

Firefighter Safety – Turning the Corner on 2003

The following key messages are things to consider during briefings, tailgate safety sessions, IMT meetings and the like. As the situation continues to unfold, we must maintain our unrelenting focus on firefighter and public safety. It is our responsibility to each other.

- There is not one blade of grass, one tree, or one subdivision worth the life of a firefighter.
- We must insist on the strict adherence to absolutes; not merely to the letter of policy, Orders, or Watchouts, but to the intent of them. Fatigue management goes beyond counting hours on timesheets, it is individualized and overt. Following the 10-Standard Firefighting Orders is about risk assessment and management, about assuring iterative decision-making based on current and accurate situational awareness. Cost containment is recognizing the value of investments made today that will reduce costs tomorrow. The lowest cost alternative, is not always the lowest cost over the long-term. In every case, absolutes have to do with assuring our firefighters are equipped, led, and supported in a manner that keeps them safe and productive over the long-haul.
- We are actively seeking every qualified resource, both contracted and agency, to fill the many outstanding orders prior to going outside the country. As we do so, we are reaching far into the barrel and must be extra vigilant that our standards in production, performance, and safety are not compromised. We need to recognize these folks are likely unfamiliar with the type of fuels and fire behavior we are experiencing, and we need to fill that information gap.
- We need to pay particular attention to the span-of-control issues that are arising due to the unavailability of qualified overhead and the continual ramping up of resources... many having minimal experience with the kind of situation we face.
- Remember that complimenting the 10-Standard Firefighting Orders are 10-Aviation Situations that Shout WATCHOUT! If you aren't familiar with them, ask an Aviation Safety Manager.
- Cumulative fatigue is starting to be a factor. It is surfacing in the obvious places, the ground firefighters, aviators, and incident management teams, but also looms large in the ranks of managers and line officers, in dispatch offices and fire caches. It is manifest in the explanations used when folks are asked to take a break, or take a day off... "I don't have time." "There is too much going on." "As soon as things calm down a bit." Manage by walking around and looking into the tired eyes of your staff; and look into the mirror as well. Cumulative fatigue is a killer. It prevents sound decision-making, confounds situational awareness, and dulls reaction times. It is as deadly in the office as it is on the fireground.
- Communication is key to effective operations and critical for mishap prevention. Shared information via the SAFECOM and SAFENET reporting systems increases

awareness. Lessons learned have proven to be helpful in stopping the chain of events before “potential” has a chance to become an accident.

- Most accidents have one common factor: Human Error... Pilots must pre-flight themselves as thoroughly as they do their aircraft. Ground personnel need to assure their situational awareness, that risks are assessed and mitigated before committing to an action.
- SEE IT; SAY IT; FIX IT. We need to impress on everyone involved in this massive effort that they owe it to their crew, themselves, and those around them on the ground or in the air.
- ICT3s are being asked to take on increasingly complex and difficult assignments. Many of these assignments are to emerging incidents or fires in transition, historically the most deadly. Moreover, the Type 3 organization will likely be called upon to facilitate and organize the transfer of command to an IMT2 or 1, another pinch-point in fire operations safety. ICT3s are talented, no doubt, but they are not necessarily our most experienced nor skilled incident managers. I ask you to ensure ICT3s receive the coaching, assistance and oversight they may require to effectively manage the increased risk and consequences of failure in these two critical tasks. I ask you to ensure the challenges of the IMT3s are not overlooked in all the ado surrounding large fires.
- The principle of cost containment is manifest in a comprehensive approach to safety, particularly in fatigue and stress management. Our values are simple... firefighter and public safety are our number one concern to be addressed within the priorities of suppression. If we err, let it be on the side that supports well rested and effective firefighters. If we err, let it be in favor of assuring every firefighter and support personnel goes home safe and sound when all is said and done; and goes home confident that his or her safety was of the utmost concern to those whom he or she served.
- There are many issues that demand part of our attention. It is impossible to maintain appropriate situational awareness of them all. The key is setting priorities, compartmentalizing and focusing efforts one bite of the elephant at a time. Right now our priorities are the management of the fire season thrust upon us; to assure the folks in the trenches are not distracted by the background noise of budget and competitive sourcing. We will do all we can to contain the impacts of these issues at the WO level and ask you to contain as much as you can of the work we are forced to pass to you. Do your best within the constraints of time, competing priorities, and resources available.