

FIRELINE

The official publication of the National Wildfire Suppression Association

Winter 2019



The End of an Era: Thanks Stan!





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On the cover: Stan Kunzman began his work in the U.S. Forest Service in 1963. Since then, he has gained experience worldwide, serving as area commander, military liaison and much more. He retired from the Forest Service in 1994, and beginning in 1996, Stan began coordinating NWSA's training program. Stan is retiring from NWSA in the New Year. Learn more about his contributions to the fire service, starting on page 11.



FIVE Ways to Avoid Wildfire Destruction in 2020

By Brett L'Esperance, Dauntless Air

As a company wholly dedicated to fighting wildfires from the air to protect and support those on the ground, we have a chance to see trends that may not be visible to everyone. While it's clear the 2019 U.S. fire season wasn't as destructive as the 2018 season, from our vantage point we see several areas for concern that will continue to hamper our collective ability to protect people, land and property from these threats.

As we reflect on the current fire season and prepare for a worsening wildfire environment, it's our responsibility to learn all we can from the past and use it to help drive change in the future.

FANNING THE FLAMES: FIXES FOR A FALTERING INITIAL RESPONSE SYSTEM

If the universally agreed upon goal is to reduce the destruction and devastation caused by wildfires, then catching unwanted and dangerous wildfires when they are small and putting them out before they get big should be job #1 for any firefighting agency. When initial response to small wildfires is working the way it should, small forward-attack aircraft and helicopters arrive on a scene within the first hour after a fire starts, carrying loads of water, gel or retardant that help contain the fire situation until ground crews arrive to put it out.

Each time a small wildfire is suppressed during an initial response, agencies prevent greater devastation and avoid millions of dollars in associated costs that come with large and very large fires. This is why some state agencies, such as Washington State, strive to keep the majority of wildfires to 10 acres or less in size.

However, in today's wildfire environment, small fires are more frequently growing into larger disasters. According to data from the National Interagency Fire Center, in five of the past eight years, total acres burned per season has exceeded five- and/or 10-year

averages. Yet, in recent seasons, many federal fire agencies have carried the same, or possibly fewer, contracts for pre-positioned aerial firefighting resources that can respond to fire starts fast enough to make a difference. While the increased fire suppression funding for 2020 is a welcomed start to addressing this issue, the funding alone will not solve the entirety of our nation's problem.

What is also needed are key changes to current policy and suppression strategies that are crippling our country's initial response system. Here are five changes that would make a big difference:

1 REEVALUATE THE CURRENT "MANAGED FIRE" APPROACH

There has been much discussion around the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) strategy to allow some wildfires to burn naturally, reducing fuel loads

in forests that have become overgrown. However, as *Smokejumper Magazine* editor Chuck Sheley points out, that outdated approach is dangerous in today's reality, where managed fires are increasingly difficult to control and millions more people are living in the fire-prone wildland-urban interface. By moving away from managed fire tactics that may impact the WUI and refocusing on initial attack to keep small fires small, we can avoid putting more firefighters in harm's way and save millions of dollars in suppression costs that are used to contain getaway blazes.

2 ENSURE FIRE AVIATION CONTRACTS THAT ENABLE RAPID RESOURCE SHARING

As we all know, every second counts in

wildfire response. Yet, we have cooperative supply agreements in place across federal and state levels that put up unnecessary bureaucratic obstacles and limit the ability to share and rapidly deploy aerial firefighting assets. This is unacceptable when firefighter and civilian lives are on the line. We need to be sure our systems allow fire resources to launch quickly and work efficiently beyond their own boundaries. This means creating truly cooperative supply agreements between government fire agencies that don't let budget approvals or paperwork get in the way of launching critical suppression assets.

3 ADDRESS OUTDATED SMALL BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION (SBA) PROTECTIONS AND CONTRACT CODES THAT LIMIT OUR COUNTRY'S ABILITY TO EFFECTIVELY FIGHT WILDFIRES

Thirty to 40 years ago, when wildfire seasons were shorter and less intense, the only aerial firefighting resources that existed were agricultural spraying aircraft, which were converted to fight wildfires for only a small part of the year. At that time, these planes were operated by farmers and small business owners, making SBA protections appropriate given the wildfire environment.

Fast forward to today. Despite a more dangerous wildfire threat, these small business set asides are still in place, causing larger companies to struggle to operate within the size restrictions. Some of these set asides are so restrictive that only the smallest operators can bid on the work, leaving firefighters on the ground relying on the least well-capitalized operators to provide suppression and protection.



Putting size limits on contractors also removes the incentive for operators to invest in and upgrade or grow their businesses, or bring new capital into the industry, for fear that any growth or advancement will bar them from future bidding. Why, as a country, are we disincentivizing innovation and improvement in our aerial firefighting fleet during a time when wildfires are larger and more destructive than ever before? Keeping these outdated protections in place results in fewer aircraft available to react to fires in the 2020 fire season and beyond. It's time for the entire aerial firefighting industry to come out from under SBA protections that were built for a different era.

4 FIGHT WILDFIRES WITH A MILITARY MINDSET

The risk we face from wildfires can be likened to a national security threat: The lives and property of millions of Americans are directly threatened each year, and the health of millions more is compromised for decades to come due to the impact on air and water quality. Yet, in 2018, there were more than 2,100 requests for aerial firefighting resources (helicopter and fixed-wing mobilizations) that were unable to be filled (UTF). Many of these UTFs can be traced to insufficient funding structures, challenging cooperative supply agreements

and a limited quantity of aerial resources due in part to small business set asides in the federal contracting process.

Fixing these issues would enable our country to fight wildfires with an all-out, military-like approach to rapid initial response, investing in and deploying assets quickly to save human lives and property, and avoiding millions of dollars in suppression costs. How can we be sure? In 2007, the effectiveness of the USFS's initial response dropped by just 1.5 percent. That decrease in success rate represented an estimated 150 more fires that escaped containment and cost the Forest Service an additional \$300 to \$450 million to suppress.

By avoiding decreases like this and investing in a military-like rapid initial attack, we can reduce the megafire threat and generate hundreds of millions of dollars in savings that could be used to fund other critical forest health programs. Wildfires have become a national security threat and we need to be proactive in preparing for this battle.

5 COMMIT TO DATA-DRIVEN IMPROVEMENT

As an industry, we need results from studies such as the *Aerial Firefighting Use and Effectiveness (AFUE)* report and the *2012 Rand Report (Air Attack*

Against Wildfires) to be proactively released and widely disseminated. This type of information is what we need as an industry to inform an optimized, nationwide response to the wildfire threat. Yet, after seven years, the AFUE study—which if ever completed could establish the best and most effective mixes of aircraft for any wildfire suppression mission—is still not complete despite repeated Congressional requests.

This type of delay has happened before. The 2012 Rand Report was kept from the public eye until a freedom of information request revealed the headlining recommendation for the USFS to use more water-scooping air tankers and fewer conventional air tankers to fight wildfires. This would have been a monumental shift in our nationwide approach. Could the results of the AFUE study be trending in the same direction? We don't know.

Regardless, as an industry and country, we need to agree that data and transparency are critical to enabling our collective ability to better prepare for a future where wildfires will increasingly threaten the safety and prosperity of millions of Americans.

BRIGHT SPOTS

While there is room for improvement, there are also many encouraging bright spots that we can be proud of and continue to push forward.

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1 INSPIRING EXAMPLES OF TEAMWORK AND COLLABORATION AMONG RESPONSE TEAMS, AS WELL AS FEDERAL, STATE AND MUNICIPAL AGENCIES

Year after year, we see countless examples of tight teamwork and camaraderie as ground crews and aerial forces work in ever closer collaboration with one another. We saw this at work in California in 2018, where a squadron of 12 fixed-wing planes and 14 helicopters bombarded the Holy fire with water and retardant, cooling the fire environment for hundreds of boots on the ground. Throughout the 2019 season, we've seen countless teams assemble to battle flames from Alaska to the Amazon.

2 TRANSFORMATIVE STRATEGIES HAVE KEPT MANY FIRES SMALL AND CONTAINED

The epitome of teamwork and collaboration can be found at the edge of a wildland fire, where ground crews and forward-attack aircraft, such as Type 3 helicopters and single-engine Fire Bosses, work together in direct attack against a wildfire. This type of rapid initial attack, using a network of widely dispersed aircraft to quickly jump on fires and keep them small, has helped places like Washington State control a record-setting number of fire starts and keep more than 90 percent of them to 10 acres or less between 2016 and 2019.

3 CHANGING AERIAL TACTICS HAS IMPROVED SAFETY ON THE GROUND

One of the more valuable aspects of rapid initial attack using small helicopters and single-engine Fire Bosses, is the impact the aircraft can have on the wildfire environment and safety for on-the-ground fire crews. Fire Bosses and scooping helicopters can engage in rapid, aggressive direct attack, flying right at the edge of a fire and performing surgical drops time and time again during the same fuel cycle without having to return to a base to reload. By rapidly responding to, cooling and suppressing the fire environment, these aerial forces have helped keep small fires contained and created a safer working environment for wildland firefighters.

MOVING FORWARD

As the wildfire threat intensifies across the U.S., we find hope in these bright spots and in the thousands of men and women who are ready and willing to help fight in the war against wildfires. But, if the past few seasons have taught us anything, it's that the willingness to help is sometimes not enough when it comes to today's bigger and hotter wildfires. Moving forward, we need to use the learnings from recent seasons to create a better future. 🙏

Brett L'Esperance is the CEO of Dauntless Air, an aerial firefighting company deeply dedicated to protecting people, land and property from the devastation of wildfires. The opinions expressed in this article are not necessarily those of the NWSA.

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