

R-5 Fire Update – December 27, 2017

I wanted to give everyone an update on the Thomas fire and the fires in general we have had this year here in the Region. We have been working hard to find more efficient and safer ways to respond to wildfires. Sadly, we have come to the realization that there is no “season” for fires these days. In October, even though the fires in Northern California did not occur on Forest Service lands, the Pacific Southwest Region worked with partner agencies to help battle these fires. Due to the fire activity, Forest Service seasonal wildland firefighters were extended. At the height of response, just under 2,000 Forest Service firefighters were mobilized to the wind event fires in Northern California. In addition to the crews, we provided engines, aircraft, dozers and water tender, as well as other support and overhead functions.

Just as the Northern California fires were under control, more fires started in Southern California in early December. Driven by fierce Santa Ana winds, the fires quickly spread in Los Angeles, Ventura and San Diego counties. Through initial attack, most of the fires were quickly contained, however, multiple fires required extended attack under unified command with counties or CALFIRE. The Thomas Fire is now the second largest (more than likely it will be the largest soon) fire in California history, burning more than 272,800 acres and destroying more than 1,100 structures. More than 140,000 of the acres burned are on the Los Padres National Forest. Crews from over a dozen forests in California and several other regions have assisted with these fires. Following the end of their 1039 appointments, numerous seasonal firefighters have been recalled as ADs to assist with the incidents. Firefighters have made great progress and have protected thousands of structures. The fire is currently 65 percent contained. We remain ever vigilant of the volatile weather and fire conditions and are prepared to mobilize personnel and resources as the situation dictates.

On Dec. 14, CAL FIRE firefighter Cory Iverson tragically lost his life while working on the Thomas Fire. Iverson, 32, was an engineer for the CAL FIRE San Diego Unit. Iverson worked briefly in 2012 for the Forest Service as a member of the Bear Divide Hotshots in Santa Clarita, California. He will be remembered for his passion and dedication to firefighting, and how his efforts lifted everyone he worked with.

Despite record-breaking rains last winter, the effects of five consecutive years of severe drought in California, a dramatic rise in bark beetle infestation and rising temperatures have led to historic levels of tree die-off. The Forest Service’s latest aerial survey found that an additional 27 million trees, mostly conifers, died throughout California since November 2016, bringing the total number of trees that have died to drought and bark beetles to an historic 129 million on 8.9 million acres. To ensure public safety, we will continue to focus on removing hazard trees and reducing risks to communities and critical infrastructure. We will also focus on hazardous fuels reduction and addressing forest density by thinning the forests to make them more resilient to wildfire and drought events in the future. However, in order to increase the pace and scale of this important work, we need to fix how fire suppression is funded. Last year, fire management alone consumed 56 percent of the Forest Service's national budget. As fire suppression costs continue to grow as a percentage of the Forest Service's budget, funding is shrinking for non-fire programs that protect watersheds and restore forests, making them more resilient to wildfire and drought.

We have seen many transitions in leadership throughout our agency; however, the work we do and the goals we strive to achieve remain the same. We will continue to work efficiently, effectively and with integrity while serving others.

Wishing you a safe and happy holidays!

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