



Arizona State Forestry Division
Bureau of Indian Affairs: Southwest, Navajo, Western Regions
Bureau of Land Management: Arizona, New Mexico
National Park Service: Intermountain Region
New Mexico State Forestry
U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Region 2
U. S. Forest Service



January 15, 2009

To: Bob Tibi, Director, National Weather Service, Western Region

From: Southwest Coordinating Group

Topic/Issue: Changes to Red Flag Warning Policy re: Lightning

We recently received a copy of a memo from your office regarding changes to the NWS Western Region Red Flag Warning policy, which states that Red Flag Warnings for “greater than normal” dry lightning events are to be issued by the offices serving Arizona beginning this fire season. We wish to express our opposition to this and request that lightning-based Red Flag Warnings not be issued this season for the following reasons:

- NWS has effectively provided us with the information we have needed to make lightning-based decisions for over a decade without lightning being part of the Red Flag criteria. A new or revised warning product is not needed at this time.
- Red Flag Warnings in the Southwest have been based solely on the fire behavior implications of strong winds and low humidity for years. Enacting a rapid change to this paradigm will likely lead to confusion at the field level, especially as Arizona represents only half of the Southwest Geographic Area. Firefighting resources often move between Arizona and the remainder of the area and we believe that this will create a safety issue.
- Initial examination into the drivers of high impact lightning events in the Southwest by our Predictive Services personnel indicate a highly variable and complex situation with no clear criteria for lightning-based Red Flag Warnings. Further insight may be gained at a lightning-trigger analysis workshop to be held in May, and we believe results from this workshop will be required to develop meaningful lightning-based Red Flag criteria.

It is our belief that making an unnecessary change to the present Red Flag criteria based on little scientific evidence will not improve the fire management decision process, and will lead to confusion which would compromise the safety of the firefighters that the Red Flag program is intended to protect. We encourage the NWS offices serving the Southwest to work with our Predictive Services personnel to consider producing a non-operational lightning threat product this season that could be evaluated and potentially implemented operationally for the 2010 fire season.

Sincerely,

/s/ Donald Griego

Chair, Southwest Coordinating Group

cc. Eli Jacks, Chief, NWS Fire and Public Services, Office of Climate, Water and Weather Service