

Agency Administrator/Area Command Team Lessons Learned

On March 6, 2009, Agency Administrators and Staff Officers participated in an After Action Review focusing on what they learned during the 2008 northern California Lightning Siege regarding their interactions with Area Command Teams (ACT). The following, are some of the most important items they felt should be shared with Agency Administrators who are considering requesting assistance from an Area Command Team. These lessons were shared with Area Command Teams on March 9, 2009.

When should an ACT be requested?

Lesson Learned: Since several forest Line Officers were experiencing multiple fires on their jurisdictions, they spent some time analyzing whether requesting the assistance of an Area Command Team was appropriate. They said that if criteria for when it is appropriate to request an ACT existed, they were unaware of it. Administrators said the decision could have been simplified if they had had access to a list containing ACT capabilities, or if a complexity analysis for ACTs had been available (This product is currently a work in progress). They also said it would have been helpful to have a comparison for ACT and the National Incident Management Organization (NIMO) Team capabilities. Some NIMO Teams shared a one-page summary of their capabilities with administrators.

Effective Practice(s):

- Most ACTs have team websites at <http://www.imtcenter.net>. On their home pages, they have summaries of what an ACT is and what it does.
- A short, 5-slide PowerPoint presentation that graphically displays the traditional and expanded roles of Area Command Teams is available at: [Area_Command_Roles_0309](#)

In-briefings are just a beginning

Lesson Learned: Forests that hosted several Area Command Teams, or that experienced several rotations of an ACT, noted from their experiences that the in-briefing sessions alone were not sufficient for forest personnel and ACT members to develop a common vision and establish decision-making protocols. Forest personnel said the information shared during an in-briefing session, although important, did not go far enough in clarifying the Administrator's expectations or in identifying the needs of Staff Officers. Additionally, forest personnel soon realized that ground rules for decision-making protocols had been left unstated which led to several situations where they were not included in decisions they would have expected to be included in.

Effective Practice:

Agency Administrators and Line Officers recommended having a short team building session immediately after the in-briefing with the ACT's commander specifically for the purpose of developing:

- lines of communication (and a 24-hour contact number)
- roles and responsibilities of the forest to the ACT and the forest to the IMTs
- a decision-making protocol
- a clear understanding of expectations, the needs of the host unit and leader's intent.

Confusion about roles

Lesson Learned: Forest personnel, who had never experienced a working relationship with an Area Command Team, said the role the teams played as a layer in between the forest and the Incident Management Teams produced widespread confusion about how responsibilities got divided up. Agency Administrators said ACT members need to ensure that District Rangers are not removed from the decision-making process. The District level leadership must be included in coordination because local leaders answer to their communities. One Forest Supervisor said they made sure that even after the ACT was in place, they retained their connection to the IMTs because they were concerned about disengaging too much. However, the supervisor said they tried to remain sensitive to the chain of command newly in place and avoid the scenario of “too many masters.”

Effective Practice(s):

- One ACT established a practice of bringing all of the IMT Incident Commanders into a meeting with ACT and forest personnel every two to three days. Forest personnel said “the time that we spent together was invaluable” for relationship building.
- Some participants said they requested ACTs set up their operations at the Forest Supervisor’s Office. Co-location was effective in maintaining a continuous dialog. All participants agreed close proximity of the ACT was important for building and maintaining relationships.
- When an ACT is working for more than one Agency Administrator, it is recommended a Deputy AC or an AC liaison be assigned at the remote administrator’s location to improve communication and ensure positive outcomes. The Deputy AC or AC liaison should be a dedicated individual. Rotating the Deputy AC (or liaison) did not work well.
- Agency Administrators not proximate to the ACT should also consider assigning one of their employees to assist the ACT and act as the AA’s liaison to the ACT.

A documentation system in place

Lesson Learned: Several forests that participated in Large Fire Cost Reviews in the aftermath of the 2008 Lightning Siege, found themselves scrambling for copies of documents they knew had been created and processed while fire management operations were taking place. They found copies of the documents had either not been filed where forest personnel could retrieve them or they did not understand the filing system and did not know where to begin looking for the documents. A draft national standard for documentation was recently completed by Area Command Teams for use during the 2009 fire season. That outline is available at [Area Command Documentation Package](#).

Effective practice(s):

- If a nationally standardized system of documentation for Area Command Teams is not established, one forest said they will develop one for their local unit. At the beginning of any ACT assignment, the forest’s documentation system will be shared with the incoming team and an expectation that the system be used will be communicated to the team.
- One forest reported they shared a forest employee with the ACT in place as a source for local information to the team and that same employee remained there during the team’s assignment to participate in document preparation and filing. As a result, when the ACT’s assignment concluded, the local unit employee provided institutional knowledge for filing processes and procedures and became invaluable to local forest personnel during reviews.
- Area Commanders said they recommend that an electronic filing system also be developed during an ACT’s assignment, to augment the paper file documentation products.

Delegations of Authority are a work in progress

Lesson Learned: Agency Administrators noted that the Delegation of Authority (DoA) and Leader's Intent were important tools in establishing the forest's priorities for incoming ACTs. Some Agency Administrators are uncomfortable not addressing various important topical areas more specifically in the Delegation of Authority. Forest personnel reported being criticized during the review process for using DoA's that contained non-specific language. Area Commanders said the document must include broad language to allow them to function properly: If delegations become too particular, they often contain items that may either conflict with agency policy or can become a legal liability. Area Commanders also said delegations should be considered only one of the documents needed to produce successful outcomes. Administrators and Area Commanders can end up in a situation where they are working outside the scope of their authority if the delegation is not worded properly. Questions remain relating to agency policy and the detail required in the Delegation of Authority.

Effective practice:

- Delegations that are broadly worded establish areas the ACT has the authority to work in. A Delegation of Authority template is available at [Agency Administrator to IMT DoA Template](#). An example of the supporting document outlining Leaders Intent is available at [Leaders Intent Letter to IMT](#).

Unresolved Issues and Recommendations for Administrators:

- Due to the USFS agency's policy manual (section 1231.05), delegations can only be done within the line of command. In order for a Forest-to-Forest Delegation of Authority to take place, Regional level officials are required to participate. One solution may be to have all Agency Administrators whose forests would be affected, sign a single delegation.
- It may be beneficial to the hosting unit to pre-identify who on the unit should attend the ACT in-briefing. Pre-identifying forest employees who are expected to attend and what their role will be, may help the home unit establish expectations for their employees. Geographical Area Coordinators should also be invited to the ACT in-briefing.
- Every ACT has Incident-within-an-Incident (IWI) protocols. These should be requested by the Agency Administrator of the host unit and discussed after the in-briefing because team protocols may or may not fit with the host agency's IWI procedures.
- Administrators should expect to hear that established incident business practices do not align with multiple incident management practices. Accountable cost management efforts, using I-Suite and Incident Status Summary-209, often do not meet the expectation for developing a clear picture of actual costs.
- Administrators need to address suppression rehabilitation guidelines as early in the incident as possible. Forests that experienced multiple long-duration fires in 2008, found there were not enough Resource Advisors to work with Incident Management Teams (IMT) to establish suppression rehabilitation guidelines in a timely manner. As a result, guidelines were sometimes verbally delivered to IMTs by multiple forest personnel because no forest standard existed. Sometimes suppression rehabilitation guidelines were not given to IMTs and those actions did not get completed before the team's assignment ended.
- The FS's Peer Support Program does work and should be used whenever possible. Peer assignments should be longer than 5 days.