

Forest Fire Compacts Overview and Use Testimony to Kansas House of Representatives

**George L. Geissler, CF
Oklahoma State Forester
Director, Oklahoma Forestry Services**

Hello. My name is George L. Geissler. I am the Oklahoma State Forester and Director of Oklahoma Forestry Services (OFS). I am here today at the request of the Kansas Forest Service to provide information regarding interstate forest fire compacts and their role in wildland fire suppression.

A bit of background information. Oklahoma Forestry Services is the state's lead agency related to wildland fire prevention and protection per the fire annex of Oklahoma's Emergency Operating Plan. In this role we field 45 Type 2 and 3 bulldozers and 45 Type 6 engines for wildland firefighting initial attack in Oklahoma's eastern counties and suppression assistance on Type 3 and greater wildland fire incidents statewide. We are also charged to maintain the state's Type 2 incident management team, train and equip rural fire departments, provide fire detection, and coordinate and direct state assets such as Army National Guard aircraft.

In order to fulfill our mission, OFS has utilized fire compact resources during three of the last six years (most recently during the spring of 2016). Resources such as wildland fire crews, suppression and tactical aircraft, incident management teams, and command and general staff personnel to assist our own IMT have been provided by our compact partners and federal agencies.



There are eight forest fire compacts representing 43 states and all of Canada except one province and one territory. My own state is a member of the South Central Interstate Forest Fire Compact along with Texas, Arkansas, Louisiana, and Mississippi.



State forest fire programs are reinforced through forest fire compacts between the states. Established under the Weeks Act of 1911 and other specific legislation enacted by Congress, state forest fire compacts reduce wildfire suppression costs for local, state and Federal jurisdictions by allowing states to share personnel and equipment and by minimizing the fire fighting burden on any single state during periods of high fire occurrence. The interconnectivity of the forest fire compacts allows for the movement of resources not only from these states within a compact but from states in adjoining compacts which provides an even greater number of available personnel and equipment. Forest fire compacts also facilitate the sharing and coordination of information, prevention efforts, training, fire management knowledge, and lessons learned.

Movement of resources between compacts is initiated through state to state requests made by the compact administrator. This is typically the state forester or the officer holding the equivalent position (responsible for forest fire control within the state). Personnel and equipment of the state fulfilling the request become agents of the requesting state. This is

accomplished due to predefined liability, jurisdictional authorities, operating procedures and invoicing processes.

In just the past year alone personnel and equipment from Tennessee, Florida, Georgia, Arkansas, Louisiana, North Carolina, Texas and Kentucky have fought fires in Oklahoma including the 367,000 acre Anderson Creek fire which raged in northwestern Oklahoma and southwestern Kansas in March of 2016.

During the spring of 2016 Oklahoma Forestry Services staffed over 48 large incidents in the time leading up to the Anderson Creek fire. Early in the season wildfires were so numerous that during several time periods there were wildfires burning without state or local resources available to fight them.

In my role as compact administrator I opened the compact and requested assistance in the form of task forces which began arriving within two days of the request. These additional crews allowed us to provide direct suppression assistance to local fire departments and allowing for wildfires to be contained early.

I also requested the assistance of federal suppression aircraft in the form of single engine air tankers (SEATs), large air tankers, super-scooper tankers, air command platforms (basically aerial air traffic controllers), large rotor wing aircraft and the personnel and portable air tanker bases to maintain and fill them. At one point we had over 14 aircraft of various types in operation.

These ground forces and aircraft operated seamlessly with our OFS wildland crews and other state and local resources. This was all accomplished due to common operating processes, procedures and equipment.

Another major asset brought to bear on the Anderson Creek Fire and the 350 Complex Fire (which followed Anderson Creek two weeks later) was the Texas Type 2 Incident Management Team which provided much needed large incident management when OFS's Type 2 IMT was committed to statewide area command. This team and others like it are available from numerous states and federal agencies.

Of particular note should be that because Kansas does not participate in a forest fire compact and there is no other form of agreement between our states there was no way for us to share resources during the Anderson fire (primarily due to lack of jurisdictional authority and liability) which further complicated an already complex situation.

In all, local fire departments, OFS and compact resources fought over 1 million acres of wildfires in a little over 4 months in the spring of 2016 without a fatality or major injury to the public or response personnel. Without the use of compact resources our state would have been unable to accomplish this feat. Oklahoma does not maintain (nor could we afford to maintain) adequate resources to staff such an increase in the wildland fire activity.

Once the situation subsided we received detailed invoices from the states and agencies which provided assistance per the compacts. These invoices were formatted in such a manner as to

allow ease of payment by our state and ease of processing for reimbursement by Fire Management Assistance Grants (FMAGs) provided by the federal government.

Oklahoma's participation in South Central Interstate Forest Fire Compact is an integral part of our emergency fire response. Forest Fire Compacts provide much needed surge capacity during periods of extreme wildfire activity. These compacts have also been used to move crews during other types of incidents such as hurricanes, tornadoes, and mass casualties.

I also must say that all of us with Oklahoma Forestry Services see our participation in regional and national response as a part of our mission and duty. We have provided personnel and equipment to incidents across the United States (most recently wildfires in Tennessee and North Carolina). This provides not only the surge capacity our partner states and agencies need but also invaluable training experience for our own personnel making them better firefighters and incident managers.

Thank you for your time. I hope that you support Kansas' participation in the Forest Fire Compact.