**COOPERATIVE COUNTY FULLY COMMITTED GUIDELINES**

“Fully Committed” is a term used in relation to the buildup of county-committed resources (equipment and personnel) to a wildland fire incident within that county, in preparation to asking for State assistance. Montana’s counties contain a wide spectrum of capabilities, which makes developing a one-size-fits-all, inclusive statement defining when a county is fully committed all but impossible. Most Land Offices, and some of their Co-op. Counties, find themselves having to make this judgment several times per year. Following are some general guidelines highlighting aspects of the State/County Cooperative Fire program as they pertain to commitment levels, as well as a “tickler” list to aid a Land Office representative, and the County’s representative, in making this determination.

The first thing to understand is that a county provides the necessary wildland fire protection afforded through the State/County Co-op. Fire program with a system of firefighters (primarily volunteers) from various Rural Fire Districts, Fire Service Areas, Volunteer Fire Companies, and County Rural Fire Departments. These *Guidelines* recognize the duty and responsibility of these same fire organizations to continue to provide standard and adequate fire protection within their respective legal jurisdictions, even during a county-wide wildland fire incident. Further, it is understood and accepted that any policy encompassing all possible situations is unrealistic and acknowledges that the merits of a request for state assistance must be jointly assessed and evaluated by the Incident Commander(s), the County Firewarden (or another county representative acting for the County Commissioners), and the assigned DNRC representative, on a case-by-case basis. County-wide mutual aid agreements, mapped initial attack and fire protection areas, and fire department drawdown plans are some of the aids that need to be available, and annually updated, to allow this group to assess the capabilities of a particular county. Signed mutual aid agreements with adjoining counties are valuable tools a county can use to maintain their ability to respond to all legally mandated incidents. When, or if, these out-of-county mutual aid resources enter a paid status after State assistance is given is dependent solely on the judgment of the assigned DNRC representative and is

covered in the Mobilization of Local Government Fire Forces document.

Following is a list of some things that the County should consider doing prior to a wildland request for State assistance:

* Department(s) with jurisdiction are committed presently, and for the duration of the incident.
* Other divisions of county government are committed as necessary:
  + County Road Department.
  + Law Enforcement.
  + Search and Rescue (S&R).
  + Disaster and Emergency Services (DES).
* Mutual Aid resources within the county are utilized as per annual operating plan(s):
  + Drawdown plans implemented.
* All DNRC equipment on loan is committed to incident(s) or other initial attack responsibilities.
* County equipment and personnel are committed to incident(s) or other initial attack responsibilities as appropriate.
* Signed Mutual Aid Agreements with adjoining counties, state agencies, federal agencies, or other fire jurisdictions invoked as necessary. Knowing these other agencies might be committed to their own incident(s), this listing is offered for consideration when reasonably available.
* Consideration given to invoking the County 2-Mill Levy, per 7-33-2209 MCA, and/or
* Consideration given to invoking the County 2-Mill Levy, per DES 10-3-405 MCA. The County usually has to declare emergency or disaster in this case.

While most incidents unfold in a linear fashion, starting small and growing larger in a predictable manner, some do not. Weather, fuels, and other factors can cause an incident to grow exponentially, from small to complex, in a very short time. Sustained high fire dangers, Haines Indexes 5+, Lightning Activity Levels (LAL’s) of 5, Burning Indexes (BI’s)/ Energy Release Components (ERC’s) above the 90th percentile, and other large incidents in the county or state could cause an emerging incident to progress past the point of possible containment with the county’s resources, or lower the potential for the county to respond adequately. (In cases such as this, the decision time to involve other cooperators and seek State assistance will naturally be compressed. In these cases, it may not be possible to use the above criteria to judge “fully committed.”) Also, as fire season conditions worsen, some pre-planning of the State assistance process needs to occur. Several forms of State assistance may be given to a county, before an “official” request is processed, in order to keep an incident from becoming “project” size, after which time an incident becomes very dangerous and expensive. For example, mutual aid response by DNRC resources, the use of retardant or other resources/supplies which the counties don’t have access to, should be considered if conditions warrant. It might help to set up some “trigger” points understood by all parties when such actions would occur.

The State/County Co-op Fire program attempts to strengthen the initial attack capabilities of a county’s fire forces by having the State (DNRC) provide training, equipment, and help in organizing fire protection. The State additionally provides, on an “as needed” basis, technical assistance in the form of County Fire Advisors, fixed and/or rotary wing air support, or other non-traditionally provided resources. In turn, the County agrees to initial attack all fires on State and private land within the county which are not otherwise protected. The County maintains responsibility for all such county fires, even after the request for State assistance has been approved. The County remains as a Line Officer, in consultation with the local DNRC Land Office representative overseeing the State’s involvement. The Jurisdiction can delegate management authority for specific tactical and support operations needed to mitigate an incident, but final responsibility rests with the jurisdiction.

The County must also maintain a presence throughout the incident(s) duration. At some agreed point after the incident’s containment and control, the County will be expected to take back operational control of the incident until it’s declared out. This point will be jointly agreed to by the I.C., the DNRC representative with authority, and the County Firewarden (or another representative acting for the County Commissioners). State involvement after this point will again be at the discretion of the local DNRC Land Office representative, in consultation with the County Firewarden.