

Recommendations
to the
Interim Committee on Wildfire Matters



Chief Mike Morgan
President

October 1, 2013

Recommendations from the Colorado State Fire Chiefs

TO: Joint Legislative Wildfire Matters Review Committee

FROM: Chief Mike Morgan
President
Colorado State Fire Chiefs

DATE: October 1, 2013

The three highest priority recommendations:

- #1 Insure the stability and reliability of the current Colorado state-wide emergency radio system
- #2 Continue to invest in the development, expansion and implementation of the State resource mobilization plan
- #3 Expand the current local, regional and state command, control, coordination capabilities

As you know, the members of the Colorado fire service live the threats and realities of Wildland Urban Interface (WUI) fires each and every day. The 400 local fire departments in Colorado have responded to more than 10,000 WUI fires in Colorado in just the last 18 months

WUI fires have become the most dangerous fires that the fire service fights.....WUI fires are treacherous and unpredictable and are facilitated by those citizens who choose to live in the WUI and to generally not prepare their homes for wildfires

Firefighter fatalities continue to rise in WUI fires..... the 14 fatalities at our own Storm King Mountain fire and most recently the 19 fatalities Prescott, Arizona are reminders each and every time our fire apparatus leaves our stations responding to WUI fires

Unfortunately, we are seeing a terrible new statistic emerge in Colorado.....recently civilians have lost their lives in each of the major WUI fires during 2012-2013

A robust and organized local initial attack on WUI fires, along with sufficient and appropriate state support, is the key to the most effective operations in the first hours of a WUI fire.

These recommendations are based on this recognition and on the primacy of firefighter and civilian safety and are focused on the state's roles and responsibilities in WUI and wildland fires and are ranked in order of priority.

The first three recommendations are inter-related provide the essential components necessary effective WUI/wildfire and all-hazards response. The remaining four recommendations are supportive of the first three.

#1 -- Ensure the stability and reliability of the current Colorado state-wide emergency radio system

Simply put, we need to be able to talk to each other and the single most important action that the legislature can take to improve WUI and wildfire response is to provide sufficient funding to stabilize the deterioration of the current statewide emergency radio system

Being able to talk to each other is a simple concept but one that is in jeopardy in our state. We don't want "*Can you hear me now?*" to be the tagline used to describe Colorado's emergency radio system.

Without reliable radio communications, mission critical decisions and actions are compromised or dangerously degraded, jeopardizing the lives of firefighters, law enforcement officers, first responders and civilians

Colorado a "system of systems" as the operators of the various radio systems across the state worked to establish connections between systems to achieve basic interoperability. There is still much to be done to assure seamless interoperability on a routine basis. Further, the progress that has been made is now in jeopardy. .

There are two major trunked digital systems in use throughout the State. The State Digital Trunked Radio System (DTRS) and a Harris system used by Denver, Aurora, and some surrounding jurisdictions. Significant grant funds have been invested in tying these systems together for interoperability.

But, ongoing maintenance challenges with the DTRS has resulted in Weld and Adams counties (Front Range Communication Consortium) purchasing another radio switch, effectively creating yet another radio system that may not provide seamless interoperability with the two existing systems

The reason for the third split is a very real concern that the DTRS is not being maintained by the state and the anticipation that with this maintenance neglect the DTRS will predictably fail.

Creating multiple and duplicative radio systems raises significant concerns that interoperability may be lost and has tremendous cost through duplicated costs of multiple systems.

The solution is that the State of Colorado must develop a more robust radio system within the DTRS radio system that allows inter-region operability and the capability to use radios within the various regions of the state without having the necessity to adding radios.

State controlled regional radio caches need to be established and maintained in the appropriate radio frequency range, keeping the DTRS elements of the cache in a hibernation mode for activation. Radio support technicians should be dispatched to significant events to rapidly reprogram radios to address and operability challenges. Fees should be applied when these radio caches are used.

The State should map and develop those areas within the State where DTRS cannot be used and VHF is used on a daily/routine basis to support the need for VHF supply levels.

Expand the capabilities of the State FMOs by supplying appropriate radios to expand and utilize their DTRS capabilities

For the longer term, develop and implement, as a local, state and federal collaborative effort, a State-wide Wildfire Communications Plan to effectively utilize both VHF and 800 mghz DTR systems based upon available coverage for initial attack, tactical operations, mutual aid and air operations

The Communications Plan should be developed to recognize and account for the continued predominant utilization of VHF frequencies by both local fire resources and federal wildland firefighting agencies.

Estimated cost to State of Colorado = \$140 million over 4 years

#2 -- Continue to invest in the development, expansion & implementation of the State resource mobilization plan

If we cannot effectively mobilize, deploy and utilize firefighting resources then the efforts of this committee and the fire services across this state are minimized and lives are placed at risk.

DHSEM received three FTEs as part of HB13-1031 for this purpose. Due to multiple circumstances and back-to-back disasters there has been a delay in filling these three positions. These positions must be filled expeditiously and certainly before the end of 2013.

The resource mobilization plan provides the resources, and the incident command structure organizes the resources for the most effective fire suppression and evacuation efforts.

Estimated cost for the State of Colorado = already allocated

#3 -- Expand the current local, regional and State command, control, and coordination capabilities

Third in priority, after communications and resource mobilization is a solid incident command system that is rapidly scalable from a single jurisdiction incident to a multi-agency/multi-jurisdiction event

An incident command structure is essential to quickly organizing and efficiently utilizing the firefighting assets that will be mobilized under the State resource mobilization plan

Fully develop, fund and implement the All-Hazards Incident Management Team (AHIMT) concept across Colorado. AHIMTs are organized as local (Type IV), regional (Type III) and national (Type II and Type I). AHIMTs provide an excellent return on investment.

Each county needs at least one Type IV All-Hazard IMT which would provide significant capabilities enhancement at the county level

The state currently recognizes four (4) Type III All-Hazard Incident Management Teams. In addition to these four teams, there needs to be at least eight (8) Type III All-Hazard IMTs in the State to provide the necessary resources to manage four (4) simultaneous events

The same communications system, resource mobilization system and incident management system that is used for fighting WUI and wildfires also could be used for all other non-fire incidents and disasters.

Estimated cost for State of Colorado = about \$2 million over 2 years

#4 -- Provide sufficient funding to the Division of Fire Prevention and Control (DFPC) to fulfill its stated missions

Ensure that all regions of the State have their assigned FMOs. The FMOs are a capability that, when coordinating with a local firefighting force, significantly increases their WUI firefighting potential and thus enhances the probability of successful mission accomplishment.

However, the FMOs in each region are only one person deep and all FMOs can easily be fully engaged without any backup and sustained 24/7 operations are not possible with the current FMO staffing levels, especially when multiple regions are experiencing multiple fires (which is now considered the normal status operations during wildfire season)

Previously some regions in the state had as many as three district foresters from the Colorado State Forest Service. Currently all regions are staffed by only one FMO (and one region is vacant)

Funding for the DFPC also provides that initial response from the State to assist local agencies with determining if the fire will be handled locally or what additional resources will be required.

DFPC has multiple other responsibilities that are currently either underfunded or unfunded. The Legislative Committee should request a report from DPS/DFPC concerning the status of allocated funding for each of its areas of responsibilities.

Estimated cost to the State of Colorado = to be determined

#5 -- State aviation resources are an essential and integral part of the initial attack on WUI fires

Provide funding support for the appropriate mix of firefighting aircraft to fill the gap between what is needed on WUI and wildland fires in Colorado and what the federal interagency system will provide

The Colorado Air National Guard (Title 32) using its helicopter air support capabilities and fully qualified and trained crews, should become an integral part of the air attack plans and operations for WUI fires in Colorado

Estimated cost to the State of Colorado = to be determined

#6 -- Develop measureable and clearly articulated performance goals for response to WUI fires to guide the response of local, mutual aid and State resources

Such as:

- Hold 98% of WUI fires to five (5) acres or less
- Initial local attack on the scene of 95% of WUI fires in 20 minutes
- Initial air support over WUI fires within 30 minutes anywhere in the state
- 30/90/90 -for WUI incidents occurring with specific weather conditions, set a goal of 30 pieces of fire apparatus on the scene in 90 minutes 90% of the time

Some will say that there are too many variables to set measureable goals. But, CSFC disagrees and believes that *"if a goal is not measured, then it is not a goal – it is only a wish."*

We need to consider the vastness of our State in the development of measureable performance goals and establish "stretch goals" depending on population density and local resources. But we still need easy to understand goals!

Over the past five years 95% of all wildfires (local and State fires) have been contained to 10 acres or less and these fires have accounted for about 2% of all acres burned. One-half of one percent (0.5%) of all wildfires have accounted for 81% of all acres burned.

In addition to keeping WUI and wildfires small, we need to get resources on these 0.5% wildfires much quicker

The Colorado State Fire Chiefs has accepted the responsibility of developing the concept to implement these performance goals and has established a multi-agency task force to do this work. The initial status report will be presented in December 2013 with the final implementation strategy due by April 2013.

Estimated cost to State of Colorado = in-kind participation of the DFPC & DHSEM (Division of Homeland Security & Emergency Management) with sustaining operations & exercises funded by re-prioritization of state homeland security funds in FY 2014 and beyond

#7 -- Recognize that while community and individual homeowner mitigation is an essential component of a comprehensive WUI strategy, it is not an effective immediate or mid-term solution to our State's immediate threats

Relying on individual citizens and communities to recognize the need for mitigation and to actually implement mitigation is no longer an acceptable methodology for WUI mitigation. Mitigation is always an important factor, however there needs to be a statewide effort to mitigate as homes are placed into the WUI

There also is a need for continual maintenance of the defensible space or that advantage will quickly be lost. It is unlikely that in a local control state we will mandate anything significant at the State level and probably very few counties will adopt regulations that control on-going maintenance on private property.

Quoting from the recent Yarnell Serious Accident Investigation Report, "*Although Yavapai County had a Community Wildfire Protection Plan, many structures were not defensible by firefighters responding to the Yarnell Hill Fire. The fire destroyed over one hundred structures.*"

It may be better for the fire service to have a statewide methodology to evaluate properties as to defensibility and work with homeowners and HOAs to lessen the hazards. If not, the following must be clearly communicated to the HOAs (Home Owner Associations) and individual homeowners.

- The fire service will not deploy personnel to attempt to mitigate, but instead will move on to the homes and structures that can be saved.

- Roads that are hazardous to pass through due to lack of mitigation will be identified and during a fire the fire service will not send personnel into the area.

It is important that this is statewide and advertised widely to motivate homeowners and to provide a unified stance after/while homes are being burned.

Estimated cost to the State of Colorado = to be determined

Closing

The costs associated with fire mitigation and firefighting need to be measured against the real and total costs of fires in the WUI.

As expensive as fighting a fire is, the cost of recovery is even greater. Even if the loss of life is not considered, the ensuing flood damage to water quality, roads, bridges, utilities, and private property dwarf the cost of effective fire suppression.

But, when WUI fires are over....black and cold....the local fire service is still there as a part of the communities we serve, preparing to respond to the floods that will soon follow.

WUI fires are increasing in frequency and intensity and despite the cycles of periodic heavy rains, Colorado will always be an arid climate and we will always have WUI fires and wildfires.

As a State we must continue to prepare for the next fire season because there will be the next fire season and fires will occur within the WUI.