

# Topic: Updates from the Field – COVID-19 and Fire Season

Date: April 21, 2020

Contact: Jim Gumm

Email: [jim.gumm@usda.gov](mailto:jim.gumm@usda.gov)

Phone: 575-491-6748

## Executive Summary

This week's discussion highlighted several topics, the following are the ones emphasized the most:

[Dynamic Tension](#) – There is tension between wanting guidance and wanting the freedom to make decisions based on local context. There is a desire to know what they can expect to receive guidance on and what they won't.

[The COVID Conundrum: Risk trade-offs](#) – As described in the Lion Fire AAR, some of our COVID-19 mitigation measures don't seem sustainable within the wildland fire environment and may increase the overall risk to responders while engaged in suppression activities.

[Prevention vs. Worst-Case Scenario](#) – Serious concerns were expressed that we are concentrating a significant portion of our efforts on prevention, but that a lack of guidance regarding worst-case scenario events exists.

[Protecting our Dispatchers](#) – Participants view our dispatching system as an especially fragile component of our system of work. Can we get approval to use existing technology to shore up this fragile link or develop coverage plans in case a dispatch center goes completely down?

[COVID Catalysts](#) – There is near constant worry about firefighters themselves becoming a pathway for the infection to reach a community that may otherwise be unaffected by the virus.

[Interagency Response, Single-Agency Planning](#) – We all know we will be responding to fires in an interagency fashion, but the perception in the field is a lack of integration of the agencies' planning efforts with partners.

[OWCP Claims](#) – How will the "high-risk employment" category play out when firefighters become infected with the virus? Are we staffed up in HR to handle the workload?

[Delayed On-Boarding of Temps](#) – The regional direction supervisors are receiving does not match the direction HR is receiving, creating major gaps. Supervisors are often not being included in HR's decision to delay on-boarding of their seasonals, and only hear of the decision from their employees.

[Testing Supplies](#) – Are wildland firefighters on a preferential list to gain early access to testing supplies?

[Mental Health and Suicide Risk](#) – The current situation and associated unknowns is leading to an increase in stress levels and a decrease in mental health across all regions.

[PPE Ordering AQM issues](#) – Some units still do not understand why AQM rules are structured as they are with respect to purchasing PPE despite the Chief's video addressing this issue. How do we ensure this message is accessible to purchasers?

[Community Engagement](#) – There is a need to engage with communities *now* at the national, regional, and local levels about what a realistic fire response may look like this season and their sentiment on bringing in non-local resources.

### **Other topics included in this report:**

- [Job Corps](#)
- [Contractors](#)
- [Budget](#)
- [R1 and R9 travel limitations](#)
- [Aviation](#)
- [IMTs](#)
- [Suggested Actions](#)
- [Lessons Learned](#)
- [Operational Innovations](#)

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**Task:** Collect perspectives from the wildland fire community about current concerns, what is going well, and where they need additional help.

**Background:** A pandemic unlike anything seen in most of our lifetimes has changed how we approach wildland fire. This effort seeks to ensure changes made to the system are helpful to the wildland fire community, the public, and our partners. It will also serve as a conduit for information regarding best management practices, lessons learned, and innovations.

**Method:** Human Performance & Innovation and Organizational Learning (HP&IOL) will host nine focus group sessions weekly, one per region, for the duration of fire season. Focus group participants will be given a specific set of questions each week and asked to provide their feedback through a dialogue session facilitated by an HP&IOL team member (see [appendix A](#) for the questions asked this week).

**Regional Status Summary for the week of April 13, 2020:** Overall, most regions are still preparing for fire season and are focused on pre-season tasks such as onboarding new and seasonal employees, providing adequate housing for employees (quarantine locations), and implementing training with social distancing. Region 3 is just starting to enter fire season and many of the other regions are reaching out to them to see what they have been doing. Region 9 experienced the pandemic at the height of their season and are now at the tail end wondering what the rest of the season looks like for them, especially with regards to helping the other regions.

## Discussions from the week of April 13, 2020:

**Dynamic Tension:** There is a dynamic tension between wanting guidance and wanting the freedom to make decisions. While current guidance from the WO has provided room for decision space, some units and forests are thriving in that environment. Others are paralyzed waiting for further guidance. Having a clearer understanding of what guidance is still expected to come down from the WO and what is not may relieve some of this tension. Even if the WO is not be able to provide specific guidance on all things now, a request has been made to share what the field can expect to see guidance about, and what they will need to start figuring out at the local level.

- Empowered Now and Later: Most responders feel supported at their local levels, and some at the regional level, but responders are worried that support will only exist while things are going right. Are the national and regional offices ready to support and empower their local managers and employees when things don't go right?
  - Clear and specific intent with the stated permission that managers are empowered to make decisions at a local level would be most helpful.
- What does a COVID exposure on a fire look like? What is our responsibility as an agency to care for the individual?
  - Some regions allowing quarantine in hotels, others are not.
- What does fire camp look like? Can the field use local restaurants, or do they still need to use national caterers?
  - Want to know what options are being looked at by the WO for feeding firefighters.
- Traveling across GACCs. This has the potential to create resource shortages. What does ordering look like across GACC boundaries?
- Risk assessments are cumbersome and redundant in some regions. There is a desire to streamline the risk assessment requirements.

**Transition from Information Overload to Unified Guidance:** Most regions are experiencing information overload with guidance coming from multiple sources at the national, regional, and local levels. Frequently, the guidance can be different by the time it hits the local level due to interpretations made by readers along the way. There is a need for a single location an employee can go to gather the most up-to-date information. There is also a desire to have *unified guidance across regions* so when responders travel to other locations, they can expect the same levels of COVID-19 precautions.

- Desire a single location where they can look for guidance, doctrine, protocol, and other information.
- Learning from each other: Would like to be able to share and search lessons learned, best management practices, and innovations nationally.

**The COVID Conundrum:** The field is having extreme difficulty reconciling the CDC guidance for social distancing with that of a realistic fire response, especially with regards to balancing risk exposure. One of the biggest concerns right now is guidance on the number of people per vehicle to effectively transport firefighters responding to fires. Firefighters will be taking on more risk and may have to break CDC protocols in order to effectively suppress fires. Do we have guidelines or protocols in place for when/what is acceptable?

- Transfer of risk from increased COVID exposure risk to increased driving exposure, which is one of the most dangerous things our people do.
- Most units don't have enough vehicles to support 2, 4, or even 6 people per vehicle.
- Added to the stress is balancing the need for social distancing, but also meeting USDA's request for fleet reduction.
- Even if there were enough vehicles to meet the social distancing requirements, additional vehicles create their own issues:
  - Logistically it causes issues: more parking area is required (as was experienced on the Lion Fire in Colorado)
  - parking areas are often used as safety zones and many vehicles decreases the effectiveness of the safety zone
  - more people pumping gas (increasing exposure)

**COVID Catalysts:** Managers are concerned the decisions they make will lead to sickness or death of someone else. Firefighters, not necessarily line officers or agency administrators, will once again be asked to weigh exposure odds that no person can reasonably calculate. No one wants to be the catalyst to put a community at risk for fire *and* COVID when "normally" the only risk was the fire. Now we have a silent killer, where carriers can be asymptomatic, and you just don't know if the person next to you is infected.

**Interagency response, Single Agency Planning:** A big worry continues to be responding to a multi-jurisdictional fire where our partners may not be on the same page as the Forest Service with regards to COVID-19 precautions. While fire response is clearly interagency, the perception in the field is that planning for the upcoming season has not been.

- Coordination and alignment is needed to reduce confusion amongst responders when faced with decision making in an emergency situation.

**Prevention vs. Worst-Case Scenario:** There is a common feeling that the primary focus of planning has been on preventing the spread of COVID-19, but the field would like to know if any planning has occurred for the worst-case scenario and what this could potentially look like.

- Is there an action plan for exposed employees and communities?
- Is there a continuation of leadership plan if key IMT members, dispatch centers, or other critical infrastructure temporarily go out of service?

**Mental Health and Suicide Risk:** The current telework situation, potential for long periods of isolation, reduced unit cohesion, and the necessity of making impending hard decisions that affect the well-being of their employees is leading to an increase in stress levels and a decrease in mental health across all regions.

**Delayed On-Boarding of Temps:** The regional direction supervisors are receiving does not match the direction HR is receiving, creating major gaps. Supervisors are not being included in the decision by HR to delay the on-boarding of their employees, and many are only finding out from their employees after the decision has been made.

- There is a lack of consistency from HR regarding proper notifications that supervisors have to account for.
- Many temp employees live out-of-state in the off-season and are not being told of delayed on-boarding until they are in route to start. They then must make the choice to go back home or continue to the work site, and in some cases live out of their vehicle until the new start date.

**Additional Region 10-specific issues:** On-boarding and housing seasonal employees in government quarters continue to be major issues that are being worked through. Some districts were forced to make the tactical decision to not hire seasonals due to their inability to provide adequate housing separation and/or quarantine locations for individuals traveling from outside and within the state of Alaska.

In addition, some employees have been stopped while attempting to travel through international borders (Canada) and are waiting direction on how to report to their duty station.

**OWCP Claims:** There are still concerns from the field on whether they will be supported by OWCP if exposed to the virus while working.

- Do we know with certainty that forestry technician falls under “high-risk employment” as deemed by OWCP?
- CA-16s are typically used to ensure rapid treatment and responsibility of the agency to pay for initial care despite the OWCP determination. A CA-16 must be filled out and submitted within 48 hours of the injury and is typically done by the supervisor. However, the Forest Service has the added step that all CA-16s must be submitted by an HR representative. Do we have enough HR staff to handle the potential number of CA-16s?

**Protecting our Dispatchers:** Dispatch centers across the country staff the radios for our emergency responders, a task that can currently only be done at a USDA office. If a dispatch center is exposed to COVID-19, it could potentially shut the center down, leaving responders unsupported. This is especially true for 3<sup>rd</sup> tier dispatch centers that are minimally staffed. Options are available for home-use radios, such as C-Soft and Wave, but inquiries to the CIO have been returned as “not enough of an emergency to use the systems on VPN.”

- Are we working regionally and nationally to develop continuation of coverage plans for when an entire dispatch center goes down?
- There is also concern about expanded dispatch and what that looks like. Many units have large expanded dispatch units every year. They are working on strategic plans for how to handle all the surge resources. They also employ a lot of AD retirees, a high-risk segment of the population.

**Community Engagement:** There is a need to engage with communities *now* at the national, regional, and local levels about what a realistic fire response may look like this season. In addition, we need to engage communities where COVID-19 is not present or in low numbers, to understand if they even want a large fire response that could potentially bring COVID-19 to their community. This is especially relevant in Region 10 (see note below).

**Additional Region 10-specific issues:** Many villages in Alaska have stringent requirements to quarantine for 14 days when moving between villages or islands. There is a strong need to engage with the villages to understand the potential impact of outside resources as well as the desire of community members to suppress fire vs. reduce risk of exposure to COVID-19.

## Specialized Concerns

**Ordering PPE through AQM issues** – There has been a request that all PPE orders be pushed up, consolidated, and approved by the WO. It is preventing local units from getting the PPE they need to work. For Region 3 and 4 who are starting to see fires, this is a big issue. The Chief has put out a video explaining the big picture behind PPE, so the ask is, how can we structure that kind of communication to ensure it is widely shared?

**Job Corps** - Job Corps students are off until at least May 11, but centers are expecting to potentially go entirely virtual for the remainder of the summer. There is a Type 3 team in place working with the DOL and FS, but it ultimately comes down to when the DOL lets students come back.

- Centers are struggling to host virtual fire training because most students don't have access to the internet, a computer, tablet, or other device. Often, they cannot go to libraries or coffee shops to get internet because of closures. Some students are taking the training in coffee shop parking lots, which is not an ideal learning environment.
- This would be a huge loss of surge forces for many locations if we can't work with the DOL to figure out how to bring students back on.

**Contractors** – How do we order and bring on contractors? What tools or rights do we have to ensure contractors are following CDC and other appropriate guidance?

**Continuity of Leadership** - If certain functional areas, as an example dispatch offices or tanker bases, are not able to continue operations due to employee(s) becoming infected, what kind of contingency plans could be made in advance to ensure continuity of leadership and support?

**Budget** – Spending significant percentages of discretionary budgets on COVID PPE has become a growing challenge and concern. Many functional areas simply do not have the capacity to continue spending funds on PPE while providing other necessary equipment and supplies for the upcoming season.

**Testing Supplies** – Nationally, there is a shortage of testing supplies available. Will there be opportunity for “high-risk employees” to be provided with testing in order to prevent inadvertent spread of the virus to other first responders, the communities, as well as when they return to their own families following assignments?

**R1 and R9 travel limitations** – Limiting travel across regions may be detrimental to other regions needing help. In addition, restrictions may directly affect the employees themselves, e.g., if R9 can't travel more than one day away, firefighters there are essentially done for the season. This significantly affects their pay and therefore ability to support themselves and their families.

**Aviation** – There is concern that air resource availability may not meet needs for rapid response. There is a need to develop methods to prioritize ordering of resources or sharing with partners and cooperators (e.g., state, National Guard). Are the current contracts (exclusive use/BPA) extensive enough to provide for adequate coverage, e.g., pilot rotations for coverage on days off?

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**Additional Region 10-specific issues:** Availability of air resources from BPA vendors may prove to be challenging and may not be available for emergent responses.

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**IMTs** – ADs that reside in the high-risk group for COVID-19 make up a large part of IMTs. Many IMTs are receiving feedback from their team members that they anticipate accepting assignments on a case-by-case basis.

- There is an expected reduction in availability of Type 1 and 2 teams nationally and regionally.

## Suggested Actions

1. Have a national-level conversation around what hotel chains will house infected employees.
2. Look at using [Region 5's e-binder](#) as a model for communicating up-to-date national and regional guidance and policy to minimize confusion on what is draft vs. final (instead of emails).
3. Have an ACT/IMT (as regions enter fire season) set up solely to deal with incidents-within-incidents related to COVID-19.
4. Rely more heavily on infrared technology rather than mop up to reduce need for resources.
5. Possibility of going to a work schedule that mimics fire assignments for duration of season to limit time off (i.e., limit free time in which responders can be exposed outside of the office).
6. Look into creating Regional or WO support codes for quarantine if exposure on a fire.
7. Assess the feasibility of having an infection disease specialist available to each Type 1 and 2 team.
8. R9's fire season is mellowing out, could be used as guinea pigs to test what quarantine, travel, etc. looks like.
9. Develop back-up plan for dispatch coverage; adjacent dispatch center or alternative dispatch location or home-option equipped with radios.
10. Look to National PAO to advise public education and prevention topics to ensure consistency in messaging.
11. Is it possible to design a "working quarantine" situation where asymptomatic or light symptom employees could continue to contribute to the mission?

## Lessons Learned

### *Region 9*

- Made plans for consistency across zones and the entire forest.
- Half of zone was under quarantine because of some positive tests; affected staffing with limited availability of resources.
- Issue getting supplies due to a lack of availability.
- 20+ fires on the Mark Twain, didn't have enough resources to staff them all. Focused on detection with few resources on the fire. Low priority fires went unstaffed until late in the evening or the next day.

### [Lion Fire AAR – BLM Colorado](#)

1. Social distancing is very tough in stressful situations: Despite discussing social distancing practices before leaving for the fire, upon arrival multiple structures/vehicles were threatened and instincts to protect life and property took over.
2. When evacuating public, maintaining distance is difficult when property/landowners are panicked and looking for answers and guidance.
3. When working with multiple agencies the COVID-19 mitigation measures and messages have varied widely and are hard to enforce or maintain.
4. Briefings are hard to conduct in the field with large crowds following CDC guidance. We usually don't have microphones or platforms in initial attack, so it was hard to hear and voice critical information to multiple crews.
5. We utilized four vehicles with eight firefighters. This seemed like a good idea until arrival; parking and safety areas for vehicles was minimal. It added chaos to the initial arrival.
6. Personnel jumped into different trucks and engines as the incident progressed, creating more "contaminated" surfaces.
7. It is very difficult to keep equipment sanitized throughout an incident (examples: truck radios, hand tools, chainsaws, steering wheels, compartment doors)
8. A few individuals did wear masks and experienced a harder time communicating to one another thus decreasing the distance between individuals. The people who did wear masks seemed to be touching their faces and adjusting masks more.



## Operational Innovations

Region	Unit	Target	Innovation
Region 1	Missoula Interagency Dispatch Center	Dispatch	Dispatch has three groups; each group works one week in office, then two weeks telework. Rotate through to minimize presence in office. Pairing experienced employees with those less experienced.
Region 1	IHCs	Training	Critical training pushed to 3-4 weeks, start with items that can be done virtually, then assign smaller modules for staggered group training, culminate with activities needing to be done together in person.
Region 4	Fishlake NF	Staffing	Family-style modules; staggered staffing right off the bat to contain spread to just modules rather than entire crew.
Region 5	All	Information	One stop shop for information: <a href="#">R5's E-binder</a> for all things COVID-19.
Region 5	All	Fire Response	IA Protocols: If first on scene, will establish a command post and designate someone as check-in. All non-Forest Service resources must check-in and be cleared prior to engaging on an incident as per the protocols outlined in the <a href="#">E-binder R5 Employee assessment for self-quarantine</a> .
Region 6	All	Fire Response	Working on the PNW plan to respond to large fire incidents and initial attack—probably will provide a basis to work from but expecting a doctrinal approach to implementation.
Region 6, Region 10	All, Tongass and Chugach NF	Fire Response	Adding COVID-19 hazards and mitigation measures to existing risk assessments
Region 8	National Forests in Florida	Logistical Planning	Set up a BPA with hotels with single-room occupancy/kitchenette. Good for small incidents. For extended attack fire, looking at renting out entire hotels and cleaning to CDC requirements.
Region 8	National Forests in Florida	Aviation	Coordinating with local aviation resources to cover the forest while pilot is on days off to alleviate the need for a relief pilot.
Region 9	Midewin IHC	Staffing	Readying to engage as modules rather than full IHC crew.
Region 9	All	Fire Response	<a href="#">Region 9 Wildfire Response Plan</a>
Region 10, Region 2	Tongass and Chugach NF, Medicine Bow NF	Seasonal Housing	Limiting barrack use to first responders, keeping one person/room.
Interagency	Wildland Lessons Learned Center	Information Sharing	<a href="#">Wildland Fire Lessons Learned Center's Community Connected Space</a>

*Unless otherwise noted, the content of this document was compiled from notes taken during focus group discussions between members of the wildland fire community and facilitated by the Human Performance & Innovation and Organizational Learning (HP&IOL) Research, Development, and Application units. To the extent possible, focus group participants were given the opportunity to vet the content before the final production of this document.*

*As part of our process, we encourage comments on these published documents from all readers. If you would like to participate in this effort, contribute your perspective, or have feedback or questions about this document, please email HP&IOL at [SM.FS.OL\\_RMRS@usda.gov](mailto:SM.FS.OL_RMRS@usda.gov). This is an internal document, not for public distribution and is part of an ongoing research project therefore not subject to FOIA.*

## Appendix A: Questions asked to Focus Group Participants during the week of April 13, 2020

Questions asked in each of the focus group sessions:

1. What guidance you are getting from above?
  - a. What resonates? What doesn't?
2. Where is guidance lacking? What do you intend to do where guidance is lacking?
3. What are the highest impact decisions that are being made right now at your level regarding fire management and COVID-19? With what guidance and/or authority?
4. Do you feel empowered and supported to provide additional local level guidance where needed? If not, what help do you need?

Questions that were asked based on time. Focus group participants were given the opportunity to write in answers to the following questions if time ran out.

5. If your unit has a fire today, do you know what that response will look like? Is your leader's intent clear? If not, what's missing?
6. What issues are you currently experiencing? What does leadership need to know about?