

Testimony
Before The
Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee
Regarding
Fire Preparedness

Presented By:

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Good afternoon, Chairman Bingaman, Ranking Member Domenici and members of the Committee and thank you for the opportunity to present testimony today regarding wildland fire preparedness. My name is Deborah Miley and I am the Executive Director for the National Wildfire Suppression Association. Prior to my current position I was a fire contractor for twelve years.

The National Wildfire Suppression Association (NWSA) represents over 200 professional private wildfire contract companies in 17 states. NWSA's members provide professionally trained emergency resources to federal, state and local agencies responding to wildfires and other national disasters such as Hurricane Katrina, that threaten our national natural resources, private property, and personal safety.

Up to 40% of the fire resources across the United States are provided by private wildland fire services and are utilized when all the agency resources are depleted or when a catastrophic disaster strikes such as the wildfires in Southern California last year. Our goal is to complement rather than compete with the existing agency resources when fire activity exceeds agency organizational capacity.

Approximately 75% of our contract companies are located in rural areas and recruit and rigorously train local residents including displaced workers and college students to fill their ranks.

When lives are on the line, the agencies must have confidence in any resource that is a part of the fire community. Since 1991, the mission of NWSA is to insure that its members earn that confidence.

In order to accomplish this the NWSA provides training certification, advocacy and support to help its member companies field experienced, highly trained, safety focused resources that meet or exceed all federal standards.

We are currently integrated in the fire services in that private sector provides resources on the ground including 20 person crews, engines, tenders, dozers and timber fallers. In addition the private sector provides totally operational camps including showers, laundry, lavatory, housing units Private Sector fire catering operations that feed and house all firefighters and emergency response personnel.

History of the Development of Private Sector Fire Services

The relationship between the federal, state and private wildland fire contract industry began in the late 70's and early 80's—this was an era of shrinking agency budgets and an ever growing incident of large fires. To respond effectively, agencies needed professional, trained resources that were available on a call-as-needed basis to complement their dwindling ranks of full time firefighters. Thus was born the industry of private contractors, who could rapidly dispatch those resources. An added saving to the agency is that private resources are paid only for the time on the fire. The contractor bears all costs of training, equipment, liability and insurance. What the agencies get is highly effective, experienced resources when they need them and only when they need them

In the late 1980's the first contract crew agreement was written in the Pacific Northwest by the Oregon Department of Forestry. As the federal agencies had a larger need for those resources, the first Interagency Crew Agreement was developed in the Pacific Northwest which was followed by the

Interagency Engine/Tender Agreement. Prior to the implementation of those agreements everyone was hired on an Emergency Equipment Rental Agreement (EERA).

NWSA Supports the Best Value Concept of Contracting

NWSA continues to advocate the use of the Multi-Year Best Value Contracting program when contracting for private resources. We believe that this contracting vehicle will help ensure a high level of professionalism in the industry while helping the agencies assure that they get the most professionally trained, cost effective resources.

These Best Value contracts provide best value for the government and the tax payer:

- Reducing the cost to the agency by issuing multi-year contracts that do not require the staff resources needed for managing annual contracts or Emergency Equipment Rental Agreements.
- Ensure resource quality by considering not only cost but past performance, company history, equipment condition, dispatch location and training.
- Help promote professionally trained, safety focused resources

Best Value Contracting also helps stabilize the industry and help encourage the private sector to continue to invest in their businesses. This is a positive factor for the economy, especially in the rural communities.

Resources Available from Private Sector

For the upcoming fire season we estimate that we have roughly 10,000 trained firefighters, and another additional 5000 in support staff for caterers, showers and other support resources available and ready to provide resources of all types including showers, catering units, laundry, engines, tenders, 20-man crews, and other specialized equipment. These figures do not include the aerial firefighting industry. This is comparable to the number of firefighter resources that were made available last year. These figures can vary and are based on the projected needs of the agencies.

Last year, we were dispatched to 19 different states including Tennessee, Florida, Georgia, Minnesota, Colorado, California, Oregon, Washington, Idaho, Utah, Wyoming, Arizona, Nevada, Montana, Kentucky, and New Mexico, Virginia and North Carolina.

We will be ready to answer the call when the agency resources are depleted and they request additional resources to complement their efforts.

Industry concerns: Cost Containment, Training, Safety, Erosion of Fire Experience

The National Wildfire Suppression Association, like the agencies and members of the committee continues to focus on ensuring cost effectiveness of our resources, the quality of our training, which we believe to be the best anywhere. Our focus on firefighter safety is intense and has resulted in a very low incidence of injury and fatality. We are concerned, however, about the loss of agency personnel with fire experience. —a situation which creates safety issues on the line for everyone, including our members' personnel.

Some of the Solutions we have implemented to address these issues are:

Cost Containment

NWSA provides a professional cost effective resource that complements the agencies fire program. A report commissioned by the Forest Service in 2003 done by Fire Program Solutions LLC shows the costs for the using private sector for fire suppression was a cost effective addition to be used by agencies requiring additional help. In addition a report done by Geoffrey Donovan, USFS, in the Winter of 2007, shows that many variables determine the cost effectiveness of private resources, and that they can be just as cost competitive and that there needs to be an optimal mix of agency and private resources to achieve the most effective efforts in fire suppression while addressing cost containment. In short, Private fire resources are and have been an integral part of the fire community in Wildland fire suppression, and do provide a cost effective resource that can be utilized on an as needed basis to complement the agency fire program.

NWSA believes that continuing to support the implementation of true Multi-Year Best Value Contracts is the best solution to ensuring cost effectiveness in contracting.

Instituting a Contractor Certification Program

NWSA is partnering with a variety of agencies over the next year to offer a new Contractor Certification Program for our members. This program will better equip members with resources on Workers Compensation requirements, Safety & Health Standards, U.S. Department of Labor and U.S. Department of Transportation regulations in addition to a class on Business Ethics, and information on Drug & Alcohol Supervisory Training.

Instructor Monitoring Program insures top quality instruction for firefighters

Currently NWSA has 68 Certified Instructors. They are certified by our NWSA Training Coordinator according to National Wildfire Coordinating Group (NWCG) standards. Most of our NWSA instructors are retired ex-agency personnel with years of fire experience. NWSA instituted an Instructor Monitoring program and we have hired an independent 3rd party to perform this function.

We adhere to the currency requirements for instructors per the National Wildfire Coordinating Group standards. NWSA conducts an annual training session for our instructors where they are updated on course content changes, suggested training processes, and association requirements. All NWSA instructors are required to record their training in the NWSA Database Storage System.

In addition all instructors must adhere to a Code of Ethics. NWSA has terminated certification for 4 instructors who have not adhered to our requirements. When an instructor's certification is terminated, they are no longer able to use the NWSA Database system and we notify the appropriate agencies.

NWSA Database Storage System helps eliminate falsification of records and IQ cards.

NWSA has developed a Web based database storage system that tracks all training done by NWSA Certified Instructors. This program helps eliminate falsified records and Incident Qualification (IQ) cards by allowing only certified instructors to enter training into the system, which includes the firefighter's picture and the instructor's electronic signature. It produces training certificates and Incident Qualification Cards that meet all agency requirements. The documents can be verified by agency personnel on a fire accessing the system and looking at training and comparing the IQ Card in the system if necessary. The company owner can also track event information for its employees in the system, which determines qualification of position. There are many levels of security and authorization built into the system.

Records Verification Process standardizes contractor record keeping processes

This year in 2008 in the Pacific Northwest Region we started a process of records verification where we have hired an independent 3rd party that visits the contractors' establishments and looks at the records on all overhead and 10% sampling of the crews. We make recommendations on file process and submit a letter to the company owner on issues that need to be addressed and provide follow up to ensure it has been remedy.

Code of Ethics creates standard of business operations for member companies to protect and preserve industry reputation:

All NWSA members must sign and follow a Code of Ethics and there is a process in which we can terminate membership of a member if that is violated and not remedied. NWSA has terminated 2 members as a result of violations. When a member is terminated we notify all appropriate parties, and that member no longer has access to the NWSA Database.

In Conclusion

The National Wildfire Suppression Association (NWSA) believes that the private fire services will be ready for the 2008 fire season.

NWSA will continue to partner with the agencies to promote Best Value Contracting for private fire services.

NWSA will continue to work to promote professionalism in all areas of safety and training within the private fire services.

NWSA will continue to provide cost effective integrated resources to complement the agency efforts in fire suppression and emergency services.

