

The Historic 2000 Wildfire Season – A Look Back 10 Years Later

Rich Okulski, Incident Meteorologist (IMET) at the Tucson, AZ, Weather Forecast Office (WFO) remembers receiving a phone call at home from Meteorologist in Charge Glen Sampson in May 2000.

Glen's first question was "Did you sleep well?"

Rich, getting ready for his fourth straight midnight shift, knew Glen's question meant he was about to be dispatched to another wildfire. He left at the crack of dawn the following morning.

The Scott Able Fire in the Sacramento Mountains of New Mexico had burned 17,000 acres in less than 24 hours. Another "Red Flag Warning" level wind event loomed in four days. The Incident Command Team received permission to use bulldozers near towns and in wilderness areas to create "fire breaks" to contain this wildfire.

This historic 2000 Wildfire Season cost the federal government \$1.6 billion to fight (2000 U.S. Dollars). The Cerro Grande Fire near the Los Alamos National Laboratory in May received international media attention. The Albuquerque WFO sent daily fire weather forecasts to the White House during this event.

Mike Chamberlain, an IMET at the Grand Junction, CO, WFO was the first NWS employee dispatched to the Cerro Grande Fire on May 8, 2000. He remembers May 10 as the day of incredible fire weather and fire behavior.

Chamberlain said, "Retired Fire Behavior Analyst Larry McCoy and I watched a smoke plume transform into a fireball/flaming front as the wildfire advanced into the town of Los Alamos."

Chamberlain and McCoy later listened to radio traffic as firefighters called for a retreat block by block and eventually to the town golf course.

Retired IMET Bob "Berky" Berkovitz remembers arriving at the Cerro Grande Fire Incident Command Post (ICP) only to evacuate thirty minutes later as the wind blew the fire in the post's direction. Officials permitted him and firefighters back into the ICP several hours later. Berkovitz was able to set up his equipment and begin weather watch and forecast duties that evening. He and fellow IMET Mike Chamberlain continued to support the Incident Command Teams and respond to international media attention.

Attention turned to the Pacific Northwest, Northern Rockies and Alaska during the summer. Nine wildfires burned more than 130,000 acres. The Valley Complex Wildfire in Montana burned 292,070 acres! Firefighters observed "firestorms" during the height of this event.

In mid July, a brief surge of monsoon moisture caused numerous thunderstorms and fire starts across Central Idaho. One of the largest fires was at Burgdorf Junction located near Burgdorf, ID, in the Payette National Forest. **Scott Birch**, an IMET at Western Region Headquarters, was the first IMET dispatched to the Burgdorf Junction Fire on July 18

Birch said, "The fire made a large run in dry and windy conditions on July 22. Strong winds and approaching flames forced the evacuation of a fire lookout tower in the area. A Fire RAWS

automated observing station was burned next to the lookout tower, but helicopter water drops aided the lookout tower to escape damage.”

The fire camp was remote and only used generator power. For the first several weeks there were no phone lines and showers at camp. Satellite was the only communications available while Scott supported the fire. Five hundred U.S. Army soldiers from the Fourth Infantry Division at Fort Hood would be dispatched to help the firefighters in late July. Burgdorf Junction would burn for several months in the 2000 fire season. Many IMETS from throughout the NWS supported this incident, and President Clinton would tour the fire in August.

Ogulski said, “This season changed the way land management agencies fought wildfires and [government policy](#) pertaining to land use, in particular the complexity of the urban interface and ecosystem sustainability. Wildfires play an essential role in the ecological process and are natural change agents which need to be incorporated into planning processes.”

This season also changed the way the NWS supports its partners in the Fire Weather Service Program. The number of certified IMETs increased from thirty five in 2000 to eighty five in 2010. IMETs are dispatched to smaller, or Type 2, wildfires on a regular basis. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration Earth Systems Research Laboratory developed the Advanced Weather Interactive Processing System (AWIPS) emulator software known as FX-Net. Prior to FX-Net, IMETs used forecast analysis programs unique to the program and difficult to maintain. The NWS purchased two way satellite dishes in 2002. Prior to this equipment upgrade, IMETs needed a phone line to receive a regular data feed of weather and water information.

“Decision support is a vital service to partners such as emergency managers and fire land managers. IMETs practiced decision support principles and skills when our fire land management partners needed us most. Thank you to all who served up to eighteen hours a day and one to two weeks per dispatch during that historic season,” said Ogulski.



IMET Bob Nester, Missoula, MT, WFO, Briefs Incident Command Team at Maudlow Tauston Fire near Helena, MT, August 2000.