



Highlights of [GAO-04-426](#), a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

In 2002, the United States experienced one of the worst wildland fire seasons in the past 50 years—almost 7 million acres burned. These fires included the largest and costliest fire in Oregon in the past century—the Biscuit Fire. Following a lightning storm, five fires were discovered in the Siskiyou National Forest over a 3-day period beginning July 13. These fires eventually burned together to form the Biscuit Fire, which burned nearly 500,000 acres in southern Oregon and Northern California and cost over \$150 million to extinguish. GAO evaluated (1) whether policies and procedures were in place for acquiring needed firefighting resources during the initial days of the Biscuit Fire, and the extent to which these policies and procedures were followed when the fire was first identified; (2) what resource management issues, if any, affected the ability of personnel to fight the fire; and (3) what differences, if any, existed in key certification standards for personnel among federal and state agencies and whether these differences affected efforts to respond to the fire.

In commenting on a draft of this report, the Forest Service stated that the report appears to be accurate and the agency generally agrees with its contents. The Department of the Interior did not provide comments.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-04-426.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Barry T. Hill at (202) 512-3841 or hillbt@gao.gov.

BISCUIT FIRE

Analysis of Fire Response, Resource Availability, and Personnel Certification Standards

What GAO Found

National policies and procedures were in place and provided the framework to guide personnel in the local interagency dispatch center in Grants Pass, Oregon, who were responsible for acquiring resources to fight the Biscuit Fire. These policies and procedures provide for a multilevel dispatching system where, if sufficient firefighting personnel and equipment are not available locally, resource requests can be elevated to other dispatch centers at the regional and, if necessary, national level. To facilitate the swift suppression of new fires, local dispatch center personnel can contact neighboring centers directly, including those in adjacent regions, before elevating resource requests. When the first two fires were found on July 13, the Grants Pass dispatch center did not have sufficient firefighting resources available locally. Grants Pass personnel requested resources from the responsible regional center in Portland, as well as from a dispatch center in central Oregon, but no resources were immediately available in the region due to other higher priority fires that were threatening lives and property. Grants Pass personnel did not request resources from a neighboring interagency dispatch center in Fortuna, California, located in an adjoining dispatch region, because they believed the center had no available resources due to fire activity there. State officials working at the Fortuna dispatch center later said that a Fortuna-based helicopter fighting fires in Northern California near the first of the five Biscuit fires could have been made available to suppress this fire. However, Forest Service officials working with Fortuna personnel disagreed, saying that the helicopter had been needed to fight fires in California. Because no request was made, there was no discussion on that first day about whether the Biscuit Fire would have been the best use of the helicopter, and it is unclear, in any case, what the outcome of such a request would have been.

Following the initial days of the Biscuit Fire, delays in obtaining needed personnel hampered efforts to fight the rapidly growing fire. Specifically, officials faced problems obtaining (1) highly experienced management teams to direct suppression strategies and crews to carry the strategies out, (2) supervisors to manage crews and equipment, and (3) support staff to monitor the training and experience of contracted crews. An unusually severe fire season, with many other higher priority fires, affected the availability of personnel needed to fight the Biscuit Fire.

Finally, while some differences exist in certification standards for personnel between federal and state agencies responsible for fighting wildland fires, these differences did not appear to affect efforts to respond to the Biscuit Fire.