

From the President's Desk: May/June, 2004

JUST STAY HOME!!!

In late March, the head of the National Park Service (NPS) faced a contentious hearing before the U.S. Congress: seems like the NPS was shutting down facilities on some National Parks that served the Public, but still had several MILLION dollars in its foreign travel budget. The Director responded directly to the Congress: effective immediately, ALL foreign travel by NPS was ended!

Sounds like the right thing to do: get those bloated Federal bureaucrats to stop wasting money on foreign "junkets", and stay home and tend to the taxpayers business! RIGHT ON!!

But wait: might there actually be some benefit to having government employees travel abroad?

Before I continue, it's time for a disclaimer: before I retired as Fire & Aviation Leader for the US Forest Service Technology & Development Center in Missoula, Montana I was fortunate enough to be one of those "bloated federal bureaucrats" that got to make several trips abroad, on the government payroll, and at taxpayer expense. I went to Siberia with the U.N., and made several trips to Australia to work with their Fire Managers and equipment specialists, as well as to a meeting of the International Standards Organization (ISO) that was working on specs for wildland firefighter PPE. So, my perspective on foreign travel for government employees might be slightly biased!

Speaking for an organization that starts its name with the word "International", I believe that there are tremendous benefits in traveling to foreign lands to gain, and share, information, experiences, and expertise. The world-wide wildland fire community has so much in common, whether we look at Spain, Portugal, South Africa, New Zealand, China, Australia, Siberia, Canada or the US. The taxpayers of all nations are well served when their wildland fire folks share and gain experience from others.

Need a common sense example where this "pays off" in the real world? The massive fires in the western US during the summers of 2000 and 2003 depleted some of the critical resources in Operations and Air Ops. Because of the long-standing exchange programs between the Canadians, Australians, New Zealanders, and US, it was possible to bring numerous "foreigners" to fill essential roles in battling our US wildfires in Montana, Idaho and elsewhere.

I like to believe that the time that I spent working with the NRE and CFA folks in Victoria, the New South Wales RFS folks in Sydney, and the Tasmanian fire folks around Hobart played some small part in getting them to come to our assistance. IAWF Board members Rick Gale, who was with the US National Park Service Fire Program before his retirement, and Bret Butler at the Missoula Fire Science Lab, also had excellent relationships with the Aussies that helped pave the way for their coming to the US.

During the Christmas 2003 bushfires in Australia, US firefighters reciprocated by traveling "Down Unda" to help the Aussies with their major fire incidents.

The border between Canada and the US has always been "porous" when it comes to suppressing wildfires ("Thirtymile" was discovered and reported by a Canadian "Bird-dog" aircraft), and is an excellent example of the long-term benefits brought about by foreign travel and cooperation.

Stay at home and serve the taxpayers well: I beg to differ!

### ***ON ANOTHER NOTE:***

On July 6<sup>th</sup>, we observe the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the South Canyon Fire that killed 14 firefighters outside of Glenwood Springs, Colorado. Like the Linton Fire in Australia that killed 5 in December 1998, and the Huelva fire in Spain, South Canyon has been a landmark event in the history of US wildfires.

I was intimately involved in the investigation of the South Canyon fire, and what I saw on Storm King Mountain left an indelible mark in my brain and on my soul that will never be gone.

On this July 6<sup>th</sup>, I urge you to consider what happened on that day, ponder your own mortality on the fireline and the effect of your death or injury on those you love and that love you, and renew your absolute commitment to safety on every fire!