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FROM : National Wildfire Coordinating Group
REPLY TO : NWCG@nifc.gov
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SUBJECT : SAFETY WARNING: 2004 Fire Season & Aviation Resources

May 21, 2004

To: Geographic Area Coordination Groups
From: National Multi Agency Coordination Group

As we move into the 2004 fire season, all indications are that it will be as severe as the last four. Add the recent announcement that the USDA Forest Service and USDI Bureau of Land Management have terminated the contracts for large fixed-wing airtankers, and it appears to be another tough year for our firefighters on the line. It is a good time to stress that firefighter and public safety is the #1 priority in all firefighting operations, and that regardless of the resources that may or may not be available, the basic rules of firefighting still apply.

Firefighter safety must not be compromised as a result of the loss of our airtanker fleet. As most of us learned early on, tactics should never be dependent on aerial support. As long as firefighters adhere to the Standard Firefighting Orders, maintain situational awareness and mitigate the risks associated with the 18 Watchout Situations, their safety is assured.

To further reinforce firefighter safety in this context of reduced heavy airtanker capability, Agency Administrators and Fire Managers must re-evaluate and, if necessary, modify the strategic and tactical directions they give to Incident Commanders.

The shortage of heavy airtankers may increase the likelihood of emerging fires escaping initial attack, resulting in the need for more firefighters. Recognizing this, it is important that the fatigue of firefighters and support personnel be closely monitored, and that proactive countermeasures to mitigate that fatigue be identified and implemented early in the season.

Agency Administrators and Fire Managers are urged to stress the following points with

firefighters:

- Fight every fire from a solid anchor point, and always ensure the line is secure before moving on.
- If the lack of airtanker support is making control objectives difficult to attain, look for tactical advantages that can be achieved by applying more effort after the burning period (cooler temperatures, higher humidities), and by taking advantage of terrain and fuel breaks.
- Maintain situational awareness and recognize changes in fire behavior that may indicate the need to modify strategy or tactics. Use the Risk Management Process outlined in the Incident Response Pocket Guide (IRPG).
 - Always ensure LCES is implemented.
 - Diligently follow the Standard Firefighting Orders and mitigate for the 18 Situations that Shout “Watch Out”.
- In order to make the most of limited resources, minimize acreage lost through emphasis on aggressive initial attack. Initial attack should remain the top priority for most available aviation resources.
- Always maintain positive communication, and make certain everyone knows and understands the plan.

Remember, the loss of large airtankers gives us one less tool in the toolbox and we must improvise and adapt to that loss. Staying vigilant and consistently applying basic firefighting principles to our operations will ensure that no firefighter will be at greater risk.

Discuss these points with your crews and your fellow firefighters early this season, and keep them in mind as you work through the year. Have a good season.

/s/ Don Artley
Chair, NMAC
