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- The Future of Fire Management -



A wildland firefighter watches as a single engine air tanker, or SEAT, drops retardant on a wildfire in Nevada. Photo by Joe Bradshaw, BLM.

BY JEFF RUPERT

A new year means fresh opportunities to tackle current and future wildland fire management challenges. As the Interior Department strategizes for the coming fire year, we're also focused on long-term goals that will shape the future of wildland fire management.

Wildland Fire Workforce Reform

One of Interior's most important goals is our wildland fire workforce reform effort. Supported by President Biden's Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, this initiative will give our employees greater stability, enable them to grow in their positions, and improve the Department's ability to address more extreme wildfires and meet year-round wildland fire management needs.

- The Future of Fire Management (Continued) -

In 2023, Interior continued wildland fire workforce reform by implementing the temporary pay supplements provided by Bipartisan Infrastructure Law. We are hearing positive feedback from wildland fire personnel, stating that the supplements have increased their quality of life and are supporting critical necessities, like housing. Interior continues to work towards a permanent pay solution with Congress, which is essential and long overdue.

We also implemented the new 0456 Wildland Fire Management Occupational Series for federal wildland firefighters in 2023, as directed by the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law. Interior is also working to build our workforce through on-the-ground recruitment efforts, such as career fairs and hiring events, throughout 2024.

Another component of our workforce reforms is providing greater support for wildland firefighter health and wellbeing. Interior and the USDA Forest Service are developing a joint behavioral health program to provide support tailored to the unique experiences and needs of our firefighters. We're currently finalizing the program framework and anticipate significant progress on this front in 2024.



- The Future of Fire Management (Continued) -



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These improvements provide the foundation we need to continue Interior's critical workforce transformation effort – including our ability to recruit and retain a diverse workforce.



- The Future of Fire Management (Continued) -



The Bipartisan Infrastructure Law

The Bipartisan Infrastructure Law provides a historic \$1.5 billion increase for Interior's wildland fire management efforts. Since 2022, the law has helped Interior invest in ecosystem restoration, hazardous fuels management, wildfire preparation, post-wildfire recovery, and our wildland fire workforce. For example, the National Wildfire Coordinating Group is using \$27 million in Bipartisan Infrastructure Law funds to transform wildland firefighting workforce training and qualification processes. This will create a performancebased training system – an effort that further professionalizes the wildland firefighting workforce. This influx of funding has also allowed the Department to accomplish fuels management projects on 2.6 million acres of land in fiscal year 2023 - a 30 percent increase over fiscal year 2022.

- The Future of Fire Management (Continued) -

This five-year investment will continue in 2024, as Interior implements \$138 million in new allocations for crucial efforts such as modernizing wildland fire training and position qualifications and restoring landscapes. These investments build on \$647 million previously allocated under the law since it went into effect in fiscal year 2022.



Wildfire Risk Reduction and Post-Fire Recovery

In fiscal year 2023, Interior completed 2.6 million acres of fuels treatments, a 30 percent increase over fiscal year 2022. As we all know, proactive hazardous fuels reduction is one of the most critical tools to reduce wildfire risk to communities and natural resources; Interior will continue to build on these efforts in 2024 and beyond.

It's also crucial for Interior to continue its focus on post-wildfire recovery efforts. Fostering recovery where ecosystems cannot recover naturally will mitigate the damaging effects of wildfires and set landscapes on a path toward natural recovery and climate resilience.

- The Future of Fire Management (Continued) -

Collaboration and Partnerships

Wildland fire management involves a wide range of entities. States, Tribes, local governments, the private sector, non-governmental organizations, and academia all bring unique capacities and capabilities that cannot be fulfilled by the federal government alone.

To successfully tackle wildland fire management and risk reduction issues, we must better involve all relevant entities and partners. This was also identified as a priority in the federal Wildland Fire Mitigation and Management Commission's final report to Congress as critical to solving the nation's wildfire crisis. This is why, in 2024 and beyond, Interior will strive to open collaborative doors wherever possible, with the goal of reducing the silos and barriers that prevent the critical, on-the-ground work necessary to not only manage wildfires, but also proactively reduce wildfire risk on a landscape scale in a changing climate.



- The Future of Fire Management (Continued) -



Fresh Opportunities

While solving the nation's wildfire crisis can be a daunting task, increasing support and research are helping us light the path toward successfully living with fire. The Wildland Fire Mitigation and Management Commission's report to Congress provides an excellent roadmap for not just federal agencies but all partners, with an emphasis on the absolute necessity of aligning the right support and collaboration to tackle such a significant challenge. The report also validates what we already knew about the importance of workforce reforms for federal wildland firefighters, such as the need for a permanent wildland firefighter pay solution, from an objective source.

Overall, partner collaboration and public participation are giving us the right foundation to build new relationships, create more cohesive approaches, and remove the silos that limit effective wildfire risk reduction throughout the country. As we look to 2024, it's encouraging to see the public shift toward a better understanding of wildland fire, which will ultimately help Interior and our partners holistically address the breadth of wildland fire management needs with a goal of creating communities and landscapes that are resilient to wildfire as a natural and integral part of our nation's future.

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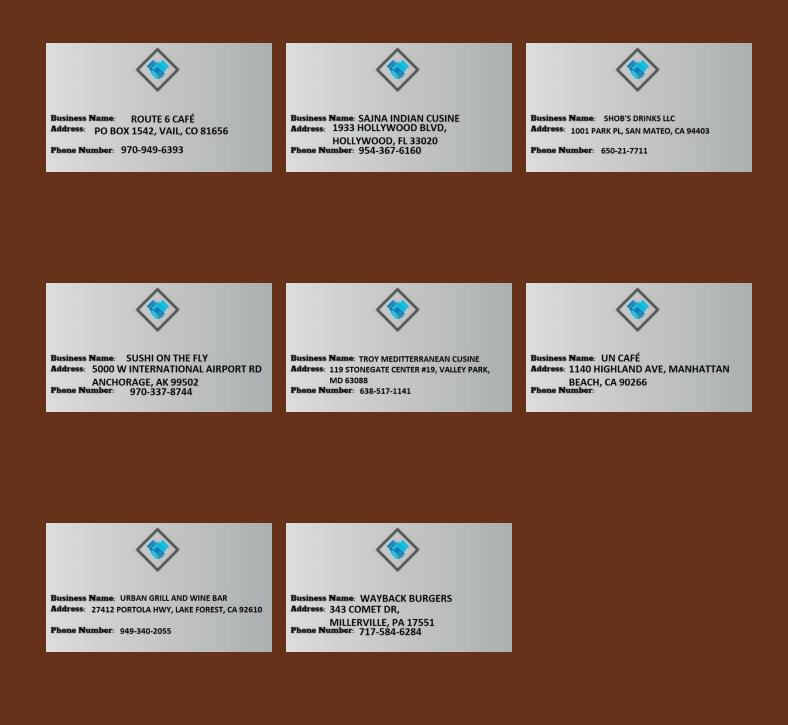
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