

funding for pre-positioning resources on a local basis is a critical part of preparedness. Differences in the use of emergency firefighting appropriations among agencies also inhibit cooperation on prescribed fire actions. In addition, a budget problem common among Federal agencies and a barrier to full effectiveness in fire suppression is that fire organizations are often funded at less than the Most Efficient Level (MEL) for preparedness. This requires shifting funds from emergency suppression to pre-positioning resources.

Standardization of budget processes and solution of some of these budget barriers would help to incrementally improve fire suppression.

A few current personnel policies have an adverse effect on Federal employees' pay while on a fire. As a result, employees are not always interested in supporting the fire suppression mission of the agencies. In some geographic areas, primarily California, the annual wage of entry-level Federal firefighters is lower than State and local firefighter salaries. Federal agencies are training firefighters only to lose qualified people to other fire-service agencies. And the Fair Labor Standards Act creates disparity in pay between exempt and nonexempt employees. In addition, the policy for hiring temporary employees is cumbersome and time consuming; these short-term employees have a restricted work year and in many geographic areas are not on the rolls long enough for the agencies to provide necessary training prior to the fire season.

Preparedness planning is critical to ensure that imminent fire situations are recognized, an appropriate level of fire protection is provided in support of land and resource management goals and objectives, and that appropriate priorities are established and actions taken. The absence of carefully developed and specific preparedness plans frequently results in poor decisions that lead to costly operational mistakes or unsafe practices during emergency situations. In contrast, well-prepared fire suppression plans generally result in smaller fires that are less costly to suppress and cause minimal damage to property and natural resources.

Reorganization and downsizing efforts are compelling Federal agencies to look at new ways to accomplish their programs, including firefighting. Retirements and organizational changes have changed the demographics and experience levels within the fire program. In some cases, agency administrators and fire management officers do not have the same level of

experience in fire management oversight as did their predecessors. Managers are often not rewarded for success or given incentives to improve. Further, the demands created by more complex natural resource issues and multiple program priorities have diverted administrators' attention away from the fire management program. Lack of oversight and attention to preparedness can result in crisis decision making. When fires become emergencies, public and political pressures may take precedence over suppression plans that are based on values at risk.

Values-at-risk estimates have been commonly used to determine strategies for large-fire suppression. Only losses in values have been considered in these calculations, because in the suppression operations, the objective as predetermined in land use plans is to put the fire out at the least total cost, which is the value of the resources (values at risk) plus suppression costs. While fire benefits have been considered in planning the fire forces for budget allocations, positive benefits of fires have not been factored into the formulation, or choice, of suppression strategies.

Use of values at risk in fire suppression has not been consistent across agencies, and the definition is too narrow without considering fire benefits as well. As mentioned above, in some cases it has been disregarded entirely. These practices contribute, sometimes significantly, to inflated fire suppression costs. The values at risk concept needs to be revised to reflect present recognition of the positive benefits of fire as compatible with agency land use objectives, as well as the need for a broader range of strategic suppression alternatives for large fires to hold costs in check and recognize limits of firefighting resources.

Standard criteria have been established to guide fire suppression priorities. These are based on the potential for the fire to destroy: (1) Human life, (2) property, and (3) resource values. Human life remains the first priority; however, a rigid second priority of property over natural resource values is being questioned by fire managers. It does not allow for flexibility to consider low-value properties relative to higher-valued natural resources. And property protection as a rigid priority is a significant contributor to inflated suppression costs as well as increased size of wildfires when limited suppression resources are concentrated to protect property. More flexibility is needed to assess the relative values

between property and natural resources in order to achieve economic efficiency.

The need for better advance preparation and more effective suppression has never been greater. The overall efficiency and effectiveness of the Federal wildland fire protection effort can be improved through consistency and better coordination. Policies and practices that have been tested and found to be inadequate can be improved through some very specific actions.

#### *Goal—Safety*

Federal employees are committed to "Zero Tolerance" of carelessness and unsafe actions.

#### *Actions*

- Federal agencies will support and enforce direction by the Secretaries of the Interior and Agriculture that:
  - Safety comes first on every fire, every time.
  - The Ten Standard Fire Orders are firm. We don't break them; we don't bend them.
  - All firefighters have the right to a safe assignment.
  - Every firefighter, every fireline supervisor, every fire manager, and every agency administrator has the responsibility to ensure compliance with established safe firefighting practices.
- Federal agencies will adopt a policy that is consistent with the Secretaries' direction for fire management safety.

#### *Goal—Values At Risk*

Federal agencies maintain preparedness planning and suppression programs that prevent unacceptable loss from fire by implementing consistent strategies based on estimates of suppression costs and damages together with benefits that may result from wildfire.

#### *Actions*

- Federal agencies will:
- Jointly redefine values at risk and clarify measures of damage and benefits that may result from fire. This will be incorporated into mobilization guides and action plans and inserted into all national training.
  - Include risk assessment in preparedness planning, with firefighter safety as a primary component.
  - Complete fire preparedness plans utilizing an interagency approach that incorporates values at risk and benefits to resources, consistent with land and resource management plans.
  - Consider a full range of suppression strategies that incorporates estimated damage and benefits to resources,