

2002 SEASON

NATIONAL INCIDENT COMMANDER/AREA COMMANDER

LESSONS LEARNED AFTER INCIDENT REPORT (AIR)

2. What were some of the most difficult challenges and how were they overcome? Please explain.

*Most Incident Management Teams (IMTs) considered **implementing the 30 Mile Abatement Plan** as their most difficult challenge. Some incident commanders (ICs) were confused; thinking the original intention of the plan was intended for initial attack and extended attack in Type 3 incidents. They strongly believe the Type 1 and 2 Teams have, and continue, to develop their plans and actions around safety. It appeared that the Type 1 and 2 Teams were taking on the largest responsibility for implementing 30 Mile action items. The ICs requested much clearer direction on what the Teams can do to compliment what the local agency has been doing before the 2003 season begins.

For the 2003 Incident Commander Responsibilities regarding the 30 Mile Abatement Plan, go online to: http://www.wildfirelessons.net/Library/IncidentMgt/IC_responsibilities.doc

For the 2003 Area Commander Responsibilities regarding 30 Mile, go online to: http://www.wildfirelessons.net/Library/IncidentMgt/AA_responsibilities.doc

One team worked in six states in 2002 with a large number of state and local fire departments. The majority of them do not have a carding system or physical testing system. A letter from their chief was accepted as documentation. One to two extra team members were needed to track, implement, and document the action items required.

*A most difficult challenge was **trying to follow the new National MAC policy** that came on the heels of the 30 Mile Abatement Plan. Since the Teams went to the ISUITES program which frequently took two days to set up and run, it was very tough to get a handle on shift length for the first 48 hours. Checking red cards, performing the safety inspections, and other aspects of the MAC Group policy really increased both the workload and stress.

*The challenge we now face is that one to three assignments per year may not be the norm anymore. We need to address **how teams will be able to cope with more frequent as well as complex assignments**. Teams faced barriers trying to keep the command and general staff positions filled for continuous assignments from May through September. They were constantly scrambling to fill critical positions. Permanent team members made great sacrifices by being away from their jobs and families for 70 to 100+ days. Critical Non-Federal team members were not permitted to go on assignments with the team because their county or city chiefs could not tolerate them being gone so much. Supervisors of Federal employees were also extremely concerned about their employees being away from their jobs.

The **"incentives" to be a member of a Type 1 or 2 seem to be diminishing**. Many people refuse to commit to a team because they can freelance, make more money, have the freedom to choose their assignments, and not have the added responsibility and accountability that team members have. We need to examine appropriate incentives for team members.

***Dealing with contractor issues** was a significant challenge encountered in the Pacific Northwest. One incident had 1700 personnel and 90% of them were contractors. One contract engine had forged Red Cards for their personnel. The variety of contracts was confusing and a significant distraction to suppressing the fires. Some contractors were hourly and some were salary. It took Teams a couple of days to catch on to this and correct the problem. In the Pacific Northwest there was extreme anxiety about when to engage and when to disengage. When an IMT took over one Complex, there were several contract crews that had not engaged for up to eight days while another Team was begging for crews on a nearby incident.

The use of contract resources comes with a big cost increase in management complexity. On one incident a Team sent 11 crews home for disciplinary reasons, ranging from drug/alcohol use to insubordination, to intimidation of line overhead. Changes need to occur in the contract to include a “three strike” rule for contractors. We also need an increase in management by using additional Contracting Officers Representatives (COTR). Trying to communicate with non-English speaking crews created another safety hazard. The current contract also needs to be modified to ensure that enough personnel are fluent in English so we can be assured that safety will not be compromised.

***The interpretation of the National Mob Guide for length of commitment** is creating more safety issues than solving problems. There is great flexibility with how it is written now in Planning Level (PL) 1-4, as well as PL5. It appears that once we reach the 14-day limit, we forget to reference, or understand, the policy on length of commitment. This is particularly true with IMTs. Multiple teams operating under an Area Command combined with continual transfer of command, created unachievable goals for both the hosting units and the firefighters in maintaining momentum, consistent direction, and a focus on safety. Many times it appeared that the outcome or product delivered was transition. We must not forget that during transition we are most vulnerable. In transition phases we often spend the most money by regaining old ground, struggle to establish and maintain relationships with our customers and the publics, and are not able to maintain continuity with our fiscal records.

The 14-day policy should be more flexible to allow teams to extend their assignments if needed. This does not mean that everyone on the fire should be extended, but having fewer changes in the command/control structure would be very beneficial. Given the number of Team assignments, it is ridiculous to leave one assignment because the 14 days are up, only to travel home and immediately turn around on another assignment with all the hassles, wasted effort, and safety threats of a transfer of command.

***Another challenge we face is the belief by many that yesterday’s thinking, in terms of large fire strategies,** will sustain us with the 21st Century wildland fires. This is similar to always staying in the initial attack mode and never having a plan for the big incident. We may have received a bargain this year with the money spent. What would it have been like without the National Fire Plan effort? The issue is not money. It is truly defining the “least cost” alternative and holding agency administrators and IMTs accountable for the implementation. We need to establish standards in this area.

***While there are notable successes in controlling costs, more upfront investments should be made to improve cost containment.** For example, it would be much more cost effective to purchase computers for incidents rather than continually lease them.

***The wide variation in line officer involvement and depth of knowledge** at an incident continues to be a difficult challenge for IMTs. We must continue to aggressively train agency

administrators in Fire Management Leadership and similar courses. Agency administrators need to be kept current on fire policies, direction and trends after completing training. The new Lessons Learned Center at <http://www.wildfirelessons.net> is a central resource and a tool for them to receive continuing education.