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FROM : National Wildfire Coordinating Group
REPLY TO : NWCG@nifc.gov
DATE : 07/09/2008
SUBJECT : SAFETY ADVISORY : Wildland Fire Fatalities

On July 7 this year, we reached the number of deaths in wildland fire operations for 2008 that we experienced during all of 2007. A total of nine wildland firefighters died in the line of duty in 2007 and nine have died so far this year. That's nine people who won't be going home to their families and friends after work any more. We need to keep these fallen heroes – and the ones lost in previous years -- in our hearts and minds as we continue our work in what promises to be a long, difficult fire season across the nation.

Causes of death for wildland firefighters in 2008 have included the following:

- vehicle accident (2 deaths when a burned bridge collapsed)
- aviation accidents (1 SEAT pilot; 1 firefighter in a midair collision)
- roadside accident (2 struck by a vehicle in heavy smoke)
- unknown, possible heart attack or aneurysm (2 deaths)
- drowning. (1 death while swimming on R&R)

Many more accidents have been experienced by wildland firefighters in 2008 that did not result in fatalities, but easily could have. Twenty-four firefighters were injured in four separate vehicle accidents; 19 firefighters became entrapped on seven different occasions, with many of those individuals suffering burn injuries; 10 firefighters were injured when lightning struck nearby in two separate incidents; three firefighters suffered burn injuries in separate events that were not entrapments; two dozer operators were injured in separate rollovers; a firefighter was hit by a snag. These are just some of the accidents reported in the NWCG Safety Gram; many other accidents and near misses have occurred both on the ground and in the air in 2008.

Entrapments are worthy of special mention. The 19 firefighters who became entrapped this year were on fires in five different states. Only three of the 19 entrapped firefighters got their fire shelters out; many others were in vehicles when entrapped – specifically engines, dozers and tractor/plows. Many of these firefighters suffered burn injuries. During all of 2007, a total of 53 firefighters were entrapped, and we are on pace to reach or exceed that number in 2008. Many of the firefighters entrapped in 2007 and 2008 are still recovering from their burn injuries and some

have left the fire service.

Mitigations exist for all of the hazards that have led to fatal accidents and near misses this year. Some of these are:

- Scout roads when in unfamiliar territory in low visibility; be aware of load limits and bridge condition when operating fire apparatus.
- Exercise extreme caution when working near a roadside, especially in low visibility conditions. Make yourself as visible as possible.
- Do not enjoy a false sense of security when working near or in a vehicle on the fireline. Survival during a burnover is not guaranteed while in any type of vehicle; vehicles and aircraft are not always reliable as an escape route. Always identify a secondary escape route.
- Rapid, unexpected changes in fire behavior kill wildland firefighters. Always identify the worst case scenario and be prepared for it by maintaining focused situation awareness and using LCES.
- Do not hesitate to use your fire shelter if you feel you need to. If you become entrapped, there will be some type of review or investigation regardless of whether you deploy a shelter or not.
- Maintain physical fitness and monitor your health regularly through medical exams.
- Only swim in designated safe areas while on fire assignments.

All wildland firefighters want to survive this fire season without injury. So did all the people who have been injured or killed to date. You are responsible for your safety and the safety of your fellow firefighters. Maintain your health, manage fatigue, stay hydrated, be actively involved in briefings and fireline communication, and keep your head in the game so that you can go home to your family and friends when the fires are over.
