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Measuring Suppression, Fuels Accomplishments by Steps and Strides: A Preseason View

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It's said that a journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step. Likewise, every year the most daunting, arduous, and longest fire line is constructed one shovel-full at a time; one swing of a pulaski, one roaring air tanker drop, one hose stream of water after another. It may take hours. It may take days. At times, a fire rages back and takes the upper hand. But eventually diligence and dedication win out. One by one, wildfires across the country are surrounded and contained. Missions are accomplished; and fire crews, equipment, and aircraft move on to the next blaze.

Already this spring the headlines are warning of yet another potentially serious fire season in 2004. News reports, using words like "dire" and "grim" to describe the outlook, cite continuing drought conditions and forecasts for a hot and abnormally dry summer in many areas of the West. They also point to the thousands of acres already scorched this spring in Colorado and Arizona as harbingers of what's to come.

As far as we know, those predictions are accurate. We are indeed facing another summer of continuing drought, high temperatures, dry landscapes, and the potential for a fire season that may rival that of 2000, 2002, and other severe years of the past. And just as in the past, we will meet those challenges head-on; professionally, safely, and with diligence and dedication. Firefighters are prepared, and will again construct fire line, as much as it takes, one piece at a time.

While those steps continue to be taken, and strides are achieved in the suppression realm, we are also making progress in a journey of a different, but related, sort. This new journey - that of reducing hazardous fuels near communities and across the landscape - is being undertaken with equal commitment and diligence. Although the road ahead is long, we are making remarkable headway acre by acre. With the Healthy Forest Initiative and the Healthy Forests Restoration Act now in place, we have gained new tools that will help us pick up the pace.

Assessments across the nation following the 2000 fire season identified 190 million acres of public land, across all agencies, that were in need of treatment to reduce hazardous fuels, better protect communities, and restore the health of the land. At the same time, about 11,000 communities in the vicinity of federal lands were deemed at risk from wildfire.

Initially, those numbers were staggering. For fire managers, it was similar to a firefighter looking up at a towering mountain over which a fire line must be constructed. But like that firefighter, we took first one step, then another, and another. Collectively, we have turned those steps into strides.

In the BLM alone, treatments were accomplished on 267,570 acres of wildland-urban interface lands last year, up from 98,590 acres in 2001. Hazardous fuels treatments outside of the wildland-urban interface areas last year totaled 313,416 acres, up from 215,388 in 2001. As of

early April 2004, a total of 192,042 acres of treatments have been accomplished, of which 98,125 acres are in areas near communities. Roughly twice that total acreage is still planned for this year.

These accomplishments have been achieved by forming partnerships and collaborating with citizen groups, interested stakeholders, other federal agencies, and local, tribal, and state government entities. These accomplishments also are in addition to the strides we've made in fire education for the public, and in assisting small community fire departments to enhance their capabilities. Combine the BLM achievements to date with other federal and state agencies and it's evident we are making tremendous progress, both separately and collectively.

There is no doubt, however, that we have a long journey ahead of us. There also is no doubt that we will continue striving to achieve that next step, that next stride; or that we will continue to work together with our counterparts, and the public, and homeowners to accomplish fuels and risk reductions across boundary lines.

So what do the accomplishments so far mean? It means that this summer, when firefighters are building fire line one shovel-full at a time, their work may be a little safer and more efficient where treatments have been done. It means that more communities can rest a little easier, knowing their exposure to wildfire and its consequences have been minimized. It means that one more fire may not become a deadly and catastrophic event.

Finally, it means we are well on our way on this journey. Like the firefighter diligently clearing fuel far up the line but with miles to go, we are leaving a solid path in our wake and progressing forward. The work we are doing together is helping make the land healthier and our communities safer. We are making a difference. And we will continue.

Let's all have a safe summer.

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