

2003 Rural Ohio Fire Department Survey Summary Report

Ohio Department of Natural Resources, Division of Forestry

Wildland Fire at the Wildland-Urban Interface: A Threat to Ohio's Communities

Each year, more than 1,000 wildfires burn between 4,000 and 6,000 acres in Ohio. Oftentimes, these fires burn dangerously close to homes and communities, at the wildland urban interface. The phrase "wildland urban interface" is used to describe areas where communities, homes and other structures are developed within or adjacent to wildland areas such as forests, grasslands or prairies. Wildland urban interface situations pose significant fire hazards to homes and communities, from the standpoint that wildland fires (fires that burn on forests, grasslands or prairies) are likely to quickly and destructively spread to homes or structures. Unfortunately, most of these fires are the result of arson or careless brush, debris and trash fires.

Containing wildland urban interface fires quickly and efficiently reduces the likelihood that the fires will have more large-scale impacts on the public and the environment. In Ohio (as in most other states) local, rural and volunteer fire departments are often the first responders on the scene of wildland urban interface fires. These departments play an invaluable role when it comes to protecting our communities from wildland fire. However, fires at the wildland urban interface present firefighters with situations that they may be unprepared or inadequately trained to face. Ensuring that Ohio's local, rural and volunteer fire departments are provided with sufficient training and equipment resources to attack wildland urban interface fires would greatly help to minimize the effects of wildland fires at the wildland urban interface.

Wildland Urban Interface Fires: An Issue Gaining National Attention

As the wildland urban interface grows and the number of wildland urban interface fire incidents rises, greater attention is being given to local, rural and volunteer fire departments' capabilities to respond to wildfires that threaten our nation's homes and communities. Tasked by the National Fire Plan's *Ten Year Comprehensive Strategy for Reducing Wildland Fire Risks to Communities and the Environment* to

"Assess the training, equipment, safety awareness and services provided by rural, volunteer, and other firefighters who work in the Wildland-Urban Interface and report to Congress",

the National Association of State Foresters (NASF) set out to develop analyses and recommendations regarding the wildland fire response capabilities of local, rural and volunteer fire departments nationwide. In the resulting report on this action item, a June 2003 Assessment and Report to Congress titled, "The Changing Role and Needs of Local, Rural, and Volunteer Fire Departments in the Wildland Urban Interface", NASF identified four key issues facing Wildland Urban Interface fire response units across the

United States. In their report, NASF called upon Congress to address these critical issues so that local, rural and volunteer fire departments may be better able to contain fires at the wildland urban interface. These issues were:

1. Wildland fire training,
2. Efficient interagency response,
3. Initial attack and emergency communications capability, and
4. Coordinated federal and state assistance.

More specifically, NASF found that the nation's local, rural and volunteer fire departments are in need of wildland firefighter training and equipment, improved coordination when it comes to interagency/cross-jurisdictional wildland fire response, financial assistance for emergency communications and more effective federal and state funding assistance. Not surprisingly, a recent survey of Ohio's rural fire service found that these same issues prevail among the state's rural fire departments.

2003 Rural Ohio Fire Department Survey

In July, 2003, as part of a larger national effort coordinated by NASF, the Ohio Department of Natural Resources (ODNR), Division of Forestry, sent a survey to over 1,000 rural Ohio fire departments¹. This study followed two previous rural volunteer fire department surveys, conducted by the Division of Forestry in 1984 and 1994.

The 2003 study, modeled after a survey created by the Texas Forest Service, was designed to capture the wildland fire training, funding and equipment needs and capabilities of rural fire departments across the state. The survey responses pointed to an overwhelming need for increased wildland fire resource support for rural fire departments. The findings of the study closely mirror the four critical issues brought forward by NASF to Congress².

Wildland Fire Training

As the NASF Report to Congress notes, "safe and effective initial response requires a basic level of training in wildland fire". However, those departments that are most likely to respond to wildland fires at the wildland urban interface (rural volunteer fire departments) are also the least likely to have adequate funding for wildland fire training or equipment.

The 2003 ODNR Division of Forestry survey of Ohio's rural fire departments clearly revealed that wildland firefighting training is at the forefront of Ohio's rural fire

¹ Departments were identified as being "rural" if they served populations of 25,000 or less.

² More detailed analyses and discussions of the 2003 Rural Ohio Fire Department Survey data are contained within the full study report.

departments' needs. Key survey findings related to wildland firefighting training included the following:

- ❖ ***Volunteer fire departments, on average, rated wildland fire as being one of the top three types of emergency situations that impact them.***

Along with structure fires and medical/EMS emergencies, wildland fire was ranked among the top emergency responses that impact rural Ohio fire departments. All three types of rural Ohio fire departments (e.g., volunteer, partially paid, and paid) rated wildland fire as having a greater impact on their departments than search and rescue operations and hazardous materials.

- ❖ ***Basic wildland firefighting ranks high on the list of rural Ohio fire department training needs.***

Out of a list of 18 types of training, basic wildland firefighting ranked fifth in terms of the training most needed by both volunteer and paid rural fire departments, and ninth for partially volunteer/partially paid departments. All three groups ranked basic wildland firefighting training as being a greater need than hazardous material, first aid/first responder and fire prevention training.

- ❖ ***The majority of rural Ohio's fire departments support including wildland firefighting courses in advanced firefighter certification requirements.***

Statewide, among all volunteer, partially paid and fully paid rural fire departments, there is very little departmental participation in the National Wildfire Coordinating Group (NWCG) wildland firefighter "red card" training. However, well over half of all fire departments, regardless of type, support including these courses in Ohio's advanced firefighter certification requirements.

Efficient Interagency Response

Wildland fires burn without regard to jurisdictional boundaries, often creating situations where multiple departments are called upon to respond. Mutual aid agreements become extremely important during these incidents - in situations where cross-jurisdictional incidents are not guided by a mutual aid agreement, conflicts, delays and losses typically result.

- ❖ ***Although most rural Ohio fire departments operate under mutual aid agreements, not all agreements are written.***

Over 90% of rural Ohio fire departments reported having mutual aid agreements with neighboring fire departments. However, slightly less

(ranging between 70-80%) reported that these agreements were formal, written agreements. Verbal agreements increase the likelihood of miscommunication, disagreement and delayed responses.

Initial Attack and Emergency Communications Capability

NASF reports that the multitude of communication frequencies and channels used by emergency response departments often results in conflicts due to frequency interference and a lack of interoperability. The 2003 Rural Ohio Fire Department Survey found that the potential for this interference and lack of interoperability clearly exists among Ohio's rural fire departments.

❖ *Ohio's rural fire departments operate on various frequencies.*

While the majority of rural Ohio fire departments operate under VHF High Band frequencies, a large number operate under other frequencies, including VHF Low Band, UHF Low Band and 800 MHZ Band. Frequency use varies both across and within individual counties so that many neighboring cities, towns, villages and even departments are not able to communicate with each other.

It is also important to note that, while the state of Ohio recently developed the infrastructure to support MARCS (Multi-Agency Radio Communication System) communications statewide, there are no funding opportunities to assist local, rural and volunteer fire departments with implementation and maintenance expenses. Although the state will be installing MARCS base stations in every county 911 call-center, the MARCS radio hardware and the associated user-fees are cost-prohibitive for departments operating on small budgets.

Coordinated Federal and State Assistance

As NASF found to be the case nationwide, Ohio's rural fire departments are often under funded in light of their responsibilities. As a result, those departments that are poorly funded have fewer resources and receive less training. Moreover, rural fire departments benefit greatly from various federal and state fire assistance programs, such as the USDA Forest Service's State Fire Assistance (SFA) and Volunteer Fire Assistance (VFA) programs and the Federal Excess Personal Property program (FEPP). Both the SFA and VFA programs provide funding support for wildland firefighting training and resources, while the FEPP program loans fire vehicles and other materials to volunteer firefighters. The 2003 Ohio Rural Fire Department Survey found the following:

❖ *Funding, along with firefighter availability and member recruitment/retention are among the leading departmental challenges facing rural Ohio fire departments.*

- ❖ ***Ohio's volunteer rural fire departments operate with fewer resources over a greater area than do partially paid or fully paid rural fire departments.***

When considered from both a statewide and regional perspective, volunteer fire departments operate on tighter budgets with fewer firefighters and cover more square miles with older fire vehicles than do their paid counterparts.

- ❖ ***Statewide, rural Ohio fire departments have only enough wildland fire protective gear to outfit approximately 20% of their members.***

Despite reporting that wildland fire has a greater impact than search and rescue operations and hazardous materials on their organizations, statewide, rural Ohio fire departments have only enough wildland fire protective gear to outfit fewer than 20% of their firefighters.

- ❖ ***Wildland fire protective gear is among the leading equipment needs of rural Ohio fire departments.***

Rural Ohio volunteer fire departments listed wildland fire protective gear as being their fifth priority, in terms of equipment needs, following only rescue and communications equipment, bunker gear and Self Contained Breathing Apparatuses. All three types of fire departments (volunteer, partially volunteer/partially paid, and paid) ranked wildland fire protective gear as being a greater need than, among other things, hoses and nozzles, brush trucks, portable pumps and tanks, and tankers.

- ❖ ***The Federal Excess Personal Property program loans excess federal property, such as engines, trucks, fire hoses, etc. to Ohio rural volunteer fire departments. Recent screening changes within the FEPP program have made it more difficult for Ohio's rural fire departments to attain those excess materials that are of greatest need.***

Nearly 10% of the vehicles reported by volunteer fire departments in the 2003 Rural Ohio Fire Department Survey were provided through the FEPP program. These vehicles included, among other things, brush trucks, tankers, and rescue vehicles. The FEPP program is particularly important to volunteer fire departments in southeast Ohio, where 12.5% of the fire service vehicles reported in the 2003 survey were provided through the FEPP program.

Meeting the Needs of Ohio's Rural Fire Departments

Funding, training and resource limitations significantly hamper Ohio's rural fire departments' abilities to respond to and contain wildland fires at the wildland urban interface. The findings from the 2003 Rural Ohio Fire Department study call attention to

the need for greater commitment from state and federal agencies to support these invaluable emergency response services. Such commitments will improve Ohio's rural fire departments' abilities to protect the state's wildland urban interface residents from the threats of wildland fire.