critical Incident Stress Management (CISM)

- This year, the BLM Fire and Aviation's Critical Incident Stress Management (CISM) program will be delivering multiple pre-incident education courses designed to provide employees with the knowledge and skills necessary to cope with traumatic events. These courses will occur in several states, with additional states planned for the next few years to reach as many BLM wildland fire personnel as possible.

Longer Fire Seasons

- Wildfire activity depends on a number of factors, including air temperature, soil moisture, relative humidity, and the presence and availability of fuels.

- Each of these factors are affected by climate variability, which can cause fuel moisture to drop and affect wildfire behavior. A warmer and dryer climate can increase drought, lengthening fire seasons.

- Although 2019 was an anomaly, over the last several decades, the number of wildfires, as well as severity and overall size, have increased across much of the United States.

- Future projections, based on forecasted climate scenarios, indicate an increase in expected wildfire severity, and an expansion of wildfire season over much of the Western United States. (Source: Liu and others, 2010; Liu and others, 2012; USGS Wildfire, 2013)

- Increased wildfire risk results in numerous side effects, including mitigation and suppression costs. As wildfires increase in frequency and size, federal and state agencies require additional budgeted funds to suppress these incidents.

- More frequent and intense wildfire activity also has an effect on public health due to smoke and its air quality effects, as well as increased risk to life and property.

- Additionally, the invasive weeds wildfire cycle is altering some ecosystems. For example, the Great Basin ecosystem is rapidly changing due to invasive annual grasses and increased wildfire activity.

Fire Prevention and Investigation

- The public plays a valuable role in preventing wildfires. The national average of human-caused wildfires comprises 87 percent of all wildfire occurrences every year. Most of these fires can be prevented.

- Preventable wildfires threaten lives, property, and precious resources every year. During the COVID-19 pandemic, firefighters are needed more than ever to keep Americans safe, so please, do your part to prevent human-caused wildfires.

- Be aware of local public safety area closures. Take extra precaution before venturing out and be careful with anything that could start a fire.

- Stay informed of current and predicted environmental conditions such as weather and drying vegetation. The National Significant Wildland Fire Potential Outlook can be found on the National Interagency Coordination Center website at predictiveservices.nifc.gov/outlooks/.

- Running out of home improvement projects? Consider making your property more resistant to wildfire. Take individual responsibility to reduce flammable material around homes and communities before a fire occurs to keep your property and firefighters safe. Learn more at www.firewise.org.

- Adhere to your state's outdoor burning guidance. Prior to burning, contact your local fire agency as smoke from open burning can cause unnecessary public health and safety concerns.

- Get involved with fire prevention; learn how to protect your community and keep your family safe from wildfire. There are many online resources, but you can start at BLM.gov: programs/public-safety-and-fire/fire-and-aviation/get-involved/fire-prevention

- The BLM is dedicated to actively investigating all human-caused fires. By learning about fire causes, we can work together to mitigate and prevent future ignitions.

- The number of human-caused fires on BLM-managed lands decreased by 27 percent in 2019, with acres burned from those fires down 79 percent from the 10-year average. Let's continue this positive trend with even less human-caused fires in 2020!

- The BLM pursues collection processes for fires that are negligently set to offset suppression costs paid by taxpayers. In 2019, BLM fire investigation personnel investigated 677 fires, established 262 active cases, and collected $2.3 million in funding. These collections benefit all aspects of the state fire programs, including additional human-caused wildfire prevention campaigns.

- The majority of BLM state offices issue prevention orders during the summer months, which restrict the use of tracer ammo, exploding targets, firecrackers, and other items that may spark a human-caused fire. It is important to check your local BLM office for specific order to see the timeframes and restrictions that may be present in your area.

Human Caused Fires on Public Lands

- In the United States, human caused fires comprise around 87 percent of all fire occurrences. On BLM-managed lands, natural ignitions (lightning) comprise over half of all wildfires. Human caused fires are most prevalent in the southeast and east, while natural ignitions are comparatively more prevalent in the west.

- Over the last 10 years, nearly 90 percent of all burned BLM acres started by natural ignitions, though human caused fires are a significant concern, since they often occur in urban areas and threaten human lives and property. Natural ignitions result in more acres as weather systems produce multiple starts, often in remote areas with longer response times, and wildfires grow larger before initial attack resources arrive.

- Research shows the top three human-caused wildfire ignitions on BLM-managed lands include those started by vehicles and roadside starts, equipment use, and outdoor burning. There is also a growing trend of fires started by fireworks and exploding targets and other shooting related fires.

- » Vehicles - roadside starts, off-highway use on dry grass, trailer malfunctions, etc.

- » Equipment - heavy machinery, power/cutting tools, farm equipment, etc.

- » Outdoor Burning - piles, debris, agriculture burning to remove crop residue, fence lines, burn barrels, etc.

#ReadyForWildfire campaign

- #ReadyForWildfire is a broad social media campaign illustrating BLM Fire and Aviation's preparations for the 2020 wildland fire year.

- This hashtag connects all topics related to COVID-19 wildfire response, firefighting resources, training, fuels management, fire weather briefings, recruitment, and fire prevention.

Community Assistance

- The BLM provided a record $6.9 million to communities at risk near BLM-managed lands for wildfire education, planning, and fuels treatments.

- The BLM also assisted 1,076 communities with wildfire mitigation and education projects that included fuels reduction on 9,592 non-federal acres, reduced wildfire risk to 6,016 homes, completed/updated 91 Community Wildfire Protection Plans, and sponsored 1,580 education events.

Rural Fire Readiness Program

- In fiscal year 2019, the BLM invested $1,049,500 to provide wildland fire training, establish and maintain agreements, and build relationships with local cooperators, such as fire departments and Rangeland Fire Protection Associations (RFPA). This year, the BLM distributed $1 million in Local Cooperator Assistance funds.

- Combined, the BLM conducted more than 462 training sessions with rural fire departments (RFD) and RFPA members. Collectively, the BLM provided training to 10,258 local cooperating firefighters in 2019.

- Under this program, the BLM and local cooperators have experienced an increase in communication, safety, and effectiveness on the fire line due to pre-season training and improved relationships.

- In fiscal year 2020, the BLM expects to transfer approximately 27 wildland fire engines to several volunteer fire departments, rural fire departments, and RFPAs. These vehicles will be equipped with $3,000 worth of firefighting tools, hose, and appliances.

Ensuring a Diverse and Inclusive Workforce

If PIOs receive media inquiries about firefighter diversity data and other national diversity related questions, they should refer inquiries to NIFC External Affairs at 208-387-5050.

- The BLM remains committed to growing a diverse and inclusive workforce. The BLM Fire and Aviation program supports diversity and inclusion goals outlined by the Office of Personnel Management, Department of the Interior, and BLM leadership.

- The BLM values a wide range of experiences and backgrounds from all its employees. However, it is apparent that some groups are struggling to be included within the fire culture. To address this issue, the BLM continues to focus on innovative solutions to improve the organization's workplace culture.

- To address workforce challenges, the BLM is focusing on high-priority workforce issues surrounding retention, recruitment, and career development.

- The BLM is focused on the need to more clearly tie the essential nature of diversity and inclusion to safety, risk management, decision-making, productivity, public service and mission accomplishment. Individuals from diverse backgrounds offer a selection of different talents, skills, and experiences that greatly improve the BLM Fire and Aviation program.

- Diversity also increases creativity, which allows us to have a more varied set of solutions to specific BLM Fire and Aviation issues. When employees feel comfortable, accepted, and included, they are able to creatively approach issues to find tangible solutions and, overall, cultivate an innovative organization.

Technology

Location based Services (LBS)

- The BLM is using Location Based Services (LBS) technology to track its fire vehicles.

- The goal of the LBS project is to equip all BLM Fire and Aviation 600-class fire vehicles with a Global Positioning System (GPS) satellite terminal to provide near real-time vehicle position and utilization (speed, heading, etc.) data.

- Vehicle position and utilization data will be visually displayed via a web-based portal or mobile device application. LBS combines current GPS technologies with BLM Fire and Aviation preparedness, dispatch, and suppression programs to enhance situational awareness, safety, and operational efficiency.

- LBS units will be operational on 705 BLM fire vehicles during the 2020 fire season.

InFORM

- The new fire reporting system, Interagency Fire Occurrence Reporting Modules (InFORM), is designed to modernize and streamline wildfire reporting by providing a single, nationwide system of record for both federal and state agencies.

- InFORM will eliminate redundant data entry, improve the quality and completeness of fire data, and provide easier data access. Phase one replaced the Fire Reporting Module of the Wildland Fire Management Information (WFMI) system in January 2020.

IROC

- The Interagency Resource Ordering Capability (IROC) is a dynamic, modern, flexible and scalable application that aligns with interagency business needs for all hazard incident resource ordering. IROC will be web-based and support both PCs and mobile devices.

- The application will be used by fire managers throughout the country to request fire personnel and equipment and concurrently track resource location. This cloud-based system will replace the ROSS (Resource Ordering and Status System) and provide a higher level of integration with other major applications for interagency dispatch center operations.

IRWIN 6.0

- The next version of Integrated Reporting of Wildland-Fire Information (IRWIN) will focus on the integration of resource data (i.e. the location/status of aircraft, engines, and crews). This integration will include applications like IROC, several computer-aided dispatch systems, both qualification systems, and "Roll Call," a new IRWIN-created tool used to manage the status of tactical resources. This update will assist with decision making by allowing fire managers to see resource commitment levels across agency boundaries.

FireNet

- FireNet made the transition to Microsoft in April 2020.

- NMAC recommends the use of FireNet for official email usage on an incident.

UAS

- The BLM will continue Unmanned Aircraft Systems (UAS) use for approved wildland fire incidents pursuant to the DOI Secretarial Order 3379 (SO 3379) issued on January 29, 2020. Secretarial Order 3379 limits UAS activity to emergency operations and emergency readiness flights.

- The BLM is supporting wildland fire programs with UAS aerial ignition, mapping, and situational awareness missions with 66 UAS pilots.

Inciweb

For InciWeb assistance, contact the Interagency Incident Applications Help Desk online at https://iiahelpdesk.nwcg.gov/

- InciWeb is a public information sharing website for current wildfires, fire-related activities and all-hazard incidents, and is a nationally and internationally recognized source for current wildfire information.

- The BLM posts wildfire incidents on InciWeb if they last beyond one or two operational periods and/or if they affect the public. There are no InciWeb incident posting criteria, however, InciWeb is only for active, current incidents, and is not intended for archival or historical purposes.

BLM Resources

- The BLM will have the following resources for the 2020 fire season (as of May, 2020):

  » 13 hotshot crews

  » 14 Type 2 initial attack (IA) crews (including five veteran crews)

  » 140 smokejumpers with eight smokejumper planes

  » 2,715 preparedness personnel

  » 276 engines

  » 40 heavy equipment apparatus (dozers, etc.)

  » 34 Exclusive Use (EU) SEATs with 100 on-call contracts (including EU)

  » Four Fire Boss water scoopers

  » 19 tactical and support aircraft

  » 25 EU helicopters (1 Type 1, 7 Type 2, 17 Type 3)

Legislation and Directives

- S.47, the John D. Dingell Jr. Conservation, Management, and Recreation Act (Dingell Act):

  » The BLM is currently working to meet the wildfire technology provisions within the Dingell Act, including managing a robust UAS program; implementing LBS technology; and applying the Wildland Fire Decision Support System (WFDSS) used by fire managers to make strategic and tactical wildland fire incident decisions.

  » BLM Fire and Aviation will continue to implement the Dingell Act provisions in concurrence with funding and operational capabilities.

- Executive Order 13855:

  » In late December 2018, President Trump issued Executive Order 13855 titled "Promoting Active Management of America's Forests, Rangelands and Other Federal Land to Improve Conditions and Reduce Wildfire Risk".

  » In response to Executive Order 13855, DOI issued Secretarial Order 3372, "Reducing Wildfire Risks on The Department of the Interior Land Through Active Management", which allows DOI agencies to build on existing practices, promote fire-adapted communities, continue safe and effective wildfire response, and create fire resilient landscapes.

  » The orders direct the BLM to implement policies to improve forest and rangeland management practices by reducing hazardous fuel loads, mitigating fire risk and ensuring the safety and stability of local communities through active management on forests and rangelands.

  » The BLM fuels management program is focused on active management to reduce wildfire risk, improve wildfire resiliency, and promote fire-adapted communities. The fuels program supports goals in Secretarial Order 3372.

» The BLM fuels program focuses on reducing wildfire risk through proactive fuels treatments by creating fuel breaks to provide safe access for firefighters, reducing fuel loads by removing pinon-juniper and invasive species, reducing fire risk near communities, targeted grazing, and herbicide plus seeding to break the fire-cheatgrass cycle.

» Fuels management projects consider the full scope of work – planning, implementation, and monitoring – needed to achieve a coordinated landscape approach to reducing wildfire risk and restoring wildfire resiliency, and typically take several years to complete.

Veterans

• BLM Fire and Aviation is committed to serving veterans and continues to explore opportunities for veteran recruitment, training, and development.

• The BLM was the first agency to establish all-veteran firefighting crews. Currently, the BLM has eight veteran hand crews, two of which are Type I hotshot crews.

• BLM's veteran wildland fire crews operate out of stations in Arizona, Oregon, Nevada, California, Montana, Wyoming, and Washington.

• These crews consist of people who have transferred their love of public service to protecting America's public lands.

• The BLM will continue to work with various veteran organizations and military transition assistance programs to find and connect veterans with BLM Fire and Aviation career opportunities.

BLM's Fuels Management Program

• The BLM fuels management program is focused on active management to reduce wildfire risk, improve wildfire resiliency, and promote fire-adapted communities. The fuels program supports goals of the National Cohesive Strategy and Secretarial Order 3372.

• The BLM fuels program focuses on reducing wildfire risk through proactive fuels treatments by treating fuels, including creating fuel breaks, to provide safe access for firefighters, reducing fuel loads by removing pinon-juniper and invasive species, reducing fire risk near communities, targeted grazing, and herbicide plus seeding to break the fire-cheatgrass cycle.

• Fuels management projects consider the full scope of work – planning, community assistance, implementation, and monitoring – needed to achieve a coordinated landscape approach to reducing wildfire risk and restoring wildfire resiliency, and typically take several years to complete.

• Fuels treatments are prioritized to address areas where values are at high risk from wildfire. For the BLM, a large portion of fuels treatments occur on grassland/shrubland vegetation types. More than 70 percent of all acres burned in the West over the last 20 years were in grassland/shrubland, with the majority occurring in cheatgrass-invaded landscapes.

• In 2020, the BLM is planning more than 600,000 acres of fuels management work across all vegetation types to reduce conifer encroachment (33 percent of total acres planned), remove invasive species (23 percent), improve wildfire resilience (23 percent), and protect critical values (21 percent), with over 50 percent of the acres planned within or adjacent to the Wildland Urban Interface (WUI).

- In fiscal year 2019, the BLM treated approximately 486,000 acres within the WUI and 360,000 acres in non-WUI, for a total of more than 846,000 acres treated.

- The BLM was able to treat additional acres that meet both fuels and resource objectives with additional funding provided by BLM's fire and resource programs, as well as contributed funding from state, counties, private, and other federal agency funding.

Fuel Breaks

- Wildfires in the sagebrush steppe expand quickly and can affect hundreds of thousands of acres. Established fuel breaks are a useful tool that can be used to manage the size and severity of wildfires. Fuel breaks often slow and sometimes stop fire spread, though fire suppression resources must be present to ensure fuel break effectiveness.

- Fuel breaks provide a safe space for firefighters to actively engage in fire suppression operations. They also allow firefighters to maximize fire suppression capabilities.

- BLM's Fire and Aviation program plans to implement more than 1,000 miles of new linear fuel breaks this fiscal year while maintaining an additional 1,131 miles of existing fuel breaks. Fuel breaks must be regularly maintained to ensure their effectiveness.

- There are numerous fuel break effectiveness instances. For example:

  » In 2018, several wildfires actively burned thousands of acres of BLM Oregon's Medford District. These wildfires intersected approximately 2,000 acres of hazardous fuels reduction projects within the WUI.

  » Firefighters were able to directly attack the flaming fronts because the fuel breaks reduced fire intensity, slowed flame spread, and reduced flame lengths.

  » This allowed firefighters to contain and control the fire in a safe, effective manner, preventing the potential loss of nearby homes, infrastructure, and precious natural resources.

  » In the areas where fuels treatments were completed, fire remained almost exclusively on the ground (surface fire), which reduced soil and tree damage and resulted in less tree mortality compared to untreated areas. Fewer spot fires occurred in treated areas, and those that started were easily contained.

- Strategic fuels treatment and fuel break locations provide safe anchor points for firefighters' burnout operations along roads; increase fire retardant capabilities; and provide for more efficient fire line construction in treated areas.