THE SECRETARY OF THE INTERIOR

WASHINGTON

JAN 14 2003

Memorandum

To: Acting Assistant Secretary, Indian Affairs
Director, Bureau of Land Management
Director, National Park Service
Director, Fish and Wildlife Service

From: Secretary

Subject: FY 2004 Fuels Treatment Program Priorities

Reducing hazardous fuels on federal lands plays a vital role in achieving the goals of the President's *Healthy Forests Initiative*, the *10-Year Comprehensive Strategy*, and the *National Fire Plan*. Reducing risk to our firefighters, communities, and municipal watersheds, and restoring the health of our forests and rangelands are the central themes of these initiatives. Of the three parts of the wildland fire triad - oxygen, heat and fuel - land managers can impact only fuel effectively.

Department of the Interior employees responsible for the fuels treatment program have made significant and noteworthy progress. In FY 2002, nearly 1.1 million acres of hazardous fuels reduction were accomplished. This is by far the largest effort ever mounted by the Department. These results are especially impressive given the extensive drought conditions across the country and the severity of the past fire season. This work was done at the same time planning occurred for treating another 1.1 million acres in FY 2003.

Equally impressive are changes that you have made to the way we plan and conduct our fuels treatment program. These changes include:

- Accelerating project selection
- Increasing collaboration among the federal agencies and with our many state, tribal, and local partners
- Planning across administrative boundaries
- Establishing a goal to contract at least 50% of allocated fuels treatment funding
- Committing to a more systematic approach to project selection

To address the magnitude of problems in forests and rangelands requires setting clear priorities and future direction for the fuels treatment program. This past summer provided vivid evidence of the consequences of fuels buildup coupled with the spread of insect, disease, and invasive plant infestations, and was compounded by severe drought. Colorado, Arizona and Oregon

recorded their largest fires in the last century. Moreover, problems linger long after the last ember is out. Soil and wind erosion, water quality degradation and loss of fish and wildlife habitat will plague many areas for years to come. Although we are now treating in excess of one million acres, we must accelerate our efforts and ensure that we are targeting the right acres.

Our goals are to eliminate loss of life, reduce firefighter injuries, and lessen damage to communities and the environment from severe, unplanned, and unwanted wildland fires.

The following National Fuel Treatment Priorities will apply to all projects:

- Funding will be targeted on a priority basis to the Wildland Urban Interface (WUI) and areas in condition classes 2 or 3 in fire regimes I, II or III with highest risk-reduction potential. These priorities are consistent with Goals Two and Three of the *10-Year Implementation Plan*.
- WUI projects should give priority to communities at greatest risk of wildland fire and where communities are contributing community and private dollars as well as volunteer efforts to reduce catastrophic fire risks.
- Priority should be given to mechanical treatments that will produce by-products (small diameter trees, biomass, etc.) that can be utilized. Mechanical treatments should be conducted where on-site conditions are conducive to their use and land-use policies do not conflict. This is consistent with Goal Four of the *10-Year Implementation Plan*.
- Prescribed burning will be used when weather and resource conditions permit, where mechanical treatments are not appropriate, and as maintenance treatments following mechanical work.
- Contracted fuels treatment work should receive preference over work performed by the federal workforce. Our goal for FY 2004 is to contract out 50% of allocated funding. Wherever possible, projects should use third-party contracting that supports rural community stability. This is consistent with Congressional direction and Goal Four of the *10-Year Implementation Plan*.

In addition to treating the right acres in the right sequence across the landscape, we must continue the collaborative relationships that guided the FY 2003 project selections. Projects should first be identified by federal agency staff, in collaboration with local communities. Stakeholders should be engaged early in the planning process to assist us in defining the fuels problem, finding innovative solutions and identifying post-treatment objectives.

To improve the effectiveness and efficiency of fuels treatment projects, we must also complete the selection of fuels treatment projects much earlier than in the past. Starting immediately, final project lists must be submitted to the Department's Office of Wildland Fire Coordination by May 1st for the coming fiscal year. The month of May was chosen so that work on selecting and preparing fuels treatment projects would be done largely outside of the intense fire seasons that usually occurs June through September.

I am confident that our line managers, resource and fuels specialists, and support personnel will continue to work together to achieve the goals of the President's *Healthy Forests Initiative,* the *10-Year Implementation Plan* and the *National Fire Plan*. Again, thank you for your professional dedication and your continued commitment to healthy forests and rangelands.

Any questions regarding this memorandum should be directed to the Department's Fuels Coordinator, Allan Fitzsimmons.

cc: Assistant Secretary, Land and Mineral Management
Assistant Secretary, Fish, Wildlife and Parks
Director, Office of Wildland Fire Coordination