



United States Department of the Interior

OFFICE OF THE SECRETARY
Washington, D.C. 20240

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Memorandum

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

From: Secretary *Gale A. Norton*

Subject: Wildland Fire Management Budgetary Policy

The severity of the fire season the country is experiencing is a vivid reminder of this Department's commitment to reducing the risk of wildland fires by removing hazardous fuels, especially in the wildland-urban interface. The President and the Congress have provided the Departments of the Interior and Agriculture with generous resources to accomplish this vital service to the country. It is up to us to make the goal a reality.

The best way to minimize the risk of catastrophic wildfires is to remove the fuels that feed them. Since the beginning of the implementation of the National Fire Plan in 2001, this Department has been engaged in efforts to do just that. We have dramatically increased the number of acres treated for the removal of hazardous fuels in the past years. Yet, we can do more.

We need to maximize hazardous fuels treatments in the transition between fiscal years. The months of October and November are especially critical, as they present an ideal window of opportunity for fuels treatments. The fire season is over in much of the country and winter snowfalls have not arrived. This is the time of year when the Department can accomplish much more fuels reduction than we have in the past.

Three factors have been identified within the Department as potential obstacles to the timely application of fuels treatments in the fall: a lengthy fuels project selection process, unclear contracting procedures, and delays in the allocation of funds for fuels projects. I have already addressed the first two factors. New procedures to expedite the nomination and selection of fuels projects were announced in the "Fuel Treatment Program Development and Collaboration Process" memorandum of March 20, 2002. I issued guidance to contracting officers to expand the use of contracts and streamline contracting procedures in the "Completing Fuels Treatment Projects and Increasing Outside Contracting" memorandum of

April 24, 2002. Today I am issuing guidance to address the budget process for hazardous fuels projects.

I have been advised that budgetary and financial policies, and practices can delay fund allocations to the field in the early months of the fiscal year. This is especially true of the Department's Wildland Fire Management (WFM) appropriation account because it is appropriated into a single account and then must be subdivided and distributed among the participating bureaus (the Bureaus of Land Management and Indian Affairs, the National Park Service, and the Fish and Wildlife Service) and then to their respective regional offices, state offices, and field stations. This multi-step process has typically taken several months to complete. The unfortunate result is that the Department has lost opportunities to conduct fuels treatment projects in the months of October and November. I am determined that we do better starting this fall.

I am therefore announcing a new Departmental policy regarding the allocation and availability of funds in the Wildland Fire Management appropriation account that will enable the Department to conduct an ambitious hazardous fuels treatment program beginning early in the fiscal year. Bureau Directors are urged to take the necessary administrative steps to ensure the policy will be fully implemented on October 1, 2002, the beginning of fiscal year 2003. The guiding principle for the policy is that fuels treatments, especially hazardous fuels removal in the wildland-urban interface, must take place regardless of internal administrative practices. The elements of the policy follow below.

1. Work on ongoing fuels treatment projects will continue at the beginning of the new fiscal year. Any project funds that were allocated but remain unobligated on September 30 will carry over into the new fiscal year because the WFM appropriation is a "no-year" appropriation; that is, the funds are available until expended. The Department's Office of Budget (POB) will work with the Office of Management and Budget to see that these funds are apportioned before the beginning of the fiscal year. Field project managers have the authority to continue work on ongoing projects until one of the following occurs: the project is completed; the allocated project funds are fully obligated; or the funds for the project are reallocated to another project.
2. New fuels treatment projects may be initiated at the beginning of the fiscal year. Unobligated (carryover) balances from the prior year and funds provided under a continuing resolution will be available for immediate obligation on October 1. These funds may be used to pay the costs of continuing projects as well as an affordable level of new fuels treatment projects. A continuing resolution may not provide enough funding for all scheduled projects to begin on time. Some new projects may be delayed until OMB apportions the appropriation. Therefore, the Department's POB will submit an apportionment request within three business days after the appropriation is enacted and will coordinate with OMB to ensure that fuels treatment funds are apportioned for full operations as soon as possible. The bureaus will be notified promptly when the apportionment is signed.

3. Bureaus will conduct their normal administrative funds control activities concurrently with fuels treatment projects. Fuels projects for fiscal year 2003 will be selected by October, enabling the bureaus to promptly release funds to the new projects at the beginning of the fiscal year. Any approved, scheduled projects delayed under a continuing resolution may begin upon OMB apportionment of the enacted appropriation. Fund transfer requests should be submitted to the Treasury Department for firefighting bureaus within three business days of the OMB apportionment. Likewise, all of the firefighting bureaus should have their internal hazardous fuels treatment project allocations prepared and ready for release to the field project managers within three business days of the OMB apportionment (i.e. concurrent with the transfer actions).

These steps will expedite the availability of funding and accelerate the completion of fuels treatment projects. This new policy, when coupled with accelerated project selections and improvements in Interior contracting processes, will put the Department in a position to be even more successful in our efforts to run the most effective fuels treatment program possible. I recognize that some bureaus will have to adjust some administrative control of funds practices and internal controls to comply with this direction. I hope you understand the necessity for these changes and will greatly appreciate your cooperation in implementing them.

Any questions about this policy should be directed to Scott Dalzell in the Office of Wildland Fire Coordination at 202-606-0509 or Charles Towle in the Office of Budget at 202-208-5219.

cc: Office of Wildland Fire Coordination
Office of Budget