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## Task Force Formed To Take Look Into State's Wildfire Policies

By Colleen Schreiber

AUSTIN — Last year Texas suffered through the worst fire season on record, with more than four million acres burned and 4000 homes and other structures lost. The fires also took 10 lives. Suppression costs reportedly exceeded \$337 million, far surpassing the amount the Texas Forest Service had budgeted. In the Bastrop fire complex, one insurance company alone reportedly paid out \$80 million in claims.

But that's old news. Or is it? For those who are still suffering, it's certainly not, but for those living in some parts of the state, particularly those areas that have received significant rain the last five or six months, the devastating drouth and devastating wildfires are probably now an afterthought.

Borger Fire Chief Bob Watson says that is most definitely the wrong attitude.

"We've almost seen the light switch go off," Watson remarks. "Some think just because they've had a little bit of rain, and we've seen a little green-up, that we're not going to have a bad fire year. That's the wrong attitude; this is no time to go to sleep."

Earlier in the morning he had briefed his crew, pointing out that the forecast called for 30 mile per hour winds.

"Don't think for one minute that we can't have a fire today," he told them. "Don't get complacent; make sure you have your head screwed on, because if we have to go out, it's going to be no different than it was six months ago."

He offered a similar message a few weeks back at a fire conference.

"Firefighters, city planners, county commissioners, judges, whoever, this is not the time to rest; this is the time that when we're not out fighting fire we need to be planning. We need to be implementing those plans, dropping a blade, getting lines cut, getting projects limbed up, brushed up, getting prepared, because we know it's going to dry out again, and when it does we need to be

ready," he told them.

Watson has been a structural firefighter for 31 years. He worked his way up through the ranks, making chief in 2007. He's also in his seventh year as a federal fire fighter. Last year he fought fire in five states. At the federal level, he's an ignition specialist, but he's now working on being a strike team and task force leader. He also has his prescribed burn manager's license, and most recently was appointed to the newly formed Wildfire Prevention Task Force.

Texas Agriculture Commissioner Todd Staples, co-chairman of the task force, is perhaps at least attempting to turn that light back on by bringing together state and federal agencies and landowner-based organizations to work together and form a viable plan to address the growing threat the state faces with regard to wildfire.

Many of the tactics that firefighters use to fight wildfires, Watson opines, no longer work. They no longer work in part, he says, because the environment is different, and he's not talking about global warming. Rather, he points to a long-term weather pattern of extended and periodic drouth coupled with excessively high temperatures and high winds.

He also points to the fact that the landscape is dramatically different today, in part because of a buildup in fuel loads due to reduced livestock grazing, and also because of an ever-increasing brush problem. These factors combined make "mega" wildfires more common, and they make any wildfire, no matter the size, more difficult to control, much less suppress.

He also points to city and county officials who, for whatever reason, be it lack of funding or lack of leadership, do little to no mitigation planning to reduce the threat of wildfire in their jurisdiction, as another part of the problem.

"We're the only city in Texas that I know of with a city ordinance that allows us to burn in our incorporated city limits," remarks Watson. "We've had the ordinance in place now for several years. I have e-mailed that document out to a lot of cities to look over, but I haven't heard of anyone who finally stepped up to make a change."

Mitigation efforts for the City of Borger entail burning out 200-foot strips, primarily on the south and southwest sides of the city. Additionally, as chief, he does an annual analysis to determine other trouble spots around the city; in some instances those areas that pose the greatest risk may be burned out in advance.

Albeit Borger is largely a rural community and trying to implement management-type prescribed burns in a highly populated urban interface, that area where suburbia meets rural, is a challenge uniquely its own and one that has largely not been addressed by state officials.

“The wildland-urban interface is the most dangerous place to fight fire,” insists Watson. “In the urban interface a firefighter has to become a hybrid firefighter — a structure firefighter and a wildland firefighter.”

From a human safety, property damage, economic perspective it is in these wildland-urban interfaces that the state stands to lose the most. And yet, Borger is one of only 45 communities in the state and only one of 751 areas in 40 states recognized as a firewise community by the Texas Forest Service. La Vista, near Austin, was the latest in Texas to receive such a designation. To achieve the firewise status, the community must obtain a wildfire risk assessment then create an action plan based on the assessment, conduct community cleanup events and pledge to invest a minimum of \$2 per capita in local firewise actions.

“Homeowners must take responsibility for educating themselves about firewise techniques,” Watson insists. “They need to understand that maybe those trees are way too close to their home or that maybe they need to mow their yard and keep trash picked up and put defensible space around their home to protect it from wildfire. These people, who build homes in the middle of a cedar thicket, uphill from a drainage, definitely need to take precautions.

“There is this misconception about wildfire,” he continues. “It’s not always a giant wall of fire that comes through that consumes everything. Rather, 99 percent of home ignitions are from flying embers and firebrands landing on or under a deck or in rose bushes that are dead because no one watered them or from fire brands that went through a vent because the vent holes were too big.”

Watson is very much a supporter of prescribed fire, but those who use this tool, be it for mitigation purposes or for habitat management, he opines, must be well-trained in the art and science of prescribed fire. For example, in addition to in-house training, Borger Fire Department personnel receive training from the National Park Service. In fact, Watson and his man receive 40 to 80 hours of training a year in wildland fire, and many of the city’s 26 firefighters are certified as federal fire fighters. Additionally, more than 300 volunteer and fulltime firefighters, he says, have gone through the training classes

that his department conducts in conjunction with the National Park Service.

Watson and his men have worked hard to bridge the sometimes contentious relationship between the career firefighters and volunteers. In addition to opening their training programs to anyone interested, the city also hosts an annual fire summit open to VFDs and the public. Last year one of the guest speakers was a retired fire chief from Orange County California who is a wildland-urban interface specialist.

“Until fire departments start getting along with each other, and county and city government start getting along, and everyone sees eye to eye, the way we handle wildfires in the state is not going to change. We all have to get on the same page and we have to have an organized, unified way of approaching how we not only fight fire but how we incorporate prescribed fire.”

Though he and his crew fought on many fires outside their jurisdiction last season, Watson says he did not experience the communication problems that so many landowners complained about, particularly when it came to the out of state federal fire fighters. It is for this reason that some leaders are of the opinion that in a state where the majority of the land is privately owned, helping firefighters, particularly the federal employees, understand something of the landowner culture in Texas also needs to be included in the fire training programs, particularly for the federal employees.

But how do you teach someone who didn't grow up here the culture? How do you explain to someone that private property rights in this state are as precious as the right to vote? Dr. Charles “Butch” Taylor, the founder of the landowner-based prescribed burn association movement in Texas, is of the opinion that if more volunteer fire departments were better trained in the use of prescribed fire, more wildfires could be managed at the county level and fewer feds would need to be called in.

Larry Joe Dougherty, president of the newly formed Prescribed Burn Alliance of Texas, agrees.

“We need preventive medicine. That is what prescribed burning is,” Dougherty insists.

Part of PBAT's mission is to reestablish the acceptance of prescribed fire to promote habitat development and also as a mitigation tool to lessen the threat from wildfires. The organization's motto is “Taking the wild out of fire.”

PBAT hopes to promote the use of safe and

effective prescribed fire by growing the number of alliance members and prescribed burn associations until all 254 counties in the state have a prescribed burn association.

“PBAT wants to see prescribed fire added as another arrow in the quiver for fighting and preventing wildfire,” Dougherty reiterates. “We can fight fire with fire a lot cheaper than we can draw water out of the Colorado River with \$40,000 a day airplanes making \$20,000 dips with water that we shouldn’t have to be using in fire suppression in the first place.”

The state, he opines, needs to identify the hotspots in these wildland-urban interfaces, and where possible use prescribed fire as part of the master management plan for managing fuel loads. The Texas Forest Service, to their credit, recently established the Texas Wildfire Risk Assessment Portal, accessible at [www.texaswildfirerisk.com](http://www.texaswildfirerisk.com), which allows users to identify wildfire threats for a particular area based on landscape characteristics, historical fire occurrence, weather conditions, terrain, and potential fire behavior. It also provides information on wildfire prevention practices for homeowners.

PBAT is also working to address the liability issue for its members. The Edwards Plateau Burning Association has had insurance now for two years, and members may choose to insure a burn through the association by following the clearly defined set of procedures. PBAT intends to build from there. They’ve put together a policy and procedures handbook, essentially standards for conducting safe prescribed fire, standards which have been deemed acceptable by the insurance industry. Ultimately, PBAT intends to pay the insurance premium for a liability policy that will cover every prescribed burn done by an alliance member in excess of \$1 million. To have a burn qualified as a “sanctioned” burn and therefore covered by the alliance policy, members have to prepare a burn plan, and those plans have to be approved by a sanctioned member of the alliance and then filed on the alliance website. The group intends to build its credibility not only with the insurance industry but also the general public as the number of acres that their members manage with prescribed fire increases over time. Their safety record, they hope, will speak for itself.

“Prescribed fire is an old concept, but we have a new opportunity to show our value,” remarks Dougherty, “but we’ve got to do it prudently and cautiously, and by having a clearly defined set of procedures and guidelines, we are showing to the insurance companies that we are an organization that promotes the safe use of prescribed fire.”

Stan Graff is treasurer of the alliance. Both he and Dougherty are also members of the recently formed wildfire prevention task force.

“PBAT is a way for private property owners to set standards among ourselves in the way we’re going to conduct burns and the training we’re going to require, and hopefully, it will give us some credibility in dealing with insurance agencies, the county judges, all the way to state level,” states Graff.

Graff has been using prescribed fire as a management tool on his East Texas property now for many years. However, in this highly fragmented region, using prescribed fire, particularly early on, was not easy. It didn’t take long for him to understand that fire is a huge public policy issue. Education and funding, he says, are two critical issues that the task force must address.

“The legislature has underfunded the Texas Forest Service for years, and that’s because all the city people think it’s a rural issue, and it’s not; it’s a state issue. Yes, the fires typically occur in the rural areas, but we all pay for it as taxpayers. That’s the huge disconnect.”

Graff understands, however, that the education of the general populous won’t come until citizens begin to see the cumulative benefit of prescribed fire. That’s where PBAT, he opines, comes into play.

Chief Watson agrees on the education front.

“Here’s the thing — and this is just human nature — as long as it didn’t happen to you, it’s no big deal. If your property got burned up, you understand it, but someone who lives in the middle of a concrete jungle has no clue.

“Up here everyone understands fire,” he continues. “In our city, when we’re burning, we have people who try to bring us lunch; they bring us water because they appreciate what we do. So if a city government wanted to impose some kind of fee to help pay for mitigation around their city up here, citizens are likely to be more receptive to it than a homeowner in Dallas. The only way to overcome that is through education.”

“In developing a comprehensive fire plan for the state, neither prescribed fire nor PBAT is the sole solution, but they must be viewed as part of the solution, not as part of the problem,” Graff adds. “In the past, prescribed fire has been seen by some as contributing to the danger, not reducing the danger.

“We are talking about a symbiotic relationship,” he

continues. "We have to have governmental leadership and private property owner buy-in or we'll never solve this problem."

Solving a problem that has been building for many decades is no small task, and it will certainly not happen overnight or even in a short year's time. Members of the task force and PBAT organizers say it will take years of focused dedication. It will take years of educating the public, and it will take years of unified effort with private citizens, local, county, and state officials, fire fighters — both public and VFD — emergency management, and landowners and prescribed burn associations all pulling together in the same direction if this growing challenge is to be tackled.

"If our state goes through what we went through last year and we don't have different results the next time around, everyone in any position at all needs to be terminated, because we're just not doing our jobs," Watson says.

"Our state has a big opportunity to try and turn a corner here. This is a big problem in Texas and it has to be fixed, but we don't have to reinvent the wheel," he concludes.

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