

I hope this finds everyone enjoying their summer!

Hard for me to believe that it is already the first day of August. On one hand it feels like summer is just flying by. On the other hand, with the early onset of an active fire season here in the Northern Region, it feels like we have a long summer to go! With that in mind, I wanted to send a quick update on what is occurring.

The fire situation across the region has become increasingly challenging over the last few weeks. Although we had a very wet winter and spring in the western part of the region it has been dry since about mid-May. The Eastern part of the region did not have the same wet winter or spring and is in various stages of drought. These variables, coupled with storms that moved through over the last few weeks, prolonged hot temperatures, and wind made for all the right conditions for things to really start taking hold and grow.

As Dave, Jane and I have been out and about visiting with folks, we have all been very appreciative and thankful for the work, dedication, and support of all of our employees, cooperators, partners, and community members. I know you all have access to the daily situation report so I won't go into detail on all of our fires. I thought I would give you a little bit of perspective, however, from recent visits.

Over the last several weeks I have visited with several of our employees and partners to see how things were going and how everyone is holding up. Overall, everyone seems to be hanging in there. This early in the season that is not surprising. I have found, however, what I would term uncharacteristic levels of fatigue. Folks are tired. Although our season here has really just started, our employees have been out and about for several months helping in other parts of country with their busy fire seasons (e.g. Region 8, Region 3, Region 4). There is no such thing as an off-season. It is fire season somewhere throughout the year. This takes a toll on everyone. Employees that travel to assist, employees that are at home holding down the fort and keeping everything else going, and families and loved ones that support each and every one of us. And of course we still have every other part of our work that is going full speed. Fire is just one element of our conservation mission. Cumulatively the sustained pace of our work and how individuals respond and adjust to the pace is noticeable and something we are keenly aware of and paying attention too. At the same time, even though difficult and very emotional on so many fronts, folks attitudes are staying positive and I can tell they are really watching out for each other.

Specific to fires, the three forests that have been hit the hardest to date are the Lolo, Beaverhead-Deerlodge and Helena-Lewis & Clark. We have multiple fires ongoing on these three units. In many of these areas we do have ongoing evacuations; many impacting our employees personally and their families, friends, and loved ones. On the Seeley Lake Ranger District, Lolo National Forests, we had the tragic death of Trenton Johnson, a 19 year old Grayback fire fighter contractor working on one of our fires. Trenton is missed by many including his sister who works as a Forest Service employee on the District. Words cannot describe the deep sorrow and sense of helplessness and loss when such a tragedy occurs. It has impacted all of us here in the region and throughout the agency.

We continue to have initial response throughout the Region and are busy strategizing and assessing anticipated conditions over the next few weeks and into the fall. Although many of these fires may not be our jurisdiction (e.g. Lodgepole Complex in Eastern Montana currently at approximately 250,000 + acres) we have resources supporting efforts. We are all in it together and will continue to work together as the season progresses.

Fires that are burning are experiencing fire behavior that is erratic, fast growing and in many cases exhibiting traits that do not allow us to take immediate suppression activities. We continue to be aggressive where we need to be and where we can have some measure of success. More importantly we are being aggressive at not engaging where it is not safe and/or will not make a difference on the ground. In addition, we are constantly assessing what is needed on the ground. We live and work in a part of the country where the vast beauty around us depends on having fire present. We need fire, and in actuality, we need more fire across the Northern Region.

We have, however, a lot of areas that now have people, structures and a different playing field than historically. All of this ties into our decision process as mother nature continues to remind us she is around.

We continue to ask questions, be curious and really take a hard look at exposure. Due to the hard work of many of our scientists and others we have some tremendous analytical tools and abilities for real-time information that has not been available in the past. We are starting to use these new tools to help our Incident Commanders and Agency Administrators have a dialogue on engagement and strategies. Those tools, combined with experience, local knowledge, historical records, and current conditions continue to allow us to build upon successes, learn from things that were not so successful and make the best decisions we can. Always remembering to stop, think, talk....then act, is imperative-- always has been and still is.

There are a lot of moving pieces. Everyone is concentrating on one step at a time. It continues to be a privilege to work with employees from across the agency, partners and members of communities. I can never express enough the deep appreciation I have for all they are doing and continue to do. This is true during our fire season and just as importantly this is true all year round. We are moving fast and continuing to work to figure out ways to be able to do work on the ground for the resources and communities. This sounds great and in some ways so simple, but as you all know from your careers and years of working for the Agency, it is never as easy as it sounds and it takes working across landscapes, ownerships and with other agencies, local governments, Tribes, volunteers, and partners. We have a lot of successes and are building on these successes. It is a marathon , not a sprint.

Some links that you may be interested in for more fire detailed information include:

Northern Rockies Coordination Center: <http://gacc.nifc.gov/nrcc>

Montana DNRC fire and aviation: <http://dnrc.mt.gov/divisions/forestry/fire-and-aviation>

IDL: <https://www.idl.idaho.gov/fire/>

ND: <https://www.ag.ndsu.edu/ndfs/programs-and-services/fire-management>

SD: <https://sdda.sd.gov/wildland-fire/>

GACC Portal: <http://gacc.nifc.gov>

Incident website information: <http://inciweb.nwcg.gov>

As always, I appreciate the support you show our employees. Please do not hesitate to give Dave, Jane or I a call if you have questions or are wondering about something you have heard or read. We will make sure to get another update out to all of you in the near future.

Leanne

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