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Private Contracting on National Forest Lands: Preseason Contracting and Fire Response

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Note: This document is based on interviews with fire professionals and document analysis and reports what our research (and vetting with fire professionals) has found to be the generally accepted process for pre-fire contracting and fire response as of 2015. Depending on the specific context, the order of actions, contracts used and entities involved may vary.

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The US Forest Service is facing unprecedented challenges in wildfire suppression, and increasingly depends on private wildfire suppression to bolster capacity for direct attack resources, such as aerial resources, firefighter hand crews and other equipment. The processes and procedures employed for contracting such resources are complex and can be difficult to follow and understand. The purpose of this paper is to provide a clear and step-wise presentation of the private contracting system for wildfire suppression on federal lands, highlighting the key actors, actions, policies and procedures used throughout.

National forest fire suppression & private suppression contractors

Wildfire in the western United States is increasingly unpredictable in terms of human and ecological damage, as well as budgets and response capacity. Fire suppression, or the act of controlling a fire with the intent to put it out, is used on federal lands in situations where it has been determined that fire needs to be suppressed, typically in order to protect life and property. The US Forest Service is responsible for approximately 70% of national wildfire suppression costs.¹ Since 2000, federal fire-fighting costs have hovered around \$1.5 billion on average annually, a dramatic increase from average spending prior to 2000.² In 2015 to date, 9.02 million acres have burned in the US (as of 09/29/15, high above the 10-year average of 6.1 million acres, and only outsize by the 9.03 million acres burned in 2006),³ and the Forest Service spent more than 50% of its entire annual agency budget on fire for the first time, with a projected growth to 67% of the agency budget by 2025.⁴ The Forest Service does not

manage these fires alone: federal capacity to manage fires depends on local cooperators (state and local fire agencies) as well as private contractors that are available to assist when needed. As suppression costs continue to rise, the role of private contractors has become increasingly prominent in providing direct wildfire suppression support to both state and federal agencies in the form of equipment, aerial resources, hand crews, and services.

The unpredictability and seasonality of fires means that private businesses in this field face uncertain conditions for building, competing, and maintaining their business over time. As the largest purchaser of wildfire suppression services and resources, the Forest Service drives private contracting markets, and many private contractors have built their businesses around meeting the agency's fire suppression needs. One key area where contractors operate, and the focus on this document, is contracting on national forest lands managed by the U.S. Forest Service.

The Forest Service's contracting processes, technical requirements for equipment and crews, and protocols for dispatching resources all shape what the private contractor market looks like. Understanding how private contracting operates within the Forest Service's pre-fire contracting and fire response structures is important in order to understand when, where, and how private contracting can be engaged on wildfire suppression, both for those working in this arena, as well as for others seeking to better understand the place and process of private contracting on federal lands.

Approach

The information presented in this working paper reports what our research (via policy and document review and interviews) and vetting with fire professionals has found to be the generally accepted process for pre-fire contracting and fire response as of 2015. Much of the information described in this document can be found in the resources listed below (and other resources listed at the end of document):

- 2015 National Dispatch Standard Operating Guide for Contracted Resources⁵
- National Interagency Mobilization Guide⁶
- Wildland Fire Incident Management Field Guide 2015⁷
- Online Virtual Incident Procurement system⁸

Depending on the specific region and/or context, the order of actions, contracts used and entities involved may vary from what is presented here. Re-

sources for additional and region-specific information are found throughout the following sections, and in a complete list at the end of this document.

In this paper we focus only on issues related to wildfire suppression on federal lands and not on related issues such as prescribed burning or allowing natural fires to continue burning for forest health purposes. It is also important to note that we focus on the processes and components of private contracting both preseason and once a fire ignites. We do not reflect upon the nuances or effectiveness of these processes, describe challenges encountered on both the agency and private contractor sides, or suggest revisions to the current structure. Some of this will be explored in our ongoing research, but is not the intended focus for this document.

How to use this document

Private contracting on federal lands is a complex process, involving different scales of agencies, various systems, processes and numerous acronyms. The following sections lay out in text and figures how the private contracting process works, including: definitions, applying to be a contractor prior to fire season, process when a fire is underway, including when fire grows in complexity, and demobilization (when resources are leaving at the conclusion of a fire).

This document is designed for those working in the private contracting field, as well as others who want to learn about the process. The following information provides the reader with some tips for navigating this document:

- Definitions of key actors are provided first, and key definitions are provided in side

boxes for key terminology introduced in each section.

- Acronyms are provided in a list on in Appendix A (see page 18).
- Figures follow a consistent format, including:
 - Private contractors are in brown boxes
 - Contracting offices and officers are green
 - Incident Management Team actors are in orange
- A short animated video of this information can be found online at:

The diagram below outlines the progression through this document; each new section begins with this diagram repeated, and the appropriate part of the progression highlighted.





1. Wildfire suppression definitions: Key actors



Private contractors

Private contractors (or vendors) are for-profit businesses that hold one or more contracts with the Forest Service for fire suppression activities and equipment. We group these contractors into four commonly used categories, including:

Aviation vendors include resources like airtankers, air buses, helicopters, fire retardant, and pilots.

Hand crews supplied by private contractors must be Type 2 – either Type 2 Initial Attack (IA) or Type 2 qualified wildland firefighter crews. Both crew types must be trained and meet qualifications of the Wildland Fire Incident Management Field Guide.⁹ Crews consist of 18-20 people per crew (typically 20-person crews), with supervision by Crew Boss and three Firefighter Squad Bosses (all meeting specified training and experience requirements). In addition to the minimum standards for Type 2 crews, Type 2_IA crews can be broken into squads, have three qualified sawyers (saw operators), and have higher levels of experienced crew members (require at least 60% of the crew with one season or more of experience as compared to 40% requirement for Type 2). For a detailed description of crew standards see Interagency Standards for Fire and Aviation Operations.¹⁰

Equipment vendors provide non-aviation firefighting and support resource items, including machinery (bulldozers, excavators, feller bunchers), vehicles (engines, water tenders), crew support (mobile laundry, handwashing stations, sleeper units) and support units (e.g., communications trailers, clerical support trailers). Equipment specifications are found at Forest Service’s Incident Procurement Acquisition Management page.¹¹

Local service vendors offer resources that are used to provide a service (e.g., portable toilets, mechanics, chainsaw repair services, vehicle rentals).¹² Such services are often contracted locally, from businesses close to the wildfire.

Contracting offices and officers

Contracting offices and officers are preseason actors tasked with coordinating contracts, including setting specifications, solicitations, issuing contracts and creating priority lists of dispatch, mainly before a fire season begins (preseason). This includes:

The National Contracting Office is the **US Forest Service Incident Support Branch for Acquisition Management**,¹³ which provides centralized acquisition support for “national contract” Fire Incident resources. The unit is a detached Washington Office Unit located at the **National Interagency Fire Center**¹⁴ in Boise, Idaho. The National Contracting Office is responsible for national contracts, for resources that are typically used nationally, in high demand but with limited availability, and often have unique reporting requirements. The office contracts both for wildland fire suppression “National Shared Resources” and for other emergency incident response activities.⁵ The unit is responsible for issuing solicitations and national contracts for: air tankers, crew carrier buses, firefighter crews, fire retardant, helicopters, mobile food services and mobile shower facilities.

The National Interagency Fire Center (NIFC) is the wildland firefighting support center for the nation. Operating costs and responsibilities for NIFC are shared by the following cooperating agencies: Bureau of Land Management, Forest Service, Bureau of Indian Affairs, National Park Service, US Fish and Wildlife Service, National Association of State Foresters, and the National Weather Service.

Regional Contracting Offices¹⁵ are organized by Forest Service Regions (Regions 1-10). These offices contain acquisition management regional contracting officers.

Dispatch and coordination centers

Dispatch and Coordination Centers are organized by Forest Service Regions (Regions 1-10) and are the agency actors that request and dispatch resources as requested by fire incident commanders, once a fire begins. These include:

The National Interagency Coordination Center (NICC)¹⁶ is the central point for coordinating wildland fire resource mobilization nationally, focused on equipment and supply dispatching; overhead and crew dispatching; aircraft dispatching; and intelligence and predictive services (for wildland fire and incident management decision making). “NICC is the sole dispatch center for heavy airtankers, lead planes, smokejumpers, hotshot crews, Type 1 Incident Management Teams, area command teams, medium and heavy helicopters, infrared aircraft, military resources, telecom equipment for fires, Remote Automated Weather Stations (RAWS), and large transport aircraft.”¹⁷ NICC’s dispatching system is comprised of three levels: **national (NICC)**, **Geographic Area**, and **local**.

Geographic Area Coordination Centers (GACCs)¹⁸ serve as the focal point for regional interagency resource coordination, logistics support, aviation support and predictive services for all state and federal agencies involved in wildland fire management and suppression within a region. There are ten regional coordination centers designated by Forest Service regions: Eastern, Southern, Southwest, Rocky Mountain, Northern Rockies, Great Basin, Northwest, Northern California, Southern California, and Alaska.¹⁹

Local Dispatch includes all the dispatch offices located within each GACC region. These dispatch contacts are the first contacted when a fire begins.

Incident command system

The incident command system (ICS) is a national system that is used to manage incidents until they end, including wildfires, hurricanes, rescues, and other incidents.²⁰ As an incident grows or shrinks, the staff involved will change. Often the system includes staff from a variety of different emergency services agencies. ICS focuses on effective operation, which includes components such as common terminology, integrated communications, pre-designated incident facilities, unified command structure, and comprehensive resource management.²⁰ ICS uses five major functional areas, including command, operations, planning, logistics, and finance.

The **Incident Commander** is in charge of the incident overall, coordinates people and activities, and is responsible for decisions about when and what resources to order, and demobilizing resources.

Incident Management Teams (IMTs) are primarily focused on wildfire incident management, and are called when a fire becomes too complex for local fire managers to address. Incident Management Teams are ranked by “type”, which is related to what level of incident complexity they can address (e.g. local, state and/or national level; type 1 and 2 are both state and national level). Such Incident command teams and systems were enacted in order to more effectively coordinate interagency decision-making, action and resource allocation in the case of wildfires.



2. Preseason contracting system



There are a number of guiding principles and procedures established for the Forest Service in engaging private contractors prior to an active fire season. This includes preseason solicitations, agreements, and contracts that agencies coordinate with private contractors prior to the fire season in order to have verified and prioritized lists of contractors that meet agency specifications for aviation, equipment, hand crews, and local services.

Agencies solicit for contracted resources based on local and regional needs and existing agreements with other federal agency or state cooperators (e.g., the Forest Service can use contracted resources on a cooperator's list). Forest Service fire suppression contracting is largely centralized at the national level, and requires different systems, procedures, and contracting mechanisms than non-fire product and service vendor acquisition and management.

National Contracts

The national contracting office, the U.S. Forest Service Incident Support Branch for Acquisition Management, contracts both for wildland fire suppression "National Shared Resources" and for other emergency incident response activities. The unit is responsible for issuing solicitations and national contracts for: air tankers, crew carrier buses, fire-fighter crews, fire retardant, helicopters, mobile food services and mobile shower facilities (see Figure 2, page 7).²⁶

National contracts such as Type 2IA hand crews and national mobile food service contracts require contracted resources to be available for a mandatory period of time and from a preset list of designated or staged points across the US during a mandatory availability period (MAP).

The national contract office also sets specifications for the Virtual Incident Procurement (VIPR) system. Solicitations in VIPR are based on National Solici-

Key preseason contracting definitions

Solicitations: Agency-issued requests for businesses to apply to be vendors of specific resources (equipment, crews, services). Solicitations are issued through the national or regional office.²¹

Mandatory Availability Period (MAP): The specific time frames, usually ranging between 90 and 180 days, when enrolled operators are contractually obligated to federal or state fire protection agencies to have resources ready for deployment when required.

Virtual Incident Procurement system (VIPR): An online system introduced in January of 2009 to help facilitate federal fire procurement by soliciting, awarding, and administering preseason agreements for resource needs.²² Forest Service regions use VIPR to issue solicitations and award agreements for resources secured under preseason agreements. To apply for solicitations for resources in VIPR, contractors must obtain a Level 2 eAuthentication Account and be registered as a contractor approved to do business in the System for Award Management.

System for Award Management (SAM): The Official U.S. Government system that consolidated the capabilities of previous systems.

Incident Blank Purchase Agreements (I-BPA): Agreements issued to contractors that have responded to the solicitation through the VIPR system.²³

Call when needed (CWN) resources: Suppression resources under agreements for a certain rate for services or use of equipment, without a guarantee of use or payment. Payment is only rendered if services are needed.

Key preseason contracting definitions, cont'd

Dispatch Priority Lists (DPL): Lists that are created for all contracted resources awarded under competitive I-BPAs;²⁴ DPLs rank available resources.

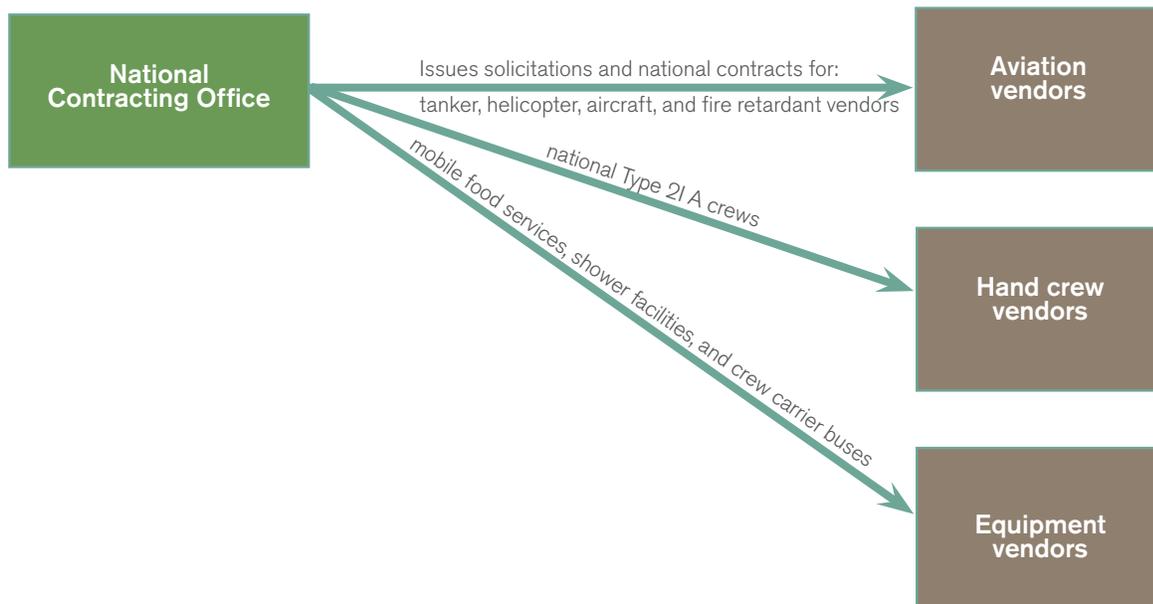
Choosing by Advantages (CBA): Also known as “Best Value,” CBA determines ranking on the Dispatch Priority List.²⁵ CBA was first used in 2007 for ranking water-handling equipment and has expanded to include ranking for all suppression equipment in I-BPAs. Equipment is ranked in this system based on the advantages it offers as well as its relative importance when compared to criteria for the equipment type. This means that equipment ranked the highest shows the greatest advantage to the government, but does not necessarily mean that it is the best equipment or is offered at the best price.

tation Templates that the agency uses in order to provide consistency in how resources are assessed, acquired and hired.²⁷

Solicitations are issued in order to create Incident Blank Purchase Agreements (I-BPA). I-BPAs are awarded to those vendors who offer a fair and reasonable price as determined by the Regional and National level Fire Contracting Officers.²³ All Preseason I-BPAs are competitively solicited every three years. If vendors miss the solicitation period, they will not have an opportunity to acquire an I-BPA until the following solicitation period. Most I-BPAs for equipment (and some other contracts) are specified as Call when needed (CWN) resources. To receive an I-BPA, the vendor must meet or exceed certain equipment and personnel requirements, including:

- “Equipment meets the minimum specifications and quality standards;
- Key personnel possess the minimum training qualifications;
- Vendor has acceptable past performance”²⁸

Figure 1 Solicitations from the National Contracting Office



Regional contracting offices validate VIPR information and issues I-BPAs for their respective region. The appropriate Contracting Officer (CO) for each dispatch zone (based on Geographic Area Coordination Center/Forest Service regions) generates Dispatch Priority Lists for each equipment solicitation (see Figure 2, below). Dispatch Priority Lists are created for all contracted equipment awarded under competitive I-BPAs. Equipment is ranked on the Dispatch Priority List by the greatest advantage per dollar (per the Choosing by Advantages system).²⁵

The regional office also issues contracts for Type 2 firefighting handcrews. Agencies solicit for contracted resources based upon the needs for their geographic area in light of the availability of resources among other federal and state cooperators.

Collectively, these processes (see Figure 3, page 9) help prepare the agency for systematic mobilization and dispatching of resources once a fire begins. Following these processes correctly and within specified timeframes is critical for businesses wanting to contract with the Forest Service.

Figure 2 Pre-season fire procurement between regional contracting offices and private contractors

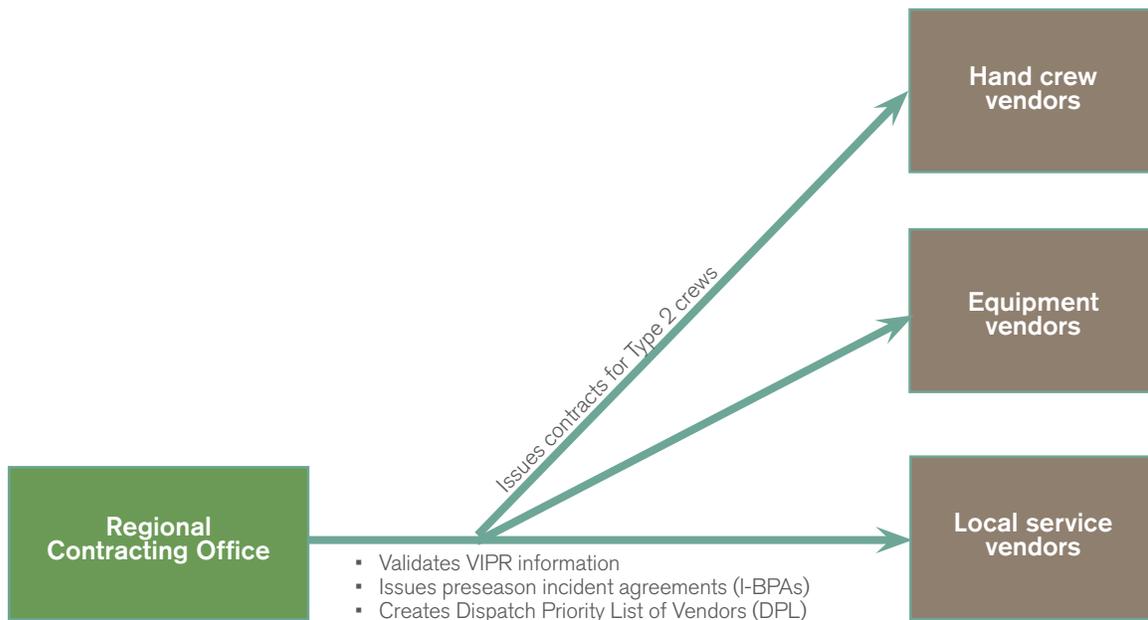
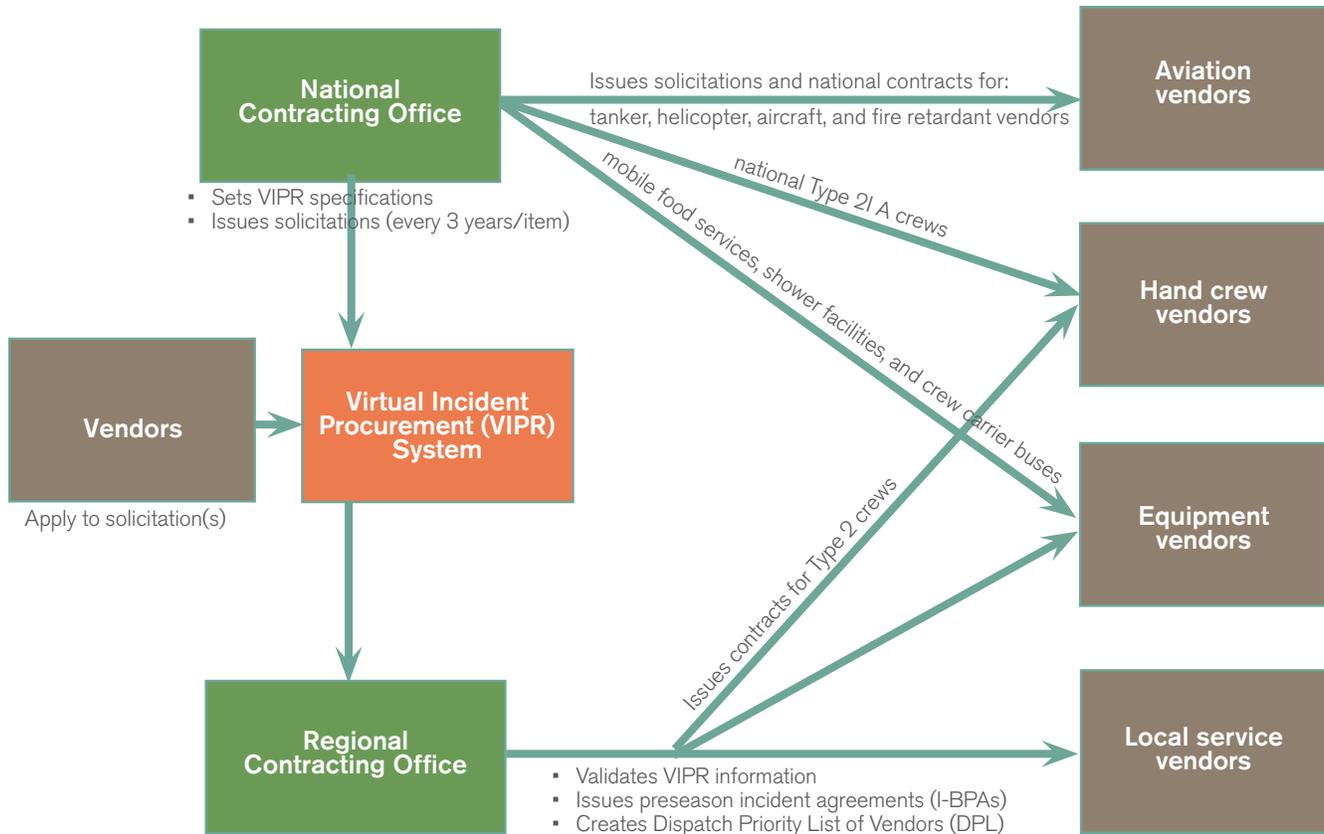


Figure 3 Pre-season fire procurement system between federal agency and private contractors





3. Federal agency fire response process overview



Generally, federal agencies follow a certain sequence when requesting and mobilizing resources to a fire (see Figure 4, below). As every fire situation is different, these processes vary on the ground. Once a fire ignites on national forest land, the agency typically calls in agency crews and equipment first, followed by other federal agency resources. When available or nearby resources are exhausted, cooperators are called in. Cooperators vary by region and agency, but include state agencies (e.g., Departments of Forestry, State Forest Service), and local entities like fire protective associations and county and regional fire departments. Once both available federal agency and cooperator resources have been exhausted, private contractor crews and resources are called in.



Figure 4 General federal agency fire response order of engagement



4. Fire response: Initial attack with private contractors



Key definitions

Initial attack (IA): An organized response by the first resources to arrive at a wildfire, focusing on suppression while protecting firefighter safety and public safety and values. All wildland fires that are managed for suppression begin in Initial Attack. This response can include actions such as, “size up, patrolling, monitoring, holding action, or aggressive Initial Attack... The kind and number of resources responding to Initial Attack vary depending upon fire danger, fuel type, values to be protected, and other factors. Generally, Initial Attack involves a small number of resources, and incident size is small.”²⁹

Host dispatch Center: The Geographic Area Coordination Center (of the ten regional coordination centers) in which a vendor is listed. Each solicitation is linked to a host dispatch center, and resources for that specific item can only be ordered through the host dispatch center.

Incident-only Emergency Equipment Rental Agreements (EERA’s): Agreements used to sign up contracted resources if the DISPATCH PRIORITY LIST is not used during Initial Attack, or if resources are not available from the Incident only Blank Purchase Agreement competitive process due to availability or exhaustion of the Dispatch Priority List.⁵ Incident-only EERAs are valid only for the duration of the incident for which they were signed up.

Resource Ordering and Status System (ROSS): A computerized system used to order resources to an incident.³⁰

When a fire begins, local dispatch is in charge of ordering resources for suppression. Local dispatch utilizes the closest forces concept during Initial Attack, meaning they use the closest available fire suppression resources, regardless of their ranking on a Dispatch Priority List (DPL).⁵ During a fire, DPL is not used exclusively, there are several points at which other vendors without preseason contracts might be used, as we describe here. It is up to the discretion of the Incident Commander at each individual fire incident to decide if and when to use contracted resources with Incident-only Blanket Purchase Agreements (I-BPAs) or other preseason contracts during Initial Attack.²³ If a Dispatch Priority List is used for Initial Attack (which is not required) the dispatcher may order the closest resources to the incident, regardless of their Dispatch Priority List or best value ranking.⁵



When a dispatcher begins using the Dispatch Priority List for ordering resources, they will contact the highest ranked vendor on the list first (the vendor ranked highest for best value to government for that specific resource) to fill the order. If that vendor is unavailable or declines to take the contract, the dispatcher will continue moving down the list until the order is filled. If an incident orders a specific configuration of equipment (e.g., dozer with a winch), the dispatcher will contact the first vendor on the list who has the equipment that meets the needs of the incident. Resources on each Dispatch Priority List can only be dispatched by their assigned Host Dispatch Center (their GACC region).

If resources are unavailable through Dispatch Priority Lists (or if the lists are not used during Initial Attack), Incident-only Emergency Equipment Rental Agreements (EERA) are used.⁵ Once the incident

releases the contracted resource, the EERA is no longer valid.

Local service vendors often do not have a preseason I-BPA and thus are not ranked on a Dispatch Priority List before fire season. In these cases, dispatch will make their own local decisions about who to call for services. This varies by region, but in some cases dispatchers have their own regional list of potential local service vendors to contact as needed.

Resources are typically requested using the Resource Ordering and Status System (ROSS).³⁰ The resource order requests will go from the incident to the local dispatch center and if the Host Dispatch Center cannot fill the order, the request will go to the Geographic Area Coordination Center (GACC), which coordinates and mobilized resources by Forest Service regions.¹⁸



5. Fire response: Fire growth and complexity



Key definitions

Complexity: Complexity on a fire occurs when a complex situation arises, such as multiple fires occurring simultaneously (stretching resources and response), multiple agencies are involved in incident(s), and/or when there is high competition for suppression resources.

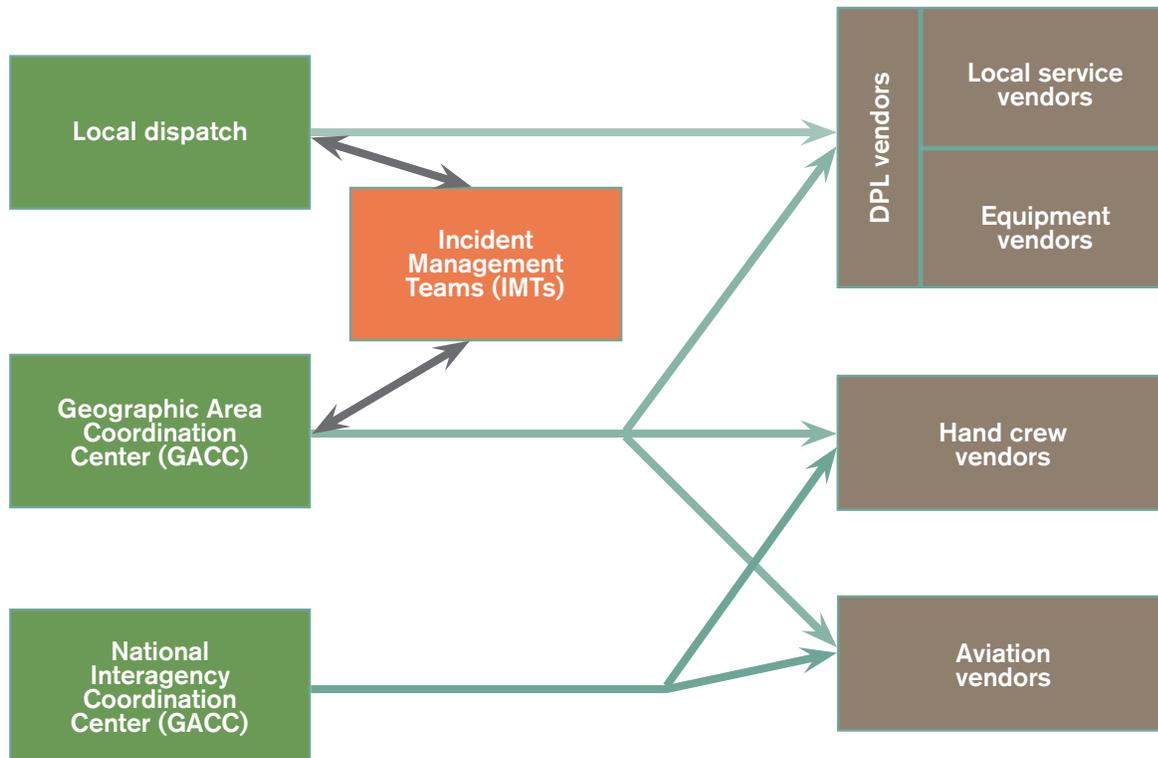
Extended Attack: The suppression approach for a wildfire that has not been controlled by Initial Attack and requires more resources. At this point, the Incident Commander in charge of Initial Attack has recognized that Initial Attack forces are not sufficient to control the fire, and has ordered more firefighting resources to aid in suppression.³¹

Incident Management Teams (IMTs): Agreements used to sign up contracted resources if the DISPATCH PRIORITY LIST is not used during Initial Attack, or if resources are not available from the Incident only Blank Purchase Agreement competitive process due to availability or exhaustion of the Dispatch Priority List. Incident-only EERAs are valid only for the duration of the incident for which they were signed up.

As fire complexity increases and resource availability wanes, a larger scale response is used, including the formation of Incident Management Teams (IMT) that change as the fire grows (see Figure 5, page 15). Local dispatch and the GACC work with the Incident Management Team to communicate and fill resource requests. If an incident transitions from Initial Attack to Extended Attack, the Incident Commander can decide to replace EERA-contracted resources with contracted resources from the Dispatch Priority List, depending on incident operational needs and objectives.³² Once in Extended Attack stage, the Dispatch Priority List is exclusively used for requesting any additional contracted resources for the incident.

When additional resources are needed at the national level, the National Interagency Coordination Center (NICC) is engaged.¹⁶ The NICC is “the focal point for interagency coordination of the mobilization of resources for wildland fire and other incidents throughout the United States.”¹⁴

Figure 5 Fire response process for federal agency once private vendors are called



6. Fire response: Demobilization of contracted resources



The Incident Commander determines demobilization priority. For tactical equipment, contractors awarded I-BPAs from competitive solicitations should have priority to remain on the incident longer than incident-only EERAs, unless the Incident Commander determines otherwise.⁵

Conclusion

The processes of private contracting, from preseason solicitations and contracting to initial and extended attack, are complex and constantly evolving. Understanding how private contracting operates within the Forest Service's pre-fire contracting and fire response structures is key in a time of increasing fire suppression costs and complexity. In this document, we paint a broad picture of how private contracting works, from a terminology, process and procedure perspective. What is clear is the intertwined nature of these processes, between dispatch and contracting agencies and contractors, often through multi-scale systems. Navigating this complicated and evolving arena is critical for those looking to understand not only how the process works, but also to better identify potential barriers to entry for those looking to participate (or expand presence) in this marketplace.

In our research, interviewees and key contacts reported that individuals within this multilayered system are often focused on their own roles and procedures, but few understand the totality of the contracting process. For others, terminology and process complexity serve as barriers to a more comprehensive understanding. We developed this document with the intent of providing a fuller picture and clarifying key terms and processes. Our hope is that this resource stimulates discussion among fire suppression professionals, contractors, and other interested stakeholders regarding issues such as the effectiveness of current contracting systems, barriers to marketplace access, and the spatial distribution of contracting opportunities. We also encourage readers to explore the additional resources listed below.

Endotes

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- 28 See "Choosing by Advantages (CBA) Information: in: USDA Forest Service Acquisition Management, "Acquisition Management-Incident procurement-Best Value Awards" Available at: <http://www.fs.fed.us/business/incident/static/Choosing%20by%20Advantages.pdf>. Last accessed: September 29, 2015.
- 29 See page 17 of: National Wildfire Coordinating Group. "Wildland Fire Incident Management Field Guide". PMS 210, NFES 002943, January 2014. Available at: <http://www.nwccg.gov/sites/default/files/products/pms210.pdf>. Last accessed: September 29, 2015.
- 30 Resource Ordering & Status System (ROSS). Available at: <http://ross.nwccg.gov>. Last accessed: September 29, 2015.
- 31 See page 23 of: See page 17 of: National Wildfire Coordinating Group. "Wildland Fire Incident Management Field Guide". PMS 210, NFES 002943, January 2014. Available at: <http://www.nwccg.gov/sites/default/files/products/pms210.pdf>. Last accessed: September 29, 2015.
- 32 See page 12 of National Interagency Fire Center, "2015 National Dispatch Standard Operating Guide for Contracted Resources: A Guide for Dispatchers & Incident Support Personnel." January 2015. Available at: http://www.nifc.gov/nicc/logistics/references/National_SOG_Contracted_Resources_Guide.pdf. Last accessed: September 29, 2015.

Appendix A: Acronyms

Acronyms

CBA	Choosing by Advantage
CO	Contracting Office(r)s
CWN	Call when needed
DPL	Dispatch Priority List
EERA	Emergency Equipment Rental Agreements
GACC	Geographic Area Coordination Centers
I-BPAs	Incident Blank Purchase Agreements
IA	Initial attack
IMT	Incident Management Team
NDSOG	National Dispatch Standard Operating Guide for Contracted Resources
NICC	National Interagency Coordination Center
NIFC	National Interagency Fire Center
ROSS	Resource Ordering and Status System
SAM	System for Award Management
Type 2	Type 2 qualified wildland firefighter crews
Type 2-IA	Type 2 Initial Attack (IA) qualified wildland firefighter crews
VIPR	Virtual Incident PRocurement



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