

Forest Service: Pyroterrorism a threat in the U.S.

By Ed Ballam, Firehouse

Fire has long been used as a weapon through history and continues to be an effective means of terrorism to this day.

In his keynote address at the Firehouse World conference in San Diego, Robert Baird, deputy national fire director of Fire and Aviation Management for the U.S. Forest Service, said pyroterrorism is something all responders need to be prepared to combat.

“Arson in the [wildland urban interface] is a real threat,” said Baird in his keynote comments. “Anything we can do to reduce it is a real accomplishment.”



The Lake Tahoe Angora Fire of 2007 was the result of a campfire gone bad.

Photo/LVFPD

Baird gave a quick review of the use of arson and pyroterrorism throughout modern history, starting with the fire balloon bombs Japan launched on the mainland United States during World War II. Of the 9,000 launched, 300 hit the

mainland.

It was also identified as a military weapon during the Vietnam War. The attacks on the World Trade Center were also a case of pyroterrorism in his mind, Baird said, noting that Osama Bin Laden was a civil engineer and knew the effect the fuel on the planes would have.

In 2002, federal authorities arrested José Padilla, an New York City native and declared enemy combatant, on suspicion that he was plotting with terrorist Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, the architect of the 911 attacks on the United States, to detonate a dirty bomb in Chicago.

During the investigation, Baird said authorities learned that Khalid figured out it would be too difficult to get a dirty bomb into the country and detonate it. So a plan was hatched to solicit volunteers to burn 20 apartment buildings in New York City simultaneously using gasoline.

In 2004, the FBI came upon intelligence and issued an alert to the National Interagency Fire Center (NIFC) suggesting that Al Queda had plans to start wildland fires in Montana, Wyoming, Utah and Colorado, Baird said, noting that all the material he was presenting was unclassified information and his interpretations and analysis were his own.

"I am not going to be some suit out of Washington, D.C., coming out here and telling you how to fight wildland fires," said Baird, who added that his family in California was evacuated during the Camp Pendleton Fire.

And as recently as this past winter, a readily available Al Queda magazine called *Inspire* published an article and photos declaring people have the freedom to light fire bombs against the American enemies, Baird said.

"Terrorists have assessed us and they look for our weaknesses," Baird said.

The threat, however, is not just from outside of the United States borders, Baird said, noting there are plenty of domestic groups who might use pyroterrorism as a method to advance their goals.

Baird pointed to the bombings of domestic terrorist Daniel Andreas San Diego, targeting firefighters and responders in 2003, as evidence of domestic pyroterrorism.

Raymond Lee Oyler, the man charged and convicted for setting the deadly Esperanza Fire in 2006 that claimed the lives of five firefighters, is yet another example of arson as a form of terrorism. Oyler was also suspected of starting as many as 25 other fires.

Even the recent fatal shooting of firefighters in Webster, N.Y., on Christmas Eve, is an example of someone using fire to create terror and kill firefighters, and a stark example of pyroterrorism, Baird said.

The best way to combat pyroterrorism, according to Baird, is to have a "cohesive wildland fire strategy" and to develop partnerships across all agencies to develop good tactical information.

While there may be many challenges to curbing pyroterrorism, Baird said developing "robust intelligence" on suspects and plots will go a long way toward achieving the goal.

It also helps to prevent fuel build-up that can contribute to the severity of wildland fires, Baird said, noting that fire officials need to know when to extinguish fires and when to let them burn to mitigate that potentially threatening fuel build-up.

Ultimately, the goal is to protect the public and responders from any harm pyroterrorists may be trying to inflict, Baird said, adding that watching out for each

other will help.

“When you roll into a fire, make sure everyone is protected and there are no easy targets,” Baird said. “Protect each other and bring everyone home.”