



# USFS Pacific Northwest Region 6

## 2020 Wildland Fire Response

### COVID-19 Protocols

April 9, 2020

#### **Leader's Intent**

- **Task**
  - Provide a common operating picture for Fire Managers and Tactical Resource Leadership to organize and prepare for response to wildland fire suppression during the 2020 Fire season with the consideration of firefighters at risk to the exposure of COVID-19.
  - Consider management strategies that apply best management practices to reduce the number of firefighters that contract COVID-19 through work related activities.
  - Plan for wildland fire suppression actions that reduce the impacts to the public sector.
- **Purpose**
  - Wildland fire suppression is a Critical Mission as defined by the Agencies. In addition to Fire Managers and Tactical Leaders needing to prepare for the inherent challenges and risks associated with fire season, all preparation needs to be overlaid by practices and actions that reduce spread of COVID-19.
- **End State**
  - Clear expectations are shared with the understanding of mission and risk for Agency Administrators, Fire Managers and Firefighters. Communications with the public are accurate and describe that our best efforts are being made during the most arduous of situations.

This document is specific to USFS, Region 6, Pacific Northwest. Additional intent will be provided for Oregon/Washington BLM, and USFS, Region 10, Alaska. It was determined that due to Agency and Department specific direction it is acceptable to have multiple documents in this instance that would better serve Agency Administrators and Fire Managers.

Pre-planning and preparing is extremely important when applying best practices to mitigate the impacts of COVID-19 on wildfire responders. Agency Administrators, Fire Managers and Risk Managers need to evaluate how best to decrease the spread of illness and lower the impact of an outbreak during a wildfire response. Agency Administrators should develop risk assessments to identify and communicate attainable objectives when considering the following:

- Reducing transmission among fire personnel;
- Protecting fire personnel and their families who are at higher risks for adverse health complications;
- Maintaining fire operations, and;
- Managing adverse effects to the public, cooperators and contractors.

The guidance in this document is intended to be complimentary to the Northwest Geographic Response Plan being developed by an Area Command Team, in some cases specific wording and



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guidance may be slightly different with the understanding that it is necessary in an Interagency environment to consider all Agencies input.

The intent and tools provided in this document are meant to provide doctrinal guidance, not prescriptive procedures with the expectation to provide the capability to:

- Maintain initial attack,
- Maintain extended attack,
- Maintain complex fire management,
- Maintain dispatch and coordination,
- Identify, define and document protocols on how to manage potential COVID-19 exposure incidents for Initial and Extended Attack incidents
- Identify, define and document protocols for Incident Management Teams (IMT) to mitigate COVID-19 exposure concerns and provide to IMTs, and all Units
- Identify, define and document protocols for wildland fire response to areas with known exposure to COVID-19

In the current environment, we need to continue to base management decisions on meeting objectives, while also minimizing the risk of COVID-19 exposure to responders. The overarching objective in wildfire response is to suppress fires as efficiently as possible, with the fewest number of responders possible, while maintaining a high probability of success in protecting our values and resources. This objective will enable us to continue our mission and protect our responders and the public from the threat of COVID-19 to the best of our ability.

This season the direction of wildland fire response actions will focus on suppression strategies with the goal of reducing the total number of responders needed to safely achieve objectives by using the full range of fire management tactics. COVID-19 considerations may alter how we meet management goals but should not lead to higher-risk tactics. Fire management decisions should focus on strategies and tactics that reduce exposure to COVID-19 and smoke impacts to communities. In many cases, swift initial response will be the default response, however, each situation is unique and must be critically assessed through risk-informed decision making.

### **Some considerations that may help us be successful include:**

- Health and safety of responders and communities is paramount
  - Ensuring that medical services are available and identified for responders and that potential impacts to local services are communicated. Consider enhanced medical services when local systems are stressed or under-prepared to support responders.
  - Critical Incident Response Plan are in place and up to date with COVID-19 protocols
  - Casualty Assistance Plan up to date with regional and local contact information
- Minimize responder exposure to COVID-19



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- Prevention and public education that reduce direct in-person contact
- Proactive implementation of restrictions
- Identifying response areas that are high priority/higher risk
- Social Distancing
  - Implementing social distancing at the module level
  - Expanding isolation and quarantine efforts before and after fires
  - Avoid traditional fire camps, emphasis on modular isolation
- Possible limitations on sharing of resources, and increased use of technology
- Pre-screening of incoming resources from outside of local areas
- Strategic movement of current resources in local/regional manner
- Precautions to limit exposure and spread of COVID-19
  - Extreme vigilance for screening, testing (where available), quarantining and tracking firefighters
- Extensive communication and coordination with our workforce, partners, cooperators, contractors and the public
- Exploration of various scenarios of degraded fire capacity and options
  - Zone by zone considerations for partners/cooperators and FS response

### **Before the Fire:**

#### **Prepare Firefighters, Develop Protocols, System Modifications**

- Prevention:
  - Public information campaigns to inform the public about fire response concerns including fire restrictions to reduce the potential for human caused fires
  - Fire restrictions will be coordinated with all partner for consistent messaging to the public
  - Educating first responders with data and a basic understanding of causal mechanisms and effective mitigation of COVID-19
  - Pause implementation of prescribed fire to reduce impacts to firefighters and public respiratory health
  - Survey first responders to develop lists of those pre-disposed to respiratory illness and factor this into their assigned roles and tasks on large incidents
- Planning:
  - Pre-identification of potential control locations for initial attack response. Some forests may have this from previous planning efforts, PODS, RMA work and WFDSS
  - Make sure that all first responders have and are familiar with the Preparedness Guide for Firefighters and Their Families ([Preparedness Guide for Firefighters and Their Families.](#)) Build extra capacity in all of our workforce, but especially supervisors, for managing line of duty deaths (Casualty Assistance Program)



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- Planning Questions:
  - Pre-identify a standard set of questions that should be considered for determining exposure associated with both environmental hazards as well as COVID-19
- Technology:
  - Remote operations, briefings, sensing and surveillance, fuel modeling/sensing; fire behavior modeling/projections
- Staffing:
  - Preparation for those modules that have or potential to have reduced personnel, by identifying collateral duty/overhead personnel and militia prepared to help with staffing engines, IHC's and handcrews
- Stance:
  - Operations will prepare with the expectation that resource limitations will occur at all Preparedness Levels
- Contracting:
  - MRE's, medical equipment, PPE, remote sensing, UAS, contract personnel and equipment
  - Forest Procurement Assistant Team preparation for food services and PPE
- Capacity:
  - Employee support for emotional well-being and to help with personal logistical challenges related to COVID-19 (e.g. closed schools and children at home) that affect the availability of first responders to engage in assignments or travel
  - Caches prepared
- Isolation and Self quarantine - prepare for:
  - **Isolation** separates sick people with a contagious disease from people who are not sick
  - **Quarantine** separates and restricts the movement of people who were exposed to a contagious disease to see if they become sick
- Communications:
  - Develop COVID-19 communications toolkits and strategies for two-way virtual communications with communities

### During the Fire:

#### Modify Strategies, Tactics and Logistics

- **Priority: Initial attack should be the highest priority for commitment of resources with the purpose of containing fires during initial attack and preventing long duration fires.**
  - Initial attack response should align with direction to limit the risk of exposure and spread of COVID-19. This should involve strategies and tactics that minimize the number of people needed to respond and that reduce the incident duration



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while not compromising firefighter safety and probability of success. The efforts to reduce overall exposure may require consideration to increased staffing, albeit for less duration

- Emphasize containment in order to minimize assignment time, mop-up standards should be evaluated for all incidents and limited to minimize additional fire spread
- Make decisions that will minimize the number of responders needed to meet objectives
- Consider zone and point protection suppression strategies associated with protection of human life, communities and critical infrastructure when sufficient resources for perimeter control are not available
- Weigh the risk of responding in multiple vehicles; driving is still the one of our highest-risk activities
- Stock vehicles with disinfecting wipes, hand sanitizer, soap and physical barrier protection (face shields, masks). Disinfect vehicles and equipment and wash PPE after each response
- Do not share PPE, flight helmets, radios or other equipment
- Use MREs, freeze dried, single-serve sack or boxed meals instead of food lines. Evaluate drinking water supply options to minimize exposure and handling of water containers
- Monitor smoke and Co2 Exposure to firefighters, rotate in and out of smoke if necessary
- Consider shorter tours (<14 days), shorter shift lengths. Incorporate additional time into shifts to provide for hygiene, cleaning and additional rest
- Technology:
  - Remote operations, briefings sensing and surveillance, fuel modeling/sensing; fire behavior modeling/projections
  - Use technology to communicate using virtual tools
  - Increase use of UAS and webcams
  - Plan for increased use of networking capabilities, and areas with limited or not existing network capabilities may need additional services
  - Utilize dashboards and data to support risk-based decisions
- Camp:
  - When possible, shift operations and logistics from single, large camps to multiple, satellite camps that support the separation of people
  - Incident Command Teams may utilize hotels where individual rooms allow for separations
  - Briefings should be conducted via radios and/or other virtual tools, to reduce face to face interactions
  - Expanded medical support (as needed and if possible)



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- Module isolation: (dispersed camping)
- Two-way isolation: closed camps with security, no leaving camp to travel into community
- Define and implement more rigorous cleaning and sanitation protocols
- Provide extra handwashing stations if possible
- Communication:
  - Expanded use of technology and local networks for remote/virtual community meetings and updates use broadband channels to reach affected communities
  - Anticipate challenges that will occur with remote briefings, meetings and interpersonal communications
  - Consider radio or remote briefings for incoming resource, instead of individual briefings
  - Updated protocols and Systems to deliver and distribute documents electronically, such as maps and IAPs

### **After the Fire:**

#### **Ensure Safety, Recovery and Rehabilitation**

- Rest, Recovery and Reassignment: take precautions to limit potential spread of COVID-19. This may include:
  - Continued screening and testing
  - Module isolation (Fire modules should not report to the office but a designated location that allows for the crew to interact and work without exposing them or other employees. Work should allow for the continued separation of crews as long as they continue to remain available nationally.)
  - Consider possible exposure and need for isolation periods. Consider grouping exposed modules together if reassignment is required
  - Increased employee support (be prepared to provide it virtually)
    - EAP
    - Peer Support
    - Hospital and Family Liaison
- Decontamination:
  - Equipment, facilities
- Burned Area Emergency Response (BAER):
  - Consider need for BAER; potentially modify strategies and tactics (i.e. remote support, prioritize high risks, limit personnel)
- Tracking:
  - Forward and backward monitoring of all module-to-module, person-to-person and community interactions
- Communication:



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- Appraise community of status including quarantines and rehabilitation
  - Communicating potential exposure
  - Communicating our limited capacity for response
  - Community response
- AAR Specific to Wildfire Tactics and COVID-19
  - We need to institutionalize what we learn from the COVID-19 crisis and incorporate that into our enterprise risk management as well as local SOPs

### **Appendix A – Additional References COVID-19**

- Template Risk Assessment Worksheets specific to response during COVID-19
- NWCG Infectious Disease Guidance for Wildland Fire Incidents for further information:  
<https://www.nwcg.gov/committees/emergency-medical-committee/infectious-disease-guidance>
- **THIS SECTION WILL BE UPDATED PERIODICALLY.**