

# The 2003 “State of Fire” in the U.S.

By R. David Paulison

The President’s Conference on Fire Prevention had three straightforward objectives: emphasizing the danger fire poses to human life and natural resources, intensifying fire safety in every community and encouraging public officials to take the lead in fire safety. It also had special committee to modernize and improve building codes and fire prevention ordinances, improve the efficiency of fire-fighting equipment and make fire prevention education a regular part of school curriculum.

And it had the support of the President. He wrote, “The serious losses in life and property resulting annually from fires causes me deep concern. I am sure that such unnecessary waste can be reduced. The substantial progress made in the science of fire prevention and fire protection in this country during the past 40 years convinces me that the means are available for limiting this unnecessary destruction.”

Sounds great, right? Except the conference was held in 1947 and the president was Harry S. Truman.

Sadly, while significant progress has been made in more than half a century, much of the 1947 report would seem eerily familiar to any modern firefighter or emergency manager. Firefighters needed new equipment, training and planning, better communications, preparedness for disasters and more public education, according to the report.

Fast forward 26 years, when “America Burning” was published and the U.S. Fire Administration and National Fire Academy were proposed. It was 1973 and Richard Nixon was president. “We believe a continuing federal focus on the fire problem is a necessity,” wrote Richard Bland, the chairman of the National Commission on Fire Prevention and Control, which published “America Burning.” And what conclusions did that commission make? They stated that fire prevention needed more emphasis, that fire service needed better training and equipment, and that Americans needed to be educated about fire safety. Time had passed, but the problems and challenges facing fire fighters had not.

What was the “state of fire” in 1973? It’s hard to know precisely as data collection was rudimentary, but it was widely believed that more than 12,000 died every year in fires in the U.S. and several hundred thousand more were injured. Direct property loss was \$11.4 billion with 4.7 million acres lost annually to wildfires. Nearly 700,000 home fires were reported each year. In 1971, 175 firefighters died in the line of duty – about average at that time.

It was also clear that staffing and equipment was a problem. In 1972, one-third of departments reported they were staffed under authorized levels. Equipment was a problem, too. Firefighter breathing apparatus, which was supposed to provide 30 minutes of use but usually only provided 20, weighed 30 pounds. Firefighter helmets readily

conducted heat to the inside and some helmets made of plastic melted at high temperatures.

The state of fire today is both an improvement and a depressing mirror of those previous reports. Today, about 4,000 people – often the very young and very old – and about 100 firefighters die on duty each year in the U.S. These are certainly improved, but still represent considerable tragedy. Also, more than 20,000 civilians and firefighters are injured – again, an improvement, but still not a number to celebrate. In addition, fire causes about \$10 billion in losses from nearly 2 million annual fires. This last number, given the cost of inflation and the increase in population, reflects a greater reduction than apparent at first glance. And, as every fighter knows, improvements in technology and material have made protective equipment better – although not yet perfect.

Since 1979, the U.S. Fire Administration (USFA) has been part of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). In March 2003, FEMA became part of the Department of Homeland Security, bringing the firefighter community into an all-hazards mission to threats against the homeland – both natural and man-made. Since that day, millions of dollars have gone to fire departments throughout the U.S. to address many of the issues raised by the previous reports. Through July, for example, 1,760 fire departments have received some \$108.16 million under the 2003 Assistance to Firefighter Grant Program. In all, \$700 million in grants will go to more than 7,000 departments under the 2003 program and President Bush has asked for multi-millions more for the grant program in fiscal year 2004. In addition, some 100,000 firefighters received training through the National Emergency Training Center.

But funding and training is not the whole story. What wisdom can be gleaned from these previous reports and how can they help Homeland Security address issues now and in the future?

Importantly, the reports remind us that while terrorism response is a new and very real component of a modern fire department, the old enemy – house and building fires and wildfires – remain the greatest threat to our communities, our people and their property. The concept of homeland security, thus, must and does include a renewed emphasis on fire fighting. And the reports remind us that the basic, fundamentals of firefighting continue to beg for our attention – better training, greater public awareness and improved prevention methodologies.

After looking at the history of fire service in this country and looking ahead at future challenges in a modern era, I'd put forth six contemporary challenges that the fire service must meet if a future issue of "America Burning" is to paint a different picture of firefighting in the U.S.

1. We need to focus attention on the loss of life among the elderly and the very young – two vulnerable populations. Watch for a new public education campaign unveiled in late summer to educate parents and caregivers of infants and toddlers. Put your department's voice behind its message, and then expand it to the elderly

as well. Reach out to nursing homes and senior citizen groups for support. If we focus on this population, we can make a significant dent in the fire fatality rate.

2. Too many firefighters are dying in the performance of their duties. The most disturbing thing is that the majority of those deaths are due to heart attacks and traffic accidents. Every active firefighter today in the U.S. can change this statistic. The solution, perhaps more than the others, is well within your grasp. Get fit, stay fit and implement policies and procedures that make your on-road response to calls safer. Firefighter fitness is also a category within the firefighter grant program and should be looked at by all departments – volunteer and career alike.
3. We need to recognize and work together to address equipment interoperability. Breathing apparatus, rescue equipment and hose couplings are just a sample of equipment failing to reach this standard. Since no fire department is an island today – mutual aid is virtually mandatory – interoperability is an issue that is potentially costing lives. Communication interoperability is just as problematic. Fire departments need to talk to each other and to other emergency responders. We must work together to develop a solution to the interoperability challenge.
4. While there has been acceptance of incident command principles, there remain differences in how command is implemented in communities and departments, with many local nuances that, in the heat of an event, could prove incredibly costly. We must set aside our differences and accept one common incident command system for law enforcement, fire departments, emergency management, public works, utilities, medical professionals, federal and state responders, and citizens. Lives depend on it.
5. We have to fight fires smarter. One way to do that is to use technology and data to determine where our resources should go and what decisions must be made. Local data can help departments build fire stations in the most appropriate location, for example, or determine trends for which kinds of fires are on the increase in their community. Local data submitted to the National Fire Incident Reporting System, which is compiled for national trending and comparison, can help departments compare their incidents to those in other states to determine exactly where they stand by comparison and to identify problems or solutions that might not be apparent from their data alone. Collecting and submitting the data does not have to be time consuming or burdensome and its value is immeasurable.
6. Finally, we must address a potential weakness in our homeland security and first responder network – that of a national culture that distinguishes between volunteer and career firefighters. Fires don't distinguish. They kill volunteers and career firefighters alike. We must look beyond self-imposed labels to fight a common enemy. Only when we are a united fire service can we hope to meet the challenges outlined above.

While the history displayed in the 1947 and 1973 reports shows the difficulty of the situation we still face today, the historic record also shows that firefighters have repeatedly stepped forward when everyone else was running away. Firefighters have shown we have what it takes to manage additional and more complex situations, ranging from fires and natural disasters to terrorism. Yes, the world is more complex. And yes, the demands on fire departments are growing. And yes, budgets are tight. But we cannot hope to break out of the past without addressing the challenges outlined above.

The solutions are within our grasp – if we look to the issues we can address individually and work together for solutions to the issues that require cooperation. USFA, FEMA and Homeland Security stand ready to join with you – and lead when necessary – to address the challenges. Together, we can rewrite “America Burning.”