

NAFSR Fire Committee with Deputy Chief's Office
Zoom Meeting
June 12, 2023

Attending from FS WO; Jaelith Hall-Rivera, Deputy Chief, Jeff Marsolais (ADC) and Jerry Perez, Fire Director. From the Fire Committee; Tom Zimmerman, Syndy Zerr, Steve Eubanks, and Joe Stutler; Johnny was there from NAFSR.

Questions for Jaelith and Jerry.

1. The recent request from Canada for large support revealed a significant soft spot from an overhead and IMT response capability, it took many GAs to fill one IMT, granted the request had some restrictions e.g., federal only and no ADs. We had a similar issue last spring in the SW with unavailable overhead and logistical support. Are we really prepared for fire years vs traditional fire seasons?

***Response:** Bottom line is yes, the soft spot was visible not only for FS but others, recognizing there is work to do with language for fire year vs. fire season and language in the agreement to reflect interagency engagement e.g., local government and ADs, will be continuing to support Canada as we prepare for US fire year 2024. In addition, the Canada wildfire situation has caused marked and even critical impacts to personal health, economics, and transportation systems in both Canada and the US. This situation, while unfortunate, has occurred during a time of national meetings with congressional leaders and EPA and brings to the forefront the situations that our guiding strategic documents are predicting. It has helped to illuminate the need for stronger pre-fire mitigation activities and increased response preparedness.*

2. Can the language in the international agreements be changed to reflect an interagency response including ADs?

***Response:** NIFC interagency community is working on what changes can be made to be more inclusive of response. Many states are using compacts to mobilize resources as well...*

3. What are the accurate response/support numbers in terms of vacancies? I'm hearing 25% down for response and the dispatch system is woefully understaffed, are these numbers accurate? If so, what messages are going to AAs in term of expectations for strategies and tactics?

***Response:** Some Regions and some Forests are doing well, and others are not. Latest numbers for FS is 10,068 hired, target is 11,300 for GS-9 and lower and still hiring. There is a website that track hiring/staffing at*

[Wildland Firefighting Workforce | US Forest Service \(usda.gov\)](https://www.usda.gov/wildland-firefighting-workforce)

Agency leadership continue to work with AAs in training and assignments to understand capacity, strategy and tactics, recognizing there are many new AAs in the system with little complex incident management experience.

4. What is the FS assessment of progress with the 10-year strategy? We continue to hear lack of capacity concerns.

Response: *Fundamentally agency leadership has been focused on removing barriers and changing systems to allow the agency to implement the 10 year strategy and the Cohesive Strategy. Examples are the use and increased use of the private wildland fire service contract crews for Rx fire and fuels treatment, many are utilizing this process; ALL T2 crews and ALL VIPER resources are now available for use to implement the 10 year strategy and fire crisis.*

There have been the highest level meeting with the administration addressing the crisis and with EPA during the latest smoke issue in the NE US...many congressional staffers and elected are getting the message on wildland fire and understand the needs of firefighter pay, health, retention and recruitment. There is lots of focus on the "Emergency Action Portal" by AAs to expedite implementation and remove barriers; the 300 hour cap on using ADs to implement Rx fire and fuels treatment has been removed...many more examples were given.

A new agreement called Keystone allows organizations with plenty of capacity to assist with implementation e.g., RMEF, TNC has been signed to move large sums of implementation \$'s for the 10 year strategy. The 'Keystone Agreements', i.e., between \$40m and \$100m+ to NGOs (for IRA/WUI projects).

5. What is the fallback strategy if the firefighter pay doesn't become permanent and will the dispatchers be included this time? What happens if we end the fiscal year in a CR?

Response: *Many people are aware of the implications of not achieving a permanent fix to pay, retention, recruitment, health, and other issues and from the Secretaries and agency heads and staff all are focused on a legislative fix and are working on contingencies. Jerry also mentioned that some state foresters are expressing concerns about the proposed fed pay increases and how that may affect their state wildland FF staffing and recruitment.*

6. Has any progress been made on the White Paper signed by the ICAC council titled "Dignified Transportation of Deceased Firefighter from Incident" based on last year's Moose Fire. (See attached). These recommendations came to NMAC and the FS in early December 2022.:

Response: *Sarah Fisher at NIFC is taking the lead for the FS along with interagency partners to resolve these issues, and agreement this needs to be addressed in contracts, FS manuals and handbooks and changing a CFR.*

Other Issues that Surfaced:

Due to competing interests, we expect the Chief's 2024 fire year letter to be coming soon, the FS WO understands and shares the concern.

FS WO folks are appreciative of congressional testimony, wildland fire management papers, Wildland Fire Commission staffing/expertise and a host of other accomplishments by NAFSR and want to continue this relationship, have both scheduled and impromptu calls if necessary.

Further engagement is NAFSR using our voice for the National Cohesive Wildland Fire Strategy and specifically the REFRESH, just issued in early May...member support of this effort will be appreciated; NAFSR can stay engaged with any and all smoke related issues at the federal and state level. The common ground is public health and reducing long term smoke from wildland fire through both Rx fire and other active management on public lands.