

WHAT DOES FIRE SEASON LOOK LIKE AMIDST THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC?

CONCERNS, PERSPECTIVES, AND IDEAS FROM THE FIELD

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INTRODUCTION

This document will discuss the concerns, perspectives, and ideas garnered from the field on how to approach fire season 2020. While the concern is real for the upcoming fire season, COVID-19 has exposed blind spots, pinch points, and weaknesses in the wildland fire system and within the Forest Service as a whole. Whatever actions are taken this season should not be looked at as a temporary fix for a temporary situation. Rather, they should be looked at as possible permanent changes to how we fight fire into the future that make us, as a group, more resilient.

We have a unique opportunity to focus on what is important in life. We have the opportunity to put things into place that help us do our jobs better and make life better for the employees in the long run. We need to ensure that whatever the changes, our primary responsibility is to care for the safety of our people during and after assignment.

What people want most is a message from national leadership acknowledging that this fire season isn't going to be normal and that we are going to have to use different strategies. Some of those strategies may not be well taken by the public and it is going to take some political courage to follow through.

METHOD

To engage the field in a timely manner, HP&IOL held virtual focus group sessions in each region to gain a variety of perspectives. Each focus group session hosted a diverse set of resource types including IHC, engine, crew, aviation, IMT members, dispatch, and line officers. Notes from each region were combined and distilled into this summary document.

It should be noted that the participants of the focus groups were extremely appreciative to be given the opportunity to express their concerns and ideas and to be a part of the planning process.

HIGHLIGHT REEL – THE TOP 7

From the perspective of the field, we need to crank up discussions and hard thinking. We can do a lot of things to reduce risk of exposure to the virus, but it will likely increase risk elsewhere. When all is said and done, we can't let the pandemic and its associated precautions distract our resources from the basics of wildland fire and the risks associated with it. Put plainly by an IHC superintendent, "There is concern that this will be a high fatality year due to all of the distractions playing out right now." While we don't have control over the distractions on a personal or professional level, it is very important for leadership at all levels to understand these distractions and what the unintended consequences of those are going to be.

MISSION-CRITICAL, STRATEGIC DIRECTION AT A NATIONAL LEVEL NOW, IF NOT WE NEED TO PAUSE

The direction currently being pushed down to units offers a lot of decision space for units in creating different approaches. If forests and regions are rolling their own plans, some may be more lax than others on protocols, putting the resources from other forests and regions at risk. The field urgently requested clear national leader's intent. With crews already on-boarding employees and many others about to be on-boarded, maybe it is time to take a pause on operations until strategic direction is released. Until then, the field would like to know what the WO is doing to assess the situation. Be transparent with your efforts even if you don't have a "final" solution or guidance yet.

ACTING AS VECTORS FOR COVID-19 SPREAD

Personnel are concerned about contracting COVID-19 and spreading it to other firefighters and the public as they travel between incidents. Responders are also deeply worried about bringing the virus home to their families. For many, this is not an option; they would refuse to go home and risk exposing their loved ones. When considering how to protect our employees, we must also consider how to protect their families. If not, the available work force numbers may suffer drastically.

OPERATIONAL PREPAREDNESS

As a nation, we are not anywhere near the pinnacle of this outbreak and what the field has already seen is a lot of disruption in peoples' lives. The field is worried that we are not going to have the organizational capacity to respond to fire. The same goes for our partners and cooperators. The pandemic has only magnified issues with hiring and staffing and many of our surge resources, such as Job Corps, have been severely impacted.

ISOLATION IS THE KEY – RE-TOOLING HOW WE ORDER, MOBOLIZE, AND PAY RESOURCES

Reducing the amount of exposure to employees typically means isolation, whether that be individually or clustered as groups. Re-structuring how we order and stage resources is going to be extremely important in reducing

exposure. However, this may mean asking employees to do things outside of their normal position descriptions and as such, they should be paid commensurately.

GO VIRTUAL - REDUCE NUMBERS

Many IMT positions can be successful operating remotely and numerous large fire tasks can also be transitioned to a virtual platform. Personnel can work at remote stations reducing the number of people required to be in the same area. We need to start planning now to identify which tasks and positions can be made virtual and the IT and software support needed to stand up those changes.

FIRE CAMP – WE CANNOT DO IT THE WAY WE HAVE ALWAYS DONE IT

If there ever is a place for COVID-19 to spread quickly it is at fire camp. Close quarters, many shared surfaces, and a general lack of hygiene all contribute to an arena that would make COVID-19 containment nearly impossible. While the potential for COVID-19 to spread outside a fire camp makes this a more significant issue, the on-going threat in a normal season to a communicable disease spreading throughout camp and sidelining a significant portion of much needed wildland fire personnel warrants capturing these best practices as the new normal way of doing business. We need food, water, communication, medical support, and supplies to work but we don't necessarily need them from a single location.

WORKERS COMPENSATION – HOW DO WE PROVE EXPOSURE?

OWCP claims are often long and drawn-out. It has also proven to be hard to substantiate an "illness" as connected to work. How are we going to prove COVID-19 cases and exposure if contracted at work or on a fire assignment? We need to plan for the worst-case scenario with COVID-19 spreading quickly through responders on a fire. Is the Forest Service prepared to help its employees if they contract the coronavirus while working when OWCP denies their claim due to a lack of evidence?

FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION SUMMARY

The following section more deeply entails the topics in the highlight reel.

MISSION-CRITICAL, STRATEGIC DIRECTION AT A NATIONAL LEVEL NOW, IF NOT WE NEED TO PAUSE

- SOPs should be standardized nationally. There is uncertainty and worry in the field about interacting with resources outside of their jurisdiction if standards are not put into place.
 - Incorporate expert (virology) knowledge into planning.
- Direction should include what is and isn't mission-critical work. Is project work mission-critical? Can we meet other resource areas' missions and still remain healthy for our own mission?
- The field is looking for Leader's Intent in the form of Task, Purpose, End State; not tactical intent.
- Provide direction on priority: as the summer progresses will fire incidents or all-risk (COVID-19 response) incidents be the priority for responders.
- Planning should be interagency. **This is especially important for interagency dispatch centers and work sites.**
- **Ensure that Agency Administrators are included in the roll-out**

DON'T REINVENT THE WHEEL

- Engage with FEMA on how they have done things on all-hazard incidents.
- Utilize the Research Stations to synthesize data available from countries like China and Singapore on how they are dealing with the pandemic.
- Engage the field. Some units may already have plans in place addressing communicable disease in their COOPs.

SWITCH TO A HEAVY PREVENTION AND EDUCATION PRESENCE

- Strategic direction should be shared not just within the Forest Service but with our partners, cooperators, and the public. We need to be upfront with the public about realistic delayed response times and fire management options.
- **Prepare the public and partners to understand that more values at risk might be lost this year due to difficulties of fighting fire amidst COVID-19 guidance. This needs to be done at the national, regional, and local levels.**
- Develop national, regional, and local fire prevention messages.
- Heavy messaging on reducing the number of human-caused starts. May require strategic thinking on public-land use options, e.g., restricting use during high fire danger.

ACTING AS VECTORS FOR COVID-19 SPREAD

STAYING HEALTHY TO REDUCE RISK OF CONTRACTING COVID-19

Fire season is inherently taxing on firefighters fatigue levels and immune systems, which may compromise their ability to fight off COVID-19 if exposed to it. Building more rest and recovery time into the season or utilizing different suppression tactics may allow firefighters to remain healthy longer.

ALTERNATE WORK AND TRAVEL STRATEGIES

- Reduce work hours to allow more time for refurb, disinfecting, hygiene, and sleep.
- Provide biofeedback devices to all employees to help monitor health throughout the season.
- Allow personnel to take their work vehicles home so they don't have to come to the office at all.
- Have modules work and sleep at remote work stations rather than teleworking. Will allow for more crew cohesion, especially on modules where turnover was high.
- Charter flights or use NIC jets to transport modules, IMTs, and single resources.

ALTERNATE FIRE STRATEGIES

- Include risk of exposure to COVID-19 as an additional entry in the Strategic Risk Assessment.
- Start fire restrictions now: Put fire bans on public lands now rather than waiting for conditions to ripen.
 - Work with local and state authorities to institute bans on open burning before fire season starts. Many areas are already responding to escaped open-burn fires.
- Utilize more managed fire. This has the potential to reduce the need for IMTs, resources, and large fire camps.
 - One caveat of this is considering smoke impacts to communities already impacted by COVID-19, a respiratory infection.

- Modify IA and Large Fire Tactics to use existing features (e.g., roads, rivers) as well as point protection to limit personnel needed.
- Utilize more heavy equipment and less crews.
- Hit it hard. Go back to the 10 AM policy for the season; utilize aircraft more on IA to keep fires small.
 - One caveat with this approach: it may incline responders to accept undue risk during IA in an attempt to keep the fire small.
- Reduce the amount of mop-up used; let fires go out naturally. Mop-up has been shown to be taxing to firefighter respiratory systems due to high levels of carbon monoxide.

AGENCY ADMINISTRATOR (AA) SUPPORT AND EXPECTATIONS

- Define essential work push on AAs to support logistics during emergency.
- May need to lower expectations of the products received from IMTs and resources in general if responder availability goes down.

HEAVY HYGIENE, HEALTH, AND SOCIAL DISTANCING EDUCATION

With temporary employees not yet on-boarded and most permanent employees working from home, we need to be sending out clear messages on hygiene and social distancing practices now. Employees need to get into the mental model of practicing social distancing and intense hygiene habits before they are required to come together with their co-workers.

- Send out infographics and guides on practices that will be required at work so employees have time to practice at home.
- These topics need to be infused into RT-130 and other on-boarding processes.
- Get real-time education out to operators as new information comes in.

TRACKING NATIONALLY

Each forest has a pandemic team who have started collecting information on the number of confirmed cases, exposures, and other stats.

- Daily reports could be sent up the chain to track hotspots and used in mobilization planning.
- Red card qualification information of confirmed cases could also be collected to provide information on potential position deficiencies.

ISOLATION IS THE KEY – RE-TOOLING HOW WE ORDER, MOBOLIZE, AND PAY RESOURCES

MOVE TO CRITICAL MISSION TASK FORCES OR PODS

Create groups of resources able to respond to up to a Type 3 incident that can be tested for COVID-19 and then isolated and staged together in areas of high fire danger.

- Task force would consist of modules and key overhead positions that could be pre-positioned, 100% ready for response when needed.
- These groups would have the positions, qualifications, and tools to take on an entire IA or extended attack fire (Type 3 incident) on their own. Could also include bathrooms, hand-washing stations, and other “essential” resources such as a camp crew for sanitizing.

- Match the resources to the expected fire behavior, fuel type, and region.
- Modules and overhead would be self-sufficient and would stage at isolated/remote work stations, hotels, or AirBnB-type accommodations.
 - AirBnB-style accommodations provide greater opportunity for isolation from other crews and the public, a kitchen for cooking (restaurants may not be open), and private areas for each member to isolate in during down time.
- Increase the length of assignment duration, 21- or 30-day assignments, possibly even season-long assignments.
 - Build in a work-rest schedule like the one used for international deployments.
- **Current examples of possible structure include Region 1's Critical Mission Task Force groups as outlined in the Northern Rockies Ops Guide.**
- **This could also be done with IMTs that are up in the rotation.**

SUPPORT LOCAL

With all of the increased risk associated with travel, resource ordering may need to go back to closest resource, especially when prepositioning.

- Use closest Agency resources first.
- Keep resources in GACC until PL4 or PL5.
- Modify dispatch procedures to keep resources from travelling to, through, or from known hotbed areas of COVID-19.
- Order only what is necessary - Reducing the number and types of resources ordered will help personnel remain isolated.
- Order the bare minimums to take care of the fires. This is not the year to bring on contractors just to support them.

UTILIZE A HOME GUARD

Limit transporting of COVID-19 back from daily work or assignment to home.

- Once resources are mobilized to an off forest assignment (large incident) and working together no one goes home till fire season is over. Treat an assignment as a season long deployment.
- Use virtual in-briefs and transition of command to keep IA separate from off forest resources to avoid exposure. The analogy is a "home guard" as opposed to "expeditionary forces".

INCENTIVIZING ISOLATION, SELF-REPORTING, AND WORKING OUTSIDE SOPs

There is a worry from supervisors and leadership that delaying on-boarding, teleworking, and mandatory quarantine may reduce the likelihood that temporary employees will show up to work. Missing a single fire assignment due to quarantine can be a detrimental loss of income, at times up to \$5,000 for a permanent or temporary employees. If there is a monetary disincentive for reporting symptoms, employees may avoid reporting and quarantining.

PAY FIREFIGHTERS COMMENSURATE WITH WHAT THEY ARE BEING ASKED TO DO

If we pay people commensurate to the things they are being asked to do, we will get a lot more buy-in, better results, and it will go a lot farther in terms of dealing with this. This is especially true if we are going to ask people

to go into lockdown, away from their homes and families. A supervisor has only so many tools in the box to “control” their employees during off hours if they are not getting paid. People will become disgruntled quickly if they are made to stay away from home without being compensated appropriately. Do we go military style and bring people in 24/7, paid, if stopping the spread of COVID-19 is of national interest?

- Pay firefighters Portal-to-Portal – This is especially important if we are going to ask people to isolate.
- Salary firefighters – Salary should be commensurate with what a firefighter would make with 16s, overtime, and hazard pay.
- Pay firefighters to be on-call – Instead of having crews staged at a work site or doing project work, firefighters can stay home (or in an isolated location) but be fire ready. They should be paid for being on-call as most structure fire departments do.
- Pay firefighters and support staff hazard pay all day no matter their assignment. Risk of exposure to the virus should be deemed a hazard.
- Have longer periods of paid time-off between incidents.
- Increase the work-to-rest guidelines, but still compensate for a full day of work (16s).

PAID QUARANTINE AND ALTERNATE LODGING

The big worry here is, what are we going to do when someone gets sick? Quarantine the module? Everyone on the fire they’ve been in contact with? And what does quarantine look like? Many people are worried about being sent home to recover where their family is, or losing out on significant pay if quarantined.

- Increase the number of testing supplies available to reduce the amount of quarantines needed.
- Provide lodging and per diem when quarantining at home is not an option.
- Provide telework or safety and weather leave for quarantined employees.
- **Inquire with hotels to talk about willingness to serve as quarantine sites, i.e., renting out the entire hotel.**
 - **Reach out to FEMA to understand what they have done in the past.**

“I HAVE TWO YOUNG GIRLS AT HOME AND IF I GET SICK, I’M NOT GOING HOME. I HAVE AN OBLIGATION TO PROTECT THEM AND THAT MEANS NOT GOING HOME.” – FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANT

MENTAL HEALTH

Are we checking in with our folks who may be isolated? Not being able to see each other is difficult. It is hard on the heart. We need to provide an increased attention to mental health.

- Make health care professionals easily available outside of EAP. Quarantine removes responders from their support circle, which may lead to decreased mental health and increased rates of alcoholism and suicide.

OPERATIONAL PREPAREDNESS

There is a general concern amongst all responders about the potential exposure to the virus, creating a discernible timidity towards taking assignments this year. While the following sections highlight known staffing issues, **it may be prudent to do a census on people's desire to help with fires this year so that we can know what to expect for staffing levels.**

JOB CORPS STUDENT WORKFORCE

Job Corps students provide a significant part of the wildland fire workforce, from camp crews to fire crews. For example, the Trapper Creek Job Corps Center in Region 1 provides over 100 firefighters plus logistical capability. Losing those resources will be detrimental to the capacity of the local and regional areas that utilize them.

- All Job Corps students, per the Department of Labor (DOL), are at home, quarantined until at least April 14, delaying fire training and thus fire readiness for the upcoming season. We should be talking to the DOL about the impact of this.
- If bringing the students back on is not an option, we need to develop contingency plans for bringing in other surge resources.

AT-RISK COMMUNITY MEMBERS WITHIN FIRE SUPPORT AND SURGE FORCES

Most IMTs have a significant number of ADs that fill important positions, many of which fall into the at-risk category of 60 and older. As much as 30% of a team can be filled by AD personnel.

- Identify positions suitable for virtual work that can remain isolated.
- Pre-screen for at-risk individuals and have risk management conversations before ordering. Should we be sending a 70-yr-old to an all-hazard incident (pandemic-related) when they are at risk?
 - Look at altering grants and agreements policy to allow local fire departments to be paid for response to all-hazard incidents. Could be used to staff AD positions.
- Reduce the number of teams available, but ensure each team is fully staffed with Agency or partner personnel. Use at-risk ADs only as a last resort.

Many dispatch centers use ADs when expanded dispatch is needed. As with the IMTs, many of those ADs belong to the at-risk community. Not having access to ADs would drastically reduce the workforce available for expanded dispatch. This also comes at a time when the entire dispatch community is transitioning from ROSS to IROC.

- Consider off-site locations where only expanded dispatch is allowed into the area.
- If in a shared office, cordon off dispatch from the rest of the office. Allow only entry by dispatchers.
- Coordinate with neighboring dispatch centers to develop a plan and agreement to support any center that must go offline due to quarantine or exposure at the office. **R6 is already doing this.**

AVIATION

Aviation is already a limited resource. And in a season where there will likely be increased demand, what are we doing to keep our pilots healthy?

- Go over contracts and potentially amend them to include sanitizing the aircraft.

- Provide on-site trailers for pilots and other helicopter staff to sleep and eat to reduce exposure at hotels and other facilities. May require amending contracts.
- Limit helicopter occupancy to just the pilot unless absolutely necessary, e.g., transport to/from an incident.

IHC STAFFING

Many IHC crews are already operating at the edge of their numbers to meet Type 1 certification. If crew members get sick or their family is affected by COVID-19, available numbers could drop drastically, reducing the ability of IHCs to meet Type 1 standards. The normal route of using detailers to meet numbers brings in a risk of exposure.

- Adjust national Type 1 standards to allow for more flexibility in numbers and qualifications.
- Most IHCs run with buggies that require a CDL. If qualified drivers get sick, we may need the ability to allow non-certified drivers that have CDL experience to drive (e.g., expired license, permit).

SUPPLY ORDERING AND LOGISTICS

Fire caches are already running into issues with getting the supplies they need.

- Order supplies direct from the company rather than through intermediary vendors. **This has been done in R8 for ordering TechNu. Supplies arrived quickly.**
- Get contracting people geared up early, 20-72 hours before deploying an IMT.
- Have DOD liaison reach out to the military to see what services and supplies they can help us with.
- Reach out to other partners that might be able to help with supplies or logistics.
- Small fire service supply plans tend to be weak. Units should start reaching out to local businesses to sign them up. Now might be the ideal time as this could provide much-needed income for local restaurants and bars.
- Start planning for an increased need for CORs and COs. Get people working on qualifications now. Need is likely to be on steroids compared to a normal fire year.
- Inquire about our ability to utilize the NERVE Program
 - Can we build disinfecting the vehicles into the contract?
 - **Talk to rental companies to see if they are willing to rent to infected employees or using their entire fleet to for moving responders.**

REDUCTION IN QUALIFIED PERSONNEL

Due to postponed and cancelled trainings, many resources did not receive training required to maintain or acquire red card qualifications. There may be a need to expand the capability of trainees, militia, and non-qualified personnel to help staff fires this year.

- Loosen requirements for filling fire support positions.
- Push opening task books without required classes.
- Schedule red card committee meetings throughout the summer to get people qualified as soon as they get signed off.

GO VIRTUAL - REDUCE NUMBERS

By moving what can be to a virtual setting we can reduce the amount of person-to-person contact as well as the amount of paper that needs to be touched. **Moving to a more virtual setting may require setting up new processes and software to meet the needs. There is a staff of Forest Service software developers that could be tapped to meet the needs of these new processes.**

IDENTIFY IMT POSITIONS AND TASKS SUITABLE FOR VIRTUAL WORK

- Finance can be located away from the incident site.
 - OF-288s can be submitted electronically; set up a system or take pictures of CTR and email/text them to finance.
 - All resources get standard hours on an incident; finance can estimate cost this way and resources can use their IAPs as proof of time.
- Check-in and demob could be done remotely.
- Briefings can be done virtually, by radio, or remotely at a spike camp. If not possible, strictly enforce module leaders only at briefing.
- Command and General Staff don't need to be in the same place as the firefighters.
- Supply orders can be taken over the phone or with an electronic general message.

PUBLIC INFORMATION

- Need to go completely virtually. No public meetings.
- Utilize Facebook Live and other mediums to transmit information to the public.

DISPATCH

Dispatchers have the ability to work virtually with the exception of radio communication.

- Look into platforms or system that would support radio use at home such as Wave
- Engage with CIO and dispatch center managers to talk about viable options that allow radio communication at home.

FIRE CAMP – WE CANNOT DO IT THE WAY WE HAVE ALWAYS DONE IT

MOVE TO A VILLAGE-STYLE CAMP MODEL

- Small spike camps set up in different locations. Spike camps should be utilized more regardless of whether the village-style camp model is being used.
- Each camp would have food, supply cache, showers, and a crew for sanitizing.
- Each village would be self-sufficient.
- A service supply plan would need to be built up early in the incident and would require support from local community.
- **Current example as case study was the Decker Fire (2019) on the PSICC.**

SCREENING: PRE-, POST-, AND WHILE ON ASSIGNMENT

As an Agency, we need to be advocating for our crews as essential first responders and having access to testing, supplies, and PPE.

PRE-INCIDENT SCREENING

- All personnel need to be tested to establish a baseline of health, potential hotspots, and asymptomatic carriers.
- Restrict use of personnel who fall into at-risk group: Pre-screen through dispatch or other avenues.
 - Should we be sending a 70-year old from Ohio to serve on an Area Command Team on an all-hazard incident that puts them at risk?
- Restrict use of resources to Agency only unless partner resources are urgently needed. Then use partner resources, then contractors lastly.
- Develop questionnaire for recent history to determine exposure risk. **R3 IHC crew has already implemented a pre-screen of four questions for their temp employees.**

WHILE ON ASSIGNMENT

- Testing or temperature screening twice a day.
- Have isolation facilities and plan in place.
- Specific ambulance and medical tent just for suspected cases and/or incident-within-an-incident planning and operations (disease outbreak).
- Have an MD or RN assigned to the incident.
- Assign a CDC liaison to all IMTs or units.

POST-ASSIGNMENT

- Provide screening at demob, as well as each travel day home.

MEALS

- No dining hall tents – they promote congregation even outside of eating hours.
- Stagger meal times, spread out tables, and eliminate salad bars, drink dispensers, and other areas of shared items.
- To-go containers only, stagger pick up times to avoid lines.
- Use IHC or Wildland Fire Module model of self-sufficiency. Be prepared to be self-sufficient for at least 7 days.
 - Let at least IHCs plan/cover their own meals.
- Utilize MREs to allow for remote camps.
- Include hand sanitizer in sack lunches.
- Put caterer in a remote location and either do drive-through pick up or have caterer drop off hot buckets to module locations. Could set up drop points or food caches.
- **There is a need to be talking to vendors and contracting officers now to understand capabilities and potential amendments to contracts to make these changes possible (e.g., grab-and-go, delivery).**

LARGE CAMP ADJUSTMENTS

If there is no other option than to have one large fire camp, some suggested changes may reduce the capacity of COVID-19 to spread.

- Have closed camps
- Create National SOPs for disinfecting.
- More hand-washing stations and shower units and enforce their use.
- Larger or segregated sleeping areas so personnel can spread out.
- Increase number of garbage receptacles.

- Have camp crews solely responsible for cleaning/sanitizing.
- Increase security at camps, especially in areas or communities hit by the virus that have limited supplies. Camps may become a treasure chest for looting or attract infected looking for care.
- Treat each module like they are a nuclear family. Keep distance between modules, but keep modules together like a family unit.

WORKERS COMPENSATION – HOW DO WE PROVE EXPOSURE?

What is being done to stay ahead of OWCP comp claims? Occupational exposures are historically hard to get approval for.

LACK OF CLARITY ON HOW COVID-19 CASES WILL WORK WITH OWCP

- Have high-level talks with the Department of Labor about how firefighters should document cases to prove exposure occurred while working. Disseminate the learned information to all supervisors and their employees.
- Guaranteed health care for employees contracting coronavirus while on duty, despite OWCP ruling.
 - Talk to hospitals to understand typical cost of hospitalization for COVID-19.
- Automatic CA-16 is filed when COVID-19 suspected; this would require cases to be filed as a CA-1s. May need discussion with OWCP at the national level.

HOSPITAL LIAISONS

The typical number of accidents and illnesses on an incident can tax the local unit's hospital liaisons. Add suspected cases of COVID-19 to the mix and we are likely to not have enough hospital liaison capacity.

- Need to start assessing the availability of hospital liaisons on units across the country.
- Start training more people to be hospital liaisons now.
- May need to borrow hospital liaisons from other units or regions to meet the need in high activity areas.

ALASKA – A WHOLE DIFFERENT BALL GAME

While the following concerns and needs are relevant to all of the regions, they are at an extreme level in Region 10. In Alaska, managing complex wildfire operations with limited resources is standard, however, the introduction of COVID-19 may prove to be catastrophic to the region's ability to fight fire as well as the local communities.

QUARANTINE HOUSING

The Governor just put into place a statewide travel mandate to minimize non-essential travel in and out of the state, requiring every traveler to self-quarantine for 14 days.

- At this time Agency Administrators are scrambling to provide quarantine housing for arriving employees where housing is already limited and without exposing healthy employees.
- Huge expenses may have to be undertaken to provide sanitary living environments utilizing hotels and AirBnB's since additional government housing is not available.
- For the long-term fire season this housing problem will be even more compounded with potentially hundreds or thousands of visiting firefighters.
- As it stands, fire personnel entering each local community, are supposed to abide the quarantine guidelines unless given an emergency travel exemption.

TRAVEL AND THE ASSOCIATED EXPOSURE TO RESPONDERS AND COMMUNITY MEMBERS

Travel to and from many locations in Alaska is by boat or ferry only. Exclusive-use aircraft and boats may be available, but the cost will be exponential and there is still no option for social distancing in aircraft.

- There is also an added risk to the communities by having large amounts of people traveling to areas with already severely limited medical facilities and equipment.
- Additionally, traveling throughout these communities requires exposure to other travelers through commercially operated aircraft, ferries, and boats.
- There is an additional strain on Southeast Alaska this year as the Alaska Marine Highway System, once a common method for transporting USFS personnel, has experienced massive shortages of services available with a majority of their fleet being inoperable due to budgetary and maintenance shortfalls.

AVAILABILITY OF RESOURCES

Additional resource support from the lower 48 may be difficult due to availability and quarantine policies. Last year 127, 20-person hand crews, were mobilized to Fairbanks which may be next to impossible this year.

- Aircraft shortages may become a problem unless fire resources are given special clearance through the Canadian Border, and once they arrive, they will have to have the facilities available to quarantine.

POTENTIAL CHANGES THAT WOULD REQUIRE EXEMPTIONS

- Use of AirBnB-style accommodations – per travel guidance, these accommodations are not permitted.
- Type 1 standards.
- Red book guidelines for staffing fire support positions.
- Policy on taking work vehicles home.
- Additional platforms and software may need to be approved with the increase in virtual work, e.g., Zoom.
- Driving regulation for buggies, i.e., CDL license.

CONTINUING THE CONVERSATION – HP&IOL REFLECTIONS

As our National Pandemic Coordinator Robert Velasco recently stated, "When confronted with unknowns, we often anchor to our strengths." This season will indeed require us to leverage our strengths while considering how we can adapt and change how we operate. We will need to move beyond "how we have always done things". Events like this can serve as an "unfreezing event" offering us the opportunity to critically evaluate the decisions we make, the actions we take, and in the processes offer us unique learning and adaption opportunities

FEEDBACK LOOP

It is recommended that this connection to the field continue to be used in both directions. The connection can serve as a conduit through the fire season to evaluate and adjust to unintended outcomes of implemented changes or new developments as well as to gather and disperse innovations at the field level.

NATIONAL MESSAGING

The following actions serve as an example of things that are already being done that could be shared across the agency.

- Region 8 has units that have worked with their partners to identify available aircraft outside of Forest Service resources. These aircraft were brought in to cover the Forest Service pilot's days off rather than flying in a relief pilot.
- Most regions are hosting virtual trainings. Many see usefulness of this into the future. Possibly work with NWCG to develop more on-line trainings.
- Region 3 crews have developed a package for on-boarding that includes a questionnaire regarding exposure as well as CDC guidelines.
- Region 6 dispatch centers are coordinating with neighboring dispatch centers to develop a plan and agreement to support any center that must go offline due to quarantine or exposure at the office.

CAPTURING REAL TIME LEARNING

As our understanding of the challenges of fighting wildfire and the COVID-19 response continues to evolve, our ongoing efforts to communicate, share lessons learned, and daylight roadblocks will become more important than ever. One option for capturing this information is to use Rapid Lessons Shared (RLS) posted to the Wildland Fire Lessons Learned Center. Individuals, IMTs, and Area Command Teams would be encouraged to capture innovations, as well as challenges in operating in this new environment.

HP&IOL will mine these innovations and challenges from recurring focus groups, as well as from the RLS. These will be compiled into regular reports to be shared with Enterprise Risk Management Assistance, who will brief senior leaders and Area Command Teams.

EVALUATION NEEDED

This has been a year of changes. We have recently transitioned from ROSS to IROC, we are moving Firenet from Google to Microsoft. Are there any change efforts that we could hit the pause button on to reduce the complexity we are facing this year?

CONCLUSION

As always, our field-going personnel answered the call, joining us with short notice to attend a series of focus groups. They provided extensive, thoughtful responses to the challenges of the upcoming season. Their responses can be best captured by this risk-based question: Many people are talking about reinstating the 10:00 AM rule or getting more aggressive with initial attack efforts to reduce the need for large-scale IMT responses. Will IA resources take on more risk to keep fires small because of the COVID-19 threat?

As this question indicates the wildland fire environment has always been complex. This season we have the added challenge of COVID-19. The best way to deal with complexity is through transparency. Transparency doesn't just happen, it takes effort. We need to create the space for reflection, dialogue, and forging connections between the different levels of our organization. We believe HP&IOL is in unique position to assist in these efforts.