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1. **FIRES:** Record fire season still not over, officials warn

Arthur O'Donnell, *Land Letter* editor

Even before the Esperanza blaze in Southern California claimed the lives of five Forest Service firefighters, this year was already considered among the worst for wildfires across the United States.

In terms of acreage burned, the 2006 fire season has surpassed all other years since 1960, when formal record keeping began. According to a tally by the National Interagency Fire Center, 9,442,610 acres of forest and grasslands have been involved in over 86,545 separate fires. In 2005, the previous record year, 8.25 million acres were burned in 56,589 incidents.



A California firefighter stares down the Day fire this past September.
2006 was a record year for wildfires across the U.S. Photo courtesy of inciweb.org.

Over the 10-year period of 1996-2005, there was an average of 70,657 fires and 5.3 million acres burned, according to NIFC. By some counts, seven of the 10 worst years occurred in the past decade.

Historically, there have been accounts of years when tens of millions of acres were burned in massive fires, but they were long before government agencies had the ability to track individual blazes, or to coordinate suppression and firefighting efforts.

By another measure, cost of controlling these fires, 2006 also appears to have set a record as the Forest Service spent more than \$1.5 billion, including an emergency appropriation of \$200 million secured as the federal fiscal year was winding up in September ([Greenwire](#), Sept. 22).

The original \$760 million budget allocation for fiscal year 2006 was also bolstered by a \$500 million carryover of unspent funds from last year. In addition, the Department of Interior has spent at least another \$365 million.

The Forest Service warns that despite the fact that the worst of the fire season has usually ended by this time of year, there could be more significant fires to come this calendar year, especially in drought-stricken areas of Texas, and in California where autumn rains have been late. "The season is not over yet," said Rose Davis, spokeswoman for the Interagency Fire Center in Boise, Idaho.

Nonetheless, by another measure -- primary residences destroyed -- this year has seen an improvement

from recent years.

According to the Forest Service, about 675 houses were destroyed, compared to more than 3,000 in 2003. "Not as many homes and not as many evacuations," confirmed Dale Bosworth, chief of the Forest Service in a recent interview with *Land Letter*. He ascribed the difference to better prevention efforts and more aggressive fuels treatment, as well as to firefighters' emphasis on protecting life and preserving residential structures when fires do occur.

Still, the character of fires has changed, largely because of a long-term buildup of fuels in forests, and the proliferation of new housing developments along what is called the "wildlands-urban interface."

Forest Service spokesman Dan Jiron added that such growth "will continue to be strong for the next several decades."

Another trend is that major forest fires seem to be getting larger and burning with greater intensity. This is partly because of historic forest management practices to suppress any fires that led to a buildup of material and unchecked growth that still contributes to more severe blazes.

While the practice of employing "prescribed fires" to mimic natural fire cycles and cut down the potential for catastrophic blazes has been controversial, Bosworth said the program "is very good and getting better all the time. The public is much more accepting of it than 10 years ago."

Larger fires in more areas

This past year witnessed nearly two-dozen fires that each consumed over 100,000 acres, according to NIFC statistics. The five largest fires involved 200,000 acres or more of either forest lands or grasslands, and included a combined complex of fires that all occurred in the same week just east of Amarillo, Texas. Another group of fires in north-central Texas that consumed over 250,000 acres of grasslands, actually began in November 2005 before finally coming under control in March.

These are some of the most destructive fires of 2006, according to NIFC and other sources:

- East of Amarillo complex fires, Texas, involved three separate large fires covering more than 850,000 acres from March 12-18. Two of these were the Borger fire in Hutchinson County (450,000 acres) that forced the evacuation of eight towns, and the I-40 fire (350,000 acres). Eleven fatalities were reported, seven directly attributed to fire and four from a vehicle accident on a smoke-choked highway. At one point, East Texas firefighters had to battle more than 160 fires in a 24-hour period.
- Winters fire, about 50 miles north of Winnemucca, Nev., involved 238,458 acres of sagebrush and grasslands. Started by a lightning strike July 25, the fire spread rapidly because of winds, the proliferation of cheat grass, and the vast areas of sagebrush that had been killed by agora moth infestations. According to Shawn Espinosa, a wildlife biologist for the Nevada Department of Wildlife, a troubling aspect of this fire is that it appears the natural cycle of fires had been 100 to 150 years. "Now we're seeing fire return intervals of 10 to 20 years." After similar fires, more cheat grass grows wild, and "the cheat grass fire cycle perpetuates itself," Espinosa said.
- Crystal fire, 223,700 acres of grasslands and sagebrush, near American Falls, Idaho, was caused by lightning and lasted Aug. 15-31.
- Derby Mountain fire in Montana, 199,500 acres, was located near the Wyoming border and about 15 miles south of Big Timber. Also started by lightning, this fire lasted from Aug. 22 through Oct. 15

States with most acres burned (through Oct. 27, 2006)

State	Number of fires	Acres burned
Texas	2,645	1,459,609
Nevada	1,252	1,340,990
Montana	2,295	1,046,996
Idaho	1,814	933,014
California	7,888	675,735
New Mexico	2,466	597,069

Source: National Interagency Fire Center

and largely burned on private lands -- about 116,000 acres -- and destroyed at least 26 residences and 20 outbuildings, at an estimated cost of \$20 million.

- Charleston complex fire, also sparked by lightning, involved 190,421 acres of rangelands near Elko, Nev., and caused an estimated \$3.1 million in economic harm to Elko County ranchers from Aug. 15-31.
- Tripod complex fire covered 175,184 acres in the Okanogan National Forest in Washington, just south of the U.S.-Canada border. This fire, which began by lightning on July 24, was still not fully controlled by Oct. 31, but has been turned over to local units for management. Because of steep terrain and the large amount of beetle-killed lodge pole pine and spruce in the area, firefighters do not expect the fire to be completely extinguished until heavy rains come.

Another fire that has been contained but not completely extinguished is the Day fire, covering 162,702 acres in Southern California, about 10 miles north of Lake Castaic in Los Angeles. This fire was caused by human activity on Sept. 4, according to NIFC, and required evacuation of nearly 400 homes.

In addition, some of this year's fires were at or near locations previously ravaged. Mike Dubrasich, a forestry consultant in Oregon, has been tracking many of these blazes for his blog at www.SOSForests.com. He told *Land Letter* that the 110,000-acre Columbia complex fire in Washington was in the same vicinity as the 2005 School House fire that burned through 50,000 acres. The Black Crater fire in Oregon was one in a series of fires over the past decade that have consumed 150,000 acres of mostly old-growth forests, he said.

Smaller in size but deadlier

Compared with these huge fires, the Esperanza blaze was a relatively modest size, involving 40,200 acres. But its location near Los Angeles, its apparent cause, and the fact that five firefighters were killed has brought it more media attention than most other blazes.

Evidently an arson fire that began Oct. 26 on undeveloped land just outside of the San Bernardino National Forest and south of the town of Cabazon, the blaze quickly spread to the west propelled by dry Santa Ana winds. The ill-fated Forest Service crew was part of a 1,750-member team from various state, local and federal agencies.

According to reports "rollover" flames trapped the crew as they were trying to protect a house. Four were killed immediately: Capt. Mark Loutzenhiser, 44; Jess McLean, 27; Jason McKay, 27; and Daniel Hoover-Najera, 20. Pablo Cerda, age 23, was severely burned; despite best efforts of medical personnel, he died Tuesday.

Officials are investigating the cause of the fire and have interrogated but released at least two individuals. There is a \$500,000 reward posted for information leading to an arrest. Several funds have been established for donations to the firefighters' families, including:

- The Esperanza Firefighter Assistance Fund at: P.O. Box 1645, Riverside, CA, 92502; (915) 955-1010.
- Wildland Firefighters Foundation at www.wffoundation.org.
- California Fire Foundation at www.cpf.org.