

**Statement of Wayne Nordwall**  
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**Bureau of Indian Affairs, Department of the Interior**  
**Before the Forests and Forest Health Subcommittee**  
**of the**  
**Committee on Resources**  
**U.S. House of Representatives**  
**Hearing on**  
**The Cooperation among Various Governmental Agencies**  
**in Fighting Wildland Fires**  
**September 28, 2002**

### **Introduction**

Good morning, Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee. My name is Wayne Nordwall and I am the Director for the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) Western Regional Office which includes the federally recognized tribes of the states of Nevada, Utah and Arizona. I am accompanied by John Philbin, the BIA's Western Regional Forester. My testimony today will discuss the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) response to the Rodeo-Chediski Fire, the effects the fire had on the Fort Apache Indian Reservation, and land management practices regarding fire treatment.

### **Background**

The BIA is a major partner in wildland firefighting. We partner with federal and State agencies through National, State, and local agreements. More than 20 percent of all federal wildland firefighters are BIA or tribal employees hired under contracts or cooperative agreements. The fact that so many people can be available on short notice for extended periods of time for this difficult and dangerous work speaks for itself.

Our preparedness funding is based on a planning process that recognizes the high fire occurrence is due to the flammable fuel types that exist here in the Southwest. Most of the funding is directed at initial attack resources such as, engines, helicopters and the staffing that goes along with that. Funding is available for national resources (hotshot crews), interagency cooperation (staffing at local, regional and national coordination centers) and emergency crews.

Local managers make decisions on a daily basis about which of their firefighting resources are available to help on fires outside of their immediate area. In almost all cases, firefighting resources are available to assist immediate neighbors on initial attack, with the provision that they be returned at the end of the shift.

In addition to the resources provided through the planning process, severity funding may be requested when

it becomes apparent that the conditions contributing to fire danger will be substantially above normal. That was obviously the case this year and we requested an additional \$1,500,000 for the Western region. This resulted in the availability of additional helicopters and single engine air tankers (SEATS) at the San Carlos and Fort Apache Agencies.

### **Responses to the Rodeo-Chediski Fire**

The Rodeo Fire was first reported to the BIA Fort Apache Agency in Whiteriver, Arizona at 1611 hours on June 18, 2002. Since we still had resources on an earlier fire (Pina) nearby and two SEATS were on duty at the Cibecue airport, the response was rapid. The first SEAT drop was within twelve minutes and shortly followed by three engines and two crews. Within one hour of the first report we had two crews (40 personnel), two helitack crews (6 personnel), four engines (8 personnel), two SEATS and three dozers working the fire with additional crews, overhead, and air tankers on order. At the same time we were responding to five false alarms. Because of the nature of the smoke column, people were reporting the Rodeo fire at different locations. This required initial attack responses until the reports could be checked out.

By the end of the first hour the fire was estimated to be over 100 acres and growing. The fire intensity, from early on, exceeded the capabilities of the control resources. Seventy foot flame lengths fueled by overabundant fuels rendered retardants ineffective. Rates of spread were such that retardant lines could not be connected. It should be noted that within the first hour, orders for fire resources were being placed with the White Mountain Zone (WMZ) interagency office in Springerville, AZ.

After the sun went down the normal reduction in fire behavior did not occur. The fire continued to burn through the night and into some very difficult terrain. By 1930 hours the fire exceeded 700 acres and had more than 200 people working on it with 200 more on order. At 2236 hours the Eastern Arizona Fire Management team was ordered. This team consisted of thirty people from federal and state agencies in Eastern Arizona. Many of the team members are BIA employees and were already assigned to the fire. Before midnight there were 300 people on the fire. Crews did not pursue the fire downhill in the dark for two reasons: (1) building line downhill is as dangerous as attacking a running fire head-on, and (2) the steep slopes were interspersed with forty foot cliffs. The first opportunity to actually stop the head of the fire appeared to be Carrizo Creek, which is a broad gravelly drainage area with numerous interruptions in the vegetation. This was not to be.

At roughly 1000 hours on June 19, 2002, the fire made a crowning downhill run from Cibecue ridge and crossed Carrizo Creek with a wall of flame. At about 1015 hours an evacuation was recommended for the communities located in the path of this fire. By 1108 hours all personnel were ordered off the fire due to the extreme fire behavior and a "Type I" Incident Management team was ordered, which consisted of a team of seventy-two people from various agencies in Arizona and New Mexico, including BIA employees from the Fort Apache Agency.

By 1730 hours the fire crossed the Rim Road into the Apache Sitgreaves National Forest along a six mile front. It is estimated that the fire consumed more than 10,000 acres in a fifteen minute period at about this time, or about one square mile a minute. During a nine hour period on June 19th, the fire averaged 100 acres per minute, an unprecedented incident in the Southwest.

Meanwhile, on the morning of June 20, at 0837 hours, the Chediski fire was reported to the BIA at the Whiteriver fire dispatch office on June 20 at 0837 hours. The Tonto National Forest had received a report

earlier in the morning that there was a fire in the vicinity of the fish hatchery in Canyon Creek They responded with engines to the incident before an exact location was determined. While our lookout at Chediski was aware of action that the Tonto National Forest crew was taking, the Chediski lookout was unable to see any smoke at the time. The Tonto lookout at Colcord finally reported smoke at about 0835 and our BIA lookout at Chediski reported the smoke 6 minutes later. This is when jurisdiction of the fire was determined. There was a short period of time when those engines were turned around because the fire was inaccessible by road, but they were asked to continue to get as close as possible to the incident, which they did.

Once again, the BIA responded within the hour with air tankers, helicopters, engines, and crews, but was still unsuccessful, as the fire weather conditions worsened from the previous day. Before 1000 hours the wind was reported to be at twenty-five miles per hour and growing. The first heavy air tankers did not arrive until around noon. The SEATs had to switch to Whiteriver from Cibecue because of the difficult winds. This made for a longer turn-around time. The fire already exceeded one hundred twenty acres. By 1400 hours, the possibility of needing to evacuate the town of Heber was reported. Within two hours the fire spread rapidly to more than 2,000 acres, the Chediski look-out was evacuated, the Eastern Arizona fire team was ordered, and a recommendation to evacuate Heber and the Canyon Creek fish hatchery was relayed to the White Mountain interagency office.

By June 23, the Rodeo fire joined the Chediski fire to create the largest fire in the history of the Southwest - ultimately burning over 468,000 acres, or 730 square miles.

### **PowerPoint Presentation**

We would like to take this opportunity to provide a *PowerPoint* presentation which shows the fire during the first few days and provides visual information of the difference between treated and untreated areas. The presentation runs about twenty minutes.

### **Fire Effects on the Fort Apache Indian Reservation**

Of the 468,000 acres burned during the Rodeo-Chediski fire, 276,000 acres were on tribal-trust land. We estimate that more than 60 percent of the standing timber was destroyed by the fire. To date, we have made two modifications to an existing timber salvage contract that would allow the Tribe's own enterprise, Fort Apache Timber Company (FATCO) to log the burnt timber for both the Cibecue and Whiteriver sawmills. But the White Mountain Apache Tribe has requested that we prepare some salvage timber sales for the open market because FATCO does not have the capacity to handle all the sawmill work that needs to be done. Unfortunately, the interest in open market sales has all come from outside of Arizona, since local sawmill capacity has diminished in recent years. Selling to sawmills out of state will cause increased transportation costs for the salvage timber that will have a negative impact on the price the Tribe receives. Furthermore, there is no guarantee that the timber will sell or how much it will sell for, but we know that time is against us as the dead trees have already begun to deteriorate.

Intensive and extensive rehabilitation work has also begun, with over five million pounds of grass seed applied to reduce the soil losses. Almost 200,000 seedlings are growing and we expect to have nearly one million containerized seedlings ready for planting next fall.

While rehabilitation is moving forward, the impacts of the destroyed forests on the White Mountain Apache people will be profound. A large amount of their commercially producible timber has been destroyed and

vast areas have been left with no living ground cover to protect the soil from devastating erosion. The natural ecology has been nearly extinguished and with it all of the wildlife habitat that used to dominate the area. In addition, there have been significant cultural losses to the White Mountain Apache people that I will not attempt to describe here today. Besides specific locations with special meaning, the land itself is sacred to the people and they are the only ones who could begin to express that loss. I raise these issues with the Committee to point out the long-term harm to the ecosystem, the wildlife and the people that will arise from this catastrophic fire. A fire management regime that includes a strong hazardous fuels reduction component could really improve our ability to protect remaining forests in the area from a similar fate.

### **Land management practices and fire effects**

It is important to note that not all of the fire area suffered severe damage. There are several reasons for this, including most notably, the thinning of forests and prescribed burning. Three large units within the fire area were either commercially harvested and burned, or precommercially thinned and burned, all within the last five years. During the fire run, these units were in the direct path of high-intensity crown fires. However, major tree mortality occurred only on the perimeter of these units. The fire proceeded to drop out of the crowns and continue through these areas as a low to moderate intensity surface fire. Without the thinning and burning treatments, these areas would have sustained a very high mortality rate and could have incurred the same severe ecological damage that destroyed the natural environment in many other parts of the burned area.

Currently, we thin smaller diameter trees under three different programs: (1) fire crews may thin limited areas to create fuel breaks for the fire suppression, (2) forest development crews conduct precommercial thinning, and (3) BIA treats certain areas for mistletoe control under a U.S. Department of Agriculture program. Lately we have begun implementing the Hazardous Fuels Reduction (HFR) program, including the Wildland Urban Interface (WUI) program, which are part of the National Fire Plan that began in 2001. These will supplement and improve the strategic direction of our small diameter thinning programs.

Once many areas are thinned, it becomes safe to begin a prescribed fire regimen. The BIA has been performing prescribed burning for over 50 years on the Fort Apache Reservation. Harold Weaver, the Area Forester, introduced prescribed burning to the Forest Manager, Harry Kallender, in the late 1940's. During the 1950's Mr. Kallender instituted an extensive prescribed burning program on Fort Apache. This program continued under the next Forest Manager, Bud Mast. In 1971, a lightning storm ignited 80 separate fires which joined to become the Carrizo fire. This 60,000 acre fire had been the largest timber fire in Arizona and it prompted an aggressive program to treat 111,000 acres with prescribed burning in 1975 alone. That year, however, the amount of smoke, coupled with inversions, had impacts as far as the city of Phoenix and since that date we have modified and improved our practices to better account for weather conditions, moisture levels, air quality concerns, and to take account of specific tribal government concerns. In the areas where we have conducted prescribed burning and thinning (including logging) in a regular and managed regime, we have been very successful in controlling the intensity of fires and have generally improved the health of the forest stands on public and on tribal-trust lands.

One important point that I want to emphasize is our strong belief that solutions to the problem of overabundant forest and rangeland fuels must include the private sector and local governments, including tribal governments. It is critical that they are fully involved in any opportunities to engage in forest health management and to receive the benefits of economic development.

### **Conclusion**

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today. I will be happy to answer any questions you may have.

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