

IDAHO DEPARTMENT OF LANDS COMMUNITY AND STRUCTURE FIRE PROTECTION FROM WILDLAND FIRES IN IDAHO

The question of who is responsible for protecting structures from wildland fires in Idaho is asked multiple times every fire season. Both the Great Basin (GBCG) and Northern Rockies (NRCG) Coordination Groups have published a document that does a good job discussing the shared responsibilities of homeowners, local fire service organizations (FSOs), and wildland fire agencies when wildland fires threaten homes and communities.

This document will provide additional clarification to Idaho Department of Lands (IDL) employees and agencies that provide protection for IDL on what is expected of the wildland fire agency and what is expected of the local FSO. This document is intended to add clarity to the Community and Structure Guidelines produced by NRCG and GBCG.

The direction provided is based on the fact that IDL is the State agency charged with protecting forest lands in Idaho, and local FSOs are primarily formed to provide structure suppression to the citizens within their boundary. IDL is trained and equipped to provide wildland fire suppression but not structure suppression. Local FSOs are trained and equipped to provide structure suppression, but typically do not have the training or equipment to suppress wildland fires, especially those that escape initial attack.

IDL expects its firefighters and fire managers to use standard wildland fire tactics to protect a structure or community from the threat of an advancing wildland fire. This would include the use of natural barriers, constructed firelines, wet lines, or retardant lines. When safe to do so, firelines should be reinforced by the wildland agency. This can be done by ground resources through the use of black lining, hose lays, or by aerial delivery of water or fire suppressants. IDL will bear the cost of these tactics as the protection agency on lands it protects under the Offset Agreement (Provision 32, 2007-2012 Cooperative Fire Protection Agreement).

Local FSOs are expected to provide direct suppression of fires in or on structures and protection of communities by the extinguishment of spot fires on or around the structure. They are also able to take internal suppression actions if needed to prevent the loss of a structure. The suppression of fire on or within a structure is their principal responsibility, and the local FSO should bear the cost of these tactics. Local FSOs may be able to acquire additional resources to assist with this responsibility, either through mutual aid or disaster declaration assistance.

Some local FSOs may have the resources, training, and experience to assist IDL with the wildland tactics being used to protect structures from the advancing wildland fire; however, it should not be expected. Only when the local FSO clearly communicates to IDL that they have excess resources that are properly trained in wildland tactics, and that their primary mission will not be compromised, should their assistance be accepted.

The use of tactics such as gelling, wrapping, and extensive fuels modifications around structures are not standard wildland fire tactics and should not be used by IDL. Fuel treatment should be done by homeowners and communities before fire threatens. IDL should encourage these activities to occur. If the local FSO determines these tactics are part of their effort to protect the structures, then they will be responsible for these tactics and the cost associated with them.

In summary, standard wildland fire tactics should be utilized by IDL to protect structures and communities, and the cost of these tactics will be IDL's responsibility. Standard structure suppression equipment and tactics should be utilized by the local FSO to protect structures and communities, and the cost of these tactics will be the local FSO's responsibility.