



## **International Arrangements on the Sharing of Wildland Fire Suppression Resources between the United States of America and Australia and New Zealand**

### **Background**

The wildland fire season in the United States during 2000 was the worst fire season in more than 50 years. Almost 100,000 fires consumed more than 2.8 million hectares of forest and range lands. This was approximately twice the U.S. ten-year average. The season was long and difficult and firefighters faced dangerous burning conditions throughout the western U.S.

At the height of the fire season in late August, the U.S. interagency wildland fire community, which consists of federal, state, and local resources, had mobilized more than 20,000 civilian fire fighters, approximately 4,000 soldiers and marines and thousands of other support personnel in dispatch centers, warehousing facilities, and administrative centers throughout the country.

Faced with this unprecedented situation, and with a forecast for a continuing hot and dry weather pattern, fire managers realized they would need to reach beyond U.S. borders for assistance. During the remainder of the 2000 fire season, the U.S. received assistance from more than 1200 Canadian firefighters, 96 fire specialists from Australia and New Zealand and 20 Mexican firefighters. These additional resources performed important roles in the U.S. fire fighting efforts. Some international fire fighters provided much needed support to fire crews on the fireline while others performed as middle managers on incident management teams. International agreements with Canada and Mexico were in place prior to the 2000 fire season but none existed with Australia and New Zealand.

### **Why Did the U.S. go to Australia and New Zealand?**

U.S. fire managers have had informal *study group* exchanges with Australia and New Zealand for more than 20 years. These exchanges provided opportunities to share information about each other's programs and experiences. Based on that exchange relationship and the knowledge of the Australian and New Zealand firefighting systems, when the U.S. fire situation reached a critical level in 2000, the U.S. approached Australia and New Zealand and asked for their help. The 96 fire experts that came to the U.S. were integrated into the U.S. fire fighting organization where they served in middle management positions on fires, freeing up U.S. fire managers to take on more critical tasks.

### **The Relationship in 2000**

The justification for seeking the assistance of Australia and New Zealand in 2000 was based on an *assumption* that a U.S. Public Law called the "Wildfire Suppression Assistance Act," gave the authority to the U.S. Secretaries of the Interior and Agriculture to enter into assistance agreements, especially because of the critical situation facing fire managers on the fire lines. U.S. fire managers, who coordinated this activity during 2000, did not understand the clearance and vetting processes required by the U.S. Department of State prior to putting Australia and New Zealand fire fighters in harms way on the fire lines. Fortunately, no serious incidents occurred, and all of the Australian and New Zealand firefighters returned home safely and from all accounts, they performed ably and were a credit to their countries.

When the 2000 fire season was over, U.S. fire managers understood that the assumed authority used to bring Australia and New Zealand fire fighters over would not be viable in the future. And the biggest issue that arose was a concern about tort claim liability. Solicitors and risk managers from Australia and New Zealand, upon review of U.S. law did not feel that their firefighters were provided sufficient legal coverage by the U.S., if an Australian or New Zealand firefighter, even properly performing his duties, was involved in unforeseen fire line incident which caused injury or damage to other parties. New arrangements needed to be developed and signed by all parties before the U.S. could once again request and receive help from Australia and New Zealand.

### **The 2001 Christmas Fires in Southeastern Australia**

The devastating fires around Sydney and other areas of southeast Australia in 2001, like the U.S. fires in 2000, drew worldwide attention. The U.S., trying to return the favor of help that it received in 2000, offered to provide some assistance. Thanks to a break in the weather, the professionalism of their fire fighters, and to the incorporation of some lessons learned from their experiences in the U.S. in 2000, Australian fire managers were able to control their fires. However, had U.S. help been needed, the ability and timeliness of the U.S. to provide assistance would have been greatly hampered by the lack of signed arrangements and operating plans. This once again highlighted the need for the completion of more formal arrangements and protocols between the countries which would meet the concerns of all parties.

### **The 2002 U.S. Fire Season**

After a quiet wildland fire season in 2001 in the U.S., the 2002 wildland fire season was just as challenging to fire managers as 2000. As conditions in the forests and rangelands of the Western U.S. worsened and record setting hectares burned in several states, the U.S. again prepared to call for international assistance. However, Canada which provided valuable and lengthy support to the U.S. in 2000 faced its own fire problems stretching from Quebec to British Columbia. And there were still unresolved issues with arrangements and protocols with Australia and New Zealand.

Throughout 2001 and up to August of 2002 U.S., Australian, and New Zealand fire managers, risk managers and solicitors had been proposing and reviewing potential options to solve the liability concerns raised after the 2000 fire season. One alternative that was explored was purchasing sufficient liability insurance to meet risk managers requirements, but the cost was prohibitive, and the policies would have been too complex. The best possible solution was to change U.S. law that would give *any* international firefighter brought to the U.S. under the "Wildfire Suppression Assistance Act," tort liability coverage equivalent to that provided to U.S. Government fire fighters. In early August the bill was passed and signed by the President of the U.S. The language in the bill provided the assurance required by Australian and New Zealand and U.S. fire managers were once again allowed to request international assistance from Down Under. Signatures of the Secretaries of Agriculture and the Interior were quickly inked on the official Arrangement papers and posted overnight to Australia and New Zealand. The Australian States of Victoria, New South Wales, Tasmania, Western Australia, and South Australia and New Zealand signed the Arrangements. Within a week of the passage of the legislation, 50 Australian and New Zealand fire specialists were on U.S. fire lines filling, as they did in 2000, critical mid-level management fire positions in operations and aviation.

### **The 2002-2003 Bush Fire Season in Australia**

The 2002-2003 bush fire season in Australia saw some of the worst fires in over 50 years. The hardest hit states were Victoria and New South Wales. In later January of 2003, the State of Victoria requested U.S. assistance. Thirty six U.S. fire fighters went to Australia for a month. A twenty person hand crew worked shoulder to shoulder with Australian fire fighters on the fire line. An infrared scanning aircraft with crew and infrared photo interpreters was also sent. And two small incident management teams took on management responsibilities for portions of a massive fire in the Alpine Region of Victoria. The U.S. fire fighters shared their knowledge and experience with their Australian counterparts and also gained a great deal of respect for the challenges facing Australian fire fighters in the management and suppression of bush fires.

This request for U.S. assistance tested and solidified the two-way nature of the Arrangements signed in 2002.

### **The 2003 U.S. Wildland Fire Season**

The 2003 wildland fire season initially did not appear that it would reach the proportions of needs that were required in 2000 and 2002. However, by mid-July the affects of a multi-year drought, record high temperatures and low humidity and the right weather conditions caused numerous large fires to rage out of control in the Northern Rockies. For the third time in four years U.S. fire managers were facing the need for more international assistance, and Canada, as in much of 2002, was busy suppressing devastating fires of its own in several provinces. And once again, based on the 2002 Arrangements, 40 Australian and New Zealand fire fighters came to the aid of the U.S.

The 2003 request reaffirmed the true value of being able to call upon Australian and New Zealand firefighters during extreme wildland seasons. It also began to seem routine.

### **Other Values of the Arrangements**

Instituting these Arrangements not only provided for a clear mechanism to share fire fighting resources during critical times, it also established formal procedures for cooperative exchanges outside of critical fire season time periods. Knowledge of each other's capabilities and systems before the fires start can pay important dividends in the heat of battle. These cooperative exchanges have the following objectives:

- To share information on training, qualification, and certification systems and requirements;
- To share knowledge about operational procedures and systems including ground and air operations;
- To observe and participate in each others prescribed fire programs;
- To study how each country uses fire fighting equipment and apparatus;
- To observe how each country uses relationships at national, state and local levels to coordinate and access firefighting resources such as volunteers;
- To share information on fire prevention and education.

### **The Future**

Through four mobilizations of firefighters (three to the U.S. and one to Australia) and numerous exchange activities, these Arrangements have repeatedly proven the value of having effective, flexible, cooperative and formal relationships. These Arrangements are not static but must be periodically reviewed, adjusted, and re-approved by the signatories. The U.S. will continue to work with its partners in Australia and New Zealand to improve and expand on these valuable relationships in order to cooperatively address the common global challenges of wildland fire management.