Indian Affairs - Office of Public Affairs

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WASHINGTON – Assistant Secretary – Indian Affairs Tara Sweeney today announced a number of firsts for the Bureau of Indian Affairs and its Wildland Fire and Aviation Management program resulting from their efforts to aid Indian Country and which demonstrate exceptional interagency collaboration abilities and commitment to improving the development of their wildland fire workforce through new training opportunities for women.

Bureau of Indian Affairs Sends Seven Wildland Firefighters to Australia

In December, the Bureau of Indian Affairs sent wildland fire personnel abroad for the first time to combat the wildfires in Australia. Since December, so far 95 firefighters from DOI and the USFS have been deployed at the request of the Australian Fire and Emergency Service Authorities Council. Of these, seven employees with the Bureau of Indian Affairs have deployed.

“The loss of life, property and environment are devastating in Australia,” said U.S. Secretary David Bernhardt. “The United States stands with our partners, and we will continue to support Australia in sending our world class personnel to contain these blazes and help protect Australian communities and wildlife.”

The U.S., Australia and New Zealand have been exchanging fire assistance for more than 15 years as the Australian and New Zealand personnel filled critical needs during peak wildfire season in the United States. The last time the U.S sent firefighters to Australia was in 2010.

Receiving the NIFC Governing Board’s Prestigious Pulaski Award

In June of 2019, the governing board of the National Interagency Fire Center (NIFC) in Boise, Idaho, selected the Bureau’s Fort Apache Agency in Whiteriver, Ariz., and the U.S. Forest Service’s Coronado National Forest Sierra Vista Ranger District office in Hereford, Ariz., to receive its prestigious Pulaski Award recognizing their interagency collaboration and outstanding performance on a Reserved Treaty Rights Land (RTRL) project.

The Pulaski Award recognizes federal, state and local government agencies who demonstrate outstanding performance in the area of interagency collaboration, cooperation and coordination. This is the first time the governing board has recognized the BIA with this award.

“When projects that have mutual benefit to both federal and tribal partners are done collaboratively, that is when we see the highest rewards of true partnership,” said Assistant Secretary Sweeney. “By working across jurisdictional boundaries we can do more than just protect landscapes, we can help preserve tribal cultures and traditions, which are closely tied to their lands.”

Federally recognized tribes reserve the right to use their ancestral and reserved treaty lands for their religious and cultural purposes, such as hunting, fishing and gathering activities. Part of the BIA’s trust responsibilities are to protect, restore and reduce the impacts of wildfire on these lands. In conjunction

with the White Mountain Apache Tribe, the Yavapai-Apache Nation, the Fort Apache Agency and Coronado National Forest, the BIA's Western Regional Office in Phoenix facilitated the development of a collaborative RTRL project to address shared interests that enhance the health and resiliency of the Oak Savana ecosystem, an area of grass and Emory Oak trees on the White Mountain Apache reservation which is of deep cultural and spiritual significance to the Apache people.

Supporting women for fire leadership training

In another first, the Bureau sponsored three female employees – two federal and one tribal – to attend the Fire Leadership for Women (FLFW) Program at the National Interagency Prescribed Fire Training Center (PFTC) in Tallahassee, Fla.: Yvette Leech with the Warm Springs Confederated Tribes' forestry department in Warm Springs, Ore.; Ashton Lynch, a firefighter with the Bureau's Pima Agency in Sacaton, Ariz.; and Cheryl Bright, a field coordinator with the BIA Branch of Wildland Fire Management at the NIFC office in Boise.

"With this training I can share what I learned with my coworkers and use my skills to help manage prescribed burns in the community I serve," said Lynch. "I am grateful to have been part of the Fire Leadership Module."

What make this a first is that across federal wildland agencies women hold less than 10 percent of fire positions and only seven percent hold leadership positions. To address this imbalance, the PFTC developed the FLFW program with the specific intent of using prescribed fire as a catalyst for bringing women together to create a support network that will help women advance within wildland fire management. During the 20-day course, trainees safely conducted 11 prescribed burns treating 2,507 acres in northern Florida. They also worked to obtain their certifications in numerous prescribed fire qualifications necessary for their career advancement.

Collaborating to address and reduce on-reservation wildland fires

Florida isn't the only state treating landscapes to reduce the hazard potential for wildfires. For two of the BIA's Arizona agencies – Fort Yuma and San Carlos – collaboration has been key to preventing and combatting wildland fires on the reservations they serve:

- Located along the Colorado River, the Cocopah Reservation sits 13 miles south of the city of Yuma and 15 miles north of San Lis, Mexico. Its unique boundaries border two countries – the United States and Mexico – and two states, Arizona and California. Thriving along the river's banks is an invasive and dangerous plant called salt cedar, with roots that drink deeply thereby helping to lower the water table and adding large deposits of salt to the soil. The plant's prolific and highly flammable branches threaten the river's wetland ecosystem and create significant fire hazards to neighboring communities when wildfires occur.

While removing the plant is a common management practice along the river, the U.S. Department of the Interior Office of Wildland Fire's Southern Border Fuels Management Initiative provided $563,00 in funding for a first-of-its-kind project: a four-year treatment plan that, due to its unique partnerships, is making wildfire management history.

As part of the Bureau's trust responsibility, the Fort Yuma Agency provides vegetation management and wildfire protection services across the 6,500–acre reservation. Coordinating with the Cocopah Tribe and the U.S. Department of Homeland Security's Bureau of Customs and Border Patrol, the BIA applied for

and received funding to treat nine miles – approximately 36 percent of the reservation's land mass – along the Colorado River. In total, 1,359 acres of invasive and foreign salt cedar will be treated, which will preserve the tribe's valuable economic investments and the cultural and traditional native species they rely on. In its first year of the initiative, firefighters treated 150 acres. They will continue making progress each fall and winter for the next three years.

- For the San Carlos Agency this was a fire year that wouldn't end, and the associated costs of supporting those fighting wildland fires on the San Carlos Reservation meant the BIA had to develop a better way of tracking expenses in order to support its firefighting employees and tribal and interagency partners. The high-fire occurrence resulted in the agency establishing an ad hoc BIA finance team capable of tracking and accounting for costs attributed to all fire personnel. The team consisted of five BIA employees from Billings, Mont., Portland, Ore., Sacramento, Calif., and Boise. They documented and tracked 156 incidents within four complex databases which, when combined, totaled an estimated cost of $4.7 million.

The team's work, and success, made a significant contribution to the San Carlos Agency this fire season, and led to discussions about the BIA developing its own Type 3 finance section capable of supporting any BIA regional office or agency, or tribal or interagency partner. Going forward, the section anticipates being able to provide training opportunities to improve fire finance capabilities throughout Indian Country.

"The important strides the BIA is taking to improve and protect Indian Country have long-term consequences that will change the landscape of tribal communities for decades. I commend these achievements, and encourage the wildland fire community to continue their improvement efforts in the years ahead," said BIA Director Darryl LaCounte.

The Assistant Secretary – Indian Affairs oversees the BIA, the oldest bureau in the Department of the Interior. The BIA director is responsible for managing the bureau's day-to-day operations through four offices – Indian Services, Justice Services, Trust Services, and Field Operations. These offices directly administer or fund tribally operated BIA infrastructure, economic development, law enforcement and justice, social services (including child welfare), tribal governance, and trust land and natural and energy resources management programs for the nation's 573 federally recognized American Indian and Alaska Native tribes through 12 regional offices and 81 agencies. The Wildland Fire and Aviation Management program is located in the Office of Trust Services.

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