



NIFC FIRE DIRECTORS PRAISE EMPLOYEE EFFORTS

NIFC Colleagues,

Every so often, a fire season is marked by a defining event that becomes indelibly etched in our memories. Sometimes those events are turning points in our lives. For example, 1988 will always be remembered for the Yellowstone fires that burned nearly 1.6 million acres. In 2000, fires raged across the Rocky Mountains in Montana and Idaho. That same year, the Cerro Grande fire scorched Los Alamos, New Mexico. The events of the 2000 fire season led directly to the National Fire Plan—an event which still affects the work we do at NIFC.

Many in the wildland fire community won't remember the 2005 season for its fires, but we will recall this year for the role we, as a wildland fire community, played in responding to the major hurricanes Katrina, Rita and Wilma. NIFC certainly didn't sit on the sidelines when it came to responding to the destruction and upheaval caused by the hurricanes. And, like the events of 2000, the events of this year will probably endure for some time as law and policy makers strive to improve the way government responds to major emergencies.

In this special edition of Burning Issues, we want to accomplish a two goals. First, as an organization of constant learning, reading some of the stories of NIFC folks who



responded to the hurricanes will help us all to better understand the dynamics of 'all-risk' incident responses. This is important because responding to non-fire disasters is increasingly a task expected of the wildland fire community.

Secondly, we want to acknowledge the many ways that people from NIFC responded to the hurricane chaos in the Southeast. We want to thank those who set aside a period of their lives to respond to a national need. For many, the hurricane assignments were difficult. The weather was hot and uncomfortably humid; the situations people found themselves in were understandably chaotic and confusing; and above all, the human suffering was real and widespread. We appreciate each of you who responded to the call, and we also

salute those who assisted as part of their jobs right here at NIFC. Thank you!

NIFC Fire Directors

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IN THE MIX - NIFC SUPPORTS HURRICANE RELIEF

The 2005 hurricanes were life-changing events for millions of Americans. Hurricanes Katrina and Rita will join hurricanes Camille (1969), Hugo (1989) and Andrew (1992) as among the worst storms ever to strike the United States.

When the cry went out for relief and support, people answered the call for help. Agencies, businesses, and volunteers literally from across the nation responded, and NIFC was no exception. Dozens of employees from NIFC took assignments in the Southeast, many as members of incident management teams (IMT), and others were single resources. People from NIFC were assigned all along the Gulf Coast, from central Texas to Atlanta, Georgia. They did all kinds of work—from cutting trees out of entangled driveways to helping coordinate the large-scale movement of resources to where they were needed.

Although probably every one of the 76 NIFC employees who responded could tell a unique story, we only had room for a set of representative samples. Here they are....



Incident Management Teams in Mississippi provided meals for relief workers and evacuees.

Phil Street and Tom Boatner

Phil Street is the chief, Branch of Fire Management, U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service. Tom Boatner is the operations group manager for the Bureau of Land Management. As representatives of the National Multi-Agency Coordination (NMAC) group, the two were assigned from September 9-13, 2005, to assess the damage and response in Louisiana and Mississippi a week after Hurricane Katrina had passed. Upon their return, they briefed the Department of the Interior and the NMAC.

This was Street's first all-risk assignment since receiving his red card in 1980. The image that stands out most in his mind is the amount of devastation spread over a significant area along the coast, and the tremendous level of response with people doing whatever they could to provide relief.

With roads closed, power lines down, and heavy equipment everywhere, simply getting around was a significant challenge. After attending a briefing at the Southern

Area Coordination Center, the two men traveled by charter aircraft to meet with Type 1 IMTs at the New Orleans Airport, Meridian Naval Air Station in southwestern Mississippi, and the Stennis Space Center in south-central Mississippi.

They also met with Joe Ribar's Area Command team at the Louisiana Emergency Operations Center in Baton Rouge, Louisiana; and finally with a Fish and Wildlife Service Type 3 IMT in LaCombe, Louisiana.

"I was very impressed by how well the teams were able to play a coordination role rather than a command role like on a wildfire," said Street, noting that in most cases the IMTs were not the entity in charge. This was most clear at their first stop, the New Orleans Airport, where the Type 1 team assisted the Military Command of the 82nd Airborne. What Street remembers most about the airport was the amount of pride and sense of service that the IMT members on George Custer's Team displayed for having made a significant contribution to helping people who were suffering tremendously from one of the worst hurricanes in recorded history. Street thought the decision to provide people with critical stress debriefings was important.

Overall, Street and Boatner concluded that much remains to be learned by observing what worked and what didn't work. This was the first time the National Response Plan was used during a disaster of this magnitude, and the organizational shortcomings in the plan were evident. However, in every case where they saw ICS used, it was a success. The IMTs and the use of Incident Action Plans provided general structure and organization to what was commonly described as a situation being "close to total chaos" when they arrived.



Street recognized the wisdom of the FWS decision to divert the Type 3 team and other personnel from its initial mission to clear refuge lands in Lacombe to mounting a huge rescue and support effort to help the community get back on its feet. These employees, some of whom had lost their own homes, made a huge contribution to the community's recovery from this extraordinary disaster, he said.

Don Clark and Robbie Swofford

Clark and Swofford are electronic technicians with the Remote Automated Weather Station (RAWS) program at NIFC. They went on two assignments to the New Orleans area to set up incident RAWS units. For Swofford, the assignments were somewhat reminiscent of 9/11, when he did a similar job at Ground Zero in New York City. This disaster was worse, in Swofford's mind, because it was far more widespread.

To get to New Orleans, Clark and Swofford hopped on a charter flight carrying radio equipment from NIFC. They arrived in New Orleans just five days after Katrina struck, and their first job was to set up a RAWS unit at the New Orleans International Airport, which was a scene of incredible activity.

"Thousands and thousands of people were being rescued, brought to the airport, then evacuated by every kind of aircraft," Clark said. "It was the kind of scene you'd only see in a war zone."

One Air National Guard C-130 pilot described the scene after he had

landed his aircraft. "From every direction and in about 15 to 45 second intervals, helicopter after helicopter continued to land right next to us," he said. "There were literally so many helicopters coming in and out of the triage area that I do not understand how the tower guy could see through them all to control the planes once they landed."

After getting the RAWS operational at the airport, Clark and Swofford drove out onto the lower Louisiana peninsula, using a Forest Service pickup supplied by their host IMT, to set up RAWS units to support a massive hazmat response. What they saw shocked them.

"Crude oil was everywhere," Swofford said. "Hurricane Katrina actually moved some of the massive crude oil storage tanks off of their foundations and caved in the sides of other tanks."

The two men were told that the resulting oil spill was the second worst hazmat disaster in U.S. history, right after the Exxon Valdez disaster. Fortunately, only partially filled storage tanks seemed to have been the ones to fail. Most of Port Sulfur was underwater, they said. Many houses were either flattened or knocked off their foundations.

Clark and Swofford told of meeting a man beside the road who was looking at the remains of his and his mother's homes. It turned out the man was a

parish councilman. When they asked him what he intended on doing, the glassy-eyed and tired man related a story of when he was coaching little league baseball. The man said he had arrived late to a game once, and the scoreboard showed the score of 18 to zero. When he asked his kids if they were ahead or behind, the kids replied with steely gazes that they were behind. Before the coach could react, though, the kids said not to worry, because they hadn't even gotten up to bat yet. "That score will change once we get up!" they said.

Then the councilman turned to Clark and Swofford and said with determination, "We're going to get our turn at bat!"

Like others, they also saw some good things amidst the destruction and misery. "We were with a great team down there," Swofford said, referring to George Custer's 'Red Team' from the southern geographic area. "That team has a lot of experience with hurricanes. We were very, very impressed with this group of people. Without them, it would have been almost impossible for us to get our job done."





Clark was quick to agree with Swofford's sentiments. "To me, it was one of our country's finest moments," Clark added. "You hear lots about this or that failure and what wasn't done. But when you consider that three states were struck and the thousands of square miles that were affected, the response was pretty amazing."

Mark Hilton

Mark Hilton, who supervises the Forest Service's Branch of Technical Training at NIFC, spent 20 days in the southeast, serving as a communication coordinator. In this capacity, he basically helped radio and telecommunications happen by determining needs, solving radio frequency conflicts, ironing out procedures between agencies that had never worked together, and helping provide assistance and guidance wherever it was needed.

Hilton spent most of his assignment in Atlanta, Georgia, briefing IMTs about communication issues as they cycled through and doing other coordination work. However, he did spend six days driving and visiting teams from the New Orleans area to the Baton Rouge area. He met with communications units at each team site to find out what they needed and

devise ways to meet those needs. Perhaps not surprisingly, he saw a lot of confusion. "There was a big need for coordination and involvement. Part of my role was to get the right equipment to the right people, and to help figure out which Emergency Support Function to contact to address a particular problem," he said.

Communication of the electronic type wasn't the only challenge Hilton ran into. "Just locating people was difficult," he said. "Nobody had cell phones that worked very well. Traffic was horrendous. People were just trying to deal with the devastation."

One image that stands out in Hilton's memory was how he felt entering the New Orleans downtown area to install some radio equipment. "We put some equipment on the tallest building in New Orleans, and that view of the city was haunting," he recalled. "The only traffic in the city was of the official type—law enforcement, military, and agency vehicles only. We didn't see any private citizens. There was a sense that things just weren't right," he said. "If you were allowed into the city, you could drive anywhere, in any direction. Traffic lights, stop signs, one-way streets... it made no difference. Everyone was doing whatever it took to get around."



From his big-picture viewpoint, Hilton saw a lot of good work accomplished by the interagency fire community. "We, as a fire community, did an excellent job. Sometimes direction

wasn't clear, but with their can-do attitudes, our teams did a great job. They impressed a lot of people," he said.

Bobbe Bilyeu

Forest Service financial manager Bobbe Bilyeu completed a 14-day assignment as an incident business advisor, and she spent most of her time at the Regional Response Coordination Center in Atlanta, Georgia. She recalls being "on the phone all day" – or so it seemed.

Incident business advisors solve issues and ensure that agencies and IMTs are following appropriate regulations and procedures. For example, Bilyeu worked closely with the Office of Personnel Management to get some waivers for documentation requirements, so that IMTs could hire local people who had lost their identification to work as camp crews. She in-briefed and out-briefed so many Area Command teams, IMTs, buying teams and other teams that she lost track.

When asked if this was a "typical" hurricane assignment (she worked in a similar capacity after the 2004 hurricanes in Florida), she said no. "None of it was typical," she emphasized. "Wildland fire community teams and crews don't usually run such large receiving and distribution centers and we don't usually run our own morgues. On a complexity scale of one to ten, this response was an 8 or 9."

Bilyeu's duties took her to Baton Rouge during her assignment, and she was moved by what she saw



in the Baton Rouge airport. "When we got off the plane, I was struck by seeing all the people just sitting in the airport," she said. "Some were waiting for scheduled flights and others were hoping to get a mercy flight somewhere. Others had nowhere else to go since shelters were full. They were just sitting on the floor in the airport with their little kids... just hanging out. That was sad."



On the other hand, that scene was tempered by other, more inspiring ones. "The airports were amazing," she said. "They were trying to feed and care for evacuees. People were all trying to do the best job they could."

John Gould

John Gould is the fire operations and safety specialist for the Bureau of Indian Affairs at NIFC. He took a two-week operations assignment with an Eastern Great Basin type 2 IMT (headed by Merrill Saleen, BLM employee at NIFC) to Jennings, Louisiana. The team's mission was to aid the National Guard in the receiving and distribution of emergency relief supplies. "It felt good to do the job we had," Gould

said. "When our team got in place, we realized relief supplies weren't getting into some outlying areas around Jennings." The team put their thinking caps on and set up a method to expand the distribution of supplies, like water, ice and food. "We saw the need, figured out a way to meet it, and made it happen," Gould said.

At the same time, the work was frustrating, he said. The team was surrounded by many needs they were simply unable to meet. "We saw so much that needed attention, but we had to focus on the task we had been given. It was frustrating," he said.

Gould praised the level of organization brought to the situation by the Incident Command System (ICS). "Our team brought a sense of organization to the situation that otherwise would not have been there. When we got there, the situation was really confused," he said. Once cooperating agencies saw how the IMT used ICS for planning, coordinating and implementing efforts, people started to flock to briefings and planning meetings.

When asked what he will remember about his assignment, Gould chuckled and said he'd remember the oppressive heat and humidity. But he added that he will also remember what good guys the National Guard troops were and how hard everyone was working to deal with the situation. "It was an education to see how the country's emergency response plan works," he said.

Dan Buckley

Dan Buckley is the deputy fuels management specialist for the National Park Service at NIFC. He participated in the hurricane response as part of Tim Sexton's Type 1 Team, which was assigned to support the Regional Support Center/Camp in Lake Charles, Louisiana. Upon arrival, Buckley was assigned to manage a base camp for emergency responders in Cameron Parish, south of Lake Charles.

Cameron, Louisiana, is located about ¼ to ½ mile from the Gulf of Mexico. Hurricane Rita pushed a 19 ½ foot wall of water through the town and 13 miles inland. As a result of the damage, there were no stores, no vending machines, and "no place to spend a dime," Buckley said. The area was secure, and no private citizens were permitted in the area due to all the destruction of houses and personal belongings.

At the base camp, Buckley was joined by a Base Camp Manager trainee, as well as a couple other IMT members. The camp had been partially set up by FEMA, and the IMT was tasked with completing the camp. The camp had air conditioned tents for sleeping; plus showers, food, sanitation, and laundry facilities; water; and a limited amount of supplies.

The base camp housed a large variety of responders, including the National Guard, FEMA employees, Cameron Parish officials, National Disaster Medical Services, Louisiana State



employees, Red Cross, and fire engine and ambulance personnel. The base camp was located in a recreation area destroyed by Hurricane Rita just outside of Cameron.

Buckley was at the base camp for about a week. On the fourth day of his assignment, FEMA hired a private contractor to run the base camp. Buckley spent the next three days transitioning with the contractor and also loaned personnel to the contractor until they were fully staffed with their own personnel.

After that, he spent some time inventorying points of distribution to check where additional supplies were needed, as well as to distribute ice, water, and food. Along with Paul Broyles, also from NPS at NIFC, Buckley visited Big Thicket National Preserve, a unit of the National Park System in eastern Texas. They met with the unit's Fire Management Officer and viewed the hurricane



damage to the park. Buckley found that one of the main lessons he learned from the assignment was how frustrating lack of organization and lack of command structure could be. All the different entities – local, state, and federal – were supposed to be following the National Response Plan; however, none were even using the ICS.

"It was difficult to figure out what the mission of the Incident Management Team actually was and how to fit in with all the other organizations," Buckley said. "We did manage to find a niche and help out where we could."

Marie Bates

Marie Bates is the staff assistant with the Fire Management Training division at NIFC. She did a 32-day assignment with Aaron Gelobter's Type 1 IMT in Gautier, Mississippi, as the time unit leader. This was Bates' second hurricane assignment, having done a similar assignment to Puerto Rico in the late 1990s.

Her team managed a 1,000-person base camp at Gautier High School. "In some ways, it was like running a motel," she said. "Except that, most of the time, we didn't know who or what was coming until they showed up."

One evening, 150 home health care nurses arrived without warning at the base camp with sleeping bags and suitcases and asked where they could sleep.

Although the team had a fairly well-defined mission in operating a large base camp, many found other ways to pitch in to the relief effort. One team member spent his two R&R days as a Red Cross volunteer. Others stood in for local fire department chiefs who had been at their posts for weeks without going off duty. Some of these fire chiefs went home to see the damage to their own property for the first time.

Bates' team even found some ways to do a little extra-curricular hurricane relief. Their host facility, Gautier High School, was itself in need of repairs. So, working with the Seabees and U.S. Marines assigned to the facility, some team members helped clean up debris, plant new trees, and start rebuilding and repairing some of the hurricane damage at the school.



Bates was moved by the way the people in Mississippi reacted to the changes wrought in their lives. "Amidst all the destruction and chaos, the Mississippians stayed calm and embodied a great attitude," she recalled. "They were willing to accept what happened and get past the tragedy. Most of the people had such good hearts!"





In particular, she became good friends with a teacher at the high school. "Billy had lost everything, but he was far more concerned with the needs of other people."

Bates credited the support she received from her team, friends and colleagues for keeping her spirits up and not getting burned out throughout her 32-day assignment in the aftermath of the one of the country's most destructive hurricanes. She said the support among team members was critical. "We checked on each other regularly," she said. Bates also extended her appreciation to friends and colleagues at NIFC, from whom she got emails and some phone calls. "I really appreciated that support," she added.

Trish Casiano

Trish Casiano is the staff assistant for the RAWs program, and she served as a check-in recorder with the Southern area's "Blue Team" (Mike Quesinberry, incident commander) in Meridian, Mississippi, for two weeks in early September. It was an assignment she won't soon forget. "When I demobed, I was so glad to be going home, I couldn't stop smiling," she said.

Casiano's assignment was marked by a strong other-duties-as-assigned element, and for her, that meant she did more as a lay counselor than it seemed she did as a member of the Resources unit.

"It was emotionally draining," she said. "Every day, people would come into the incident command post and a lot of people just wanted to share

what they were going through. I spent a lot of time just listening."

One thing that struck her was the tenuous gasoline situation in the area. To get to her assignment, Casiano flew into Jackson, Mississippi, then rented a car and drove south to Meridian. Merely getting out of the airport was tough. "I had to see three layers of management at the rental car company in Jackson just to get a full tank of gas in the rental car," she recalled.

It was a good thing she left Jackson with a full tank, because between Jackson and Meridian, she didn't see a single gas station that had fuel. She also was struck by what she called "the dark side" of how people can act. "Siphoning gas out of cars was constant," she said. On the night before she was to leave Meridian, with her car parked in a motel parking lot, her car's fuel tank was emptied—necessitating a four-mile trudge to a fueling point and back with a gas can.

Casiano saw how the hurricane directly affected people's lives. "A lot of hurricane victims found work with FEMA where my team was based," she said. "Not only was that a way to earn some money, but the job gave these people something to do, a place to stay and a guarantee of something to eat."

Casiano says she left the assignment with a new appreciation for a couple of things. "Being where I was and having the experience really made me aware of the need to give to others," she said. "I realized I'm blessed with so much."

Larry Van Bussum

Larry Van Bussum is the National Fire Weather Operations coordinator with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's National Weather Service (NWS) at NIFC. He spent about a week in southern Louisiana right after Hurricane Katrina struck. Although we were unable to interview Van Bussum for this edition of *Burning Issues*, we did speak with a couple of his colleagues about his assignment.

Van Bussum got the call to go to Louisiana within 24 hours of Katrina's landfall. He was one of the first incident meteorologists (IMET) to respond, and his initial job was to re-establish communication between the Slidell, Louisiana NWS forecast office and the outside world. Van Bussum accomplished this by setting up a laptop computer and a portable satellite dish, and thereby re-establishing a two-way internet communication system. After that, he turned his attention to gathering meteorological data and generating weather forecasts in support of NOAA's 'hazmat' teams responding to the massive oil spill in southern Louisiana.

Van Bussum's work was vital because most of the southern Louisiana meteorologists were forced to deal with the aftermath of the hurricane in their personal lives. "When the local area gets devastated," said Heath Hockenberry, one of Van Bussum's colleagues at NIFC, "it's important for outside resources to come in and do the forecasting work. The local meteorologists have to deal with their own personal situations.



Support coming in from outside is critical.”

After Van Bussum’s initial assignment, the NWS rotated IMETs in and out of the area. Most of their work was oriented to forecasting during the post-hurricane Rita flooding and continuing to support hazmat response work.

Tyler Doggett

Tyler Doggett is a Boise BLM smokejumper based at NIFC. During Hurricane Rita response, he was responsible for tracking and coordinating shipments of water, ice, MREs, tarps and cots from the Regional Staging area in Lake Charles, Louisiana to the points of distribution in the nearby parishes. The data was compiled in spreadsheet form and sent daily to the local parish and to the Army Corps of Engineers. It was uploaded onto a file transfer protocol (FTP) site daily so other people at Area Command, for example, could access the data. Through these tracking efforts they knew when a particular location was in need of a certain commodity and they were able to facilitate shipping the item of need as quickly as possible.

“It’s always an interesting experience shifting gears from wildland fire suppression activities to managing or supporting all-risk incidents like hurricane response,” Doggett said. All-Risk and wildfire suppression activities each have different goals, hazards and operating environments. “Although they are fundamentally different, our management structure works well for both. Ultimately,

it comes down to managing and supporting people who are working toward a common goal whether it be suppressing a wildfire or coming to the aid of displaced residents,” Doggett said.

Early in the relief efforts, some shipments were misdirected. Afterwards, the National Guard escorted each group of shipments to their respective points of distribution. As an additional check and balance action, Doggett collected data from the points of distribution and cross referenced the shipments to assure the right location received the correct shipment. These data also tracked the number of people served on a daily basis which the local parish used to determine the need of continued support to a certain location.

The IMT, in addition to tracking commodities, supported two base camps with caterers, showers, and laundry facilities for the National Guard, Search and Rescue, Parish Officials, Army Corps of Engineers and the truck drivers. They all had a common goal of assisting in relief efforts, but as in wildfire management, the team also

supported the people doing the field work when the infrastructure is compromised as in a hurricane.

Whether it be a wildfire or all-risk incident, Doggett believes the incident command structure is well suited for coordinating large scale operations working toward a common goal. “Our goal of distributing semi-truck loads of commodities was no small task and neither is controlling a large wildfire,” said Doggett. “However, each requires an operating structure to assure operations are safe and complete regardless of the environment we are operating within.”

Phil Gerhardson

Phil Gerhardson, Boise BLM smokejumper, served as a Strike Team Leader for two Hotshot crews at the Hurricane Rita relief effort near Beaumont, Texas. Their primary mission was to cut trees away from power lines and alleyways to expedite the return of power to residential and commercial users. They also cleared roads, opened driveways, and removed hazardous trees at an elementary school.





Ryan Swartz

Ryan Swartz, Boise BLM smokejumper, was assigned to Barksdale Air Force Base in Shreveport, Louisiana for the Hurricane Katrina relief effort from October 4-18, 2005. At that time, Mike Whalen's Type 2 team from Nevada was operating a receiving and distribution center on the base. From Barksdale AFB, orders were filled for relief supplies needed at affected areas. "I tracked inventory of incoming and outgoing tractor-trailers hauling relief supplies such as ice, water, blankets, and home repair kits, just to name a few," Swartz said.



Hurricane Assignments

Nearly 80 people from NIFC supported hurricane relief efforts in the southeastern United States this year.

Beth Grey Cloud	Jacqueline Hawley	Mark Motes	Roy Johnson
Bob Dukart	James Glenn	Merrill Saleen	Royce Shearing
Bobbe Bilyeu	John Gould	Michael Boomer	Ryan Swartz
Brent Johnson	Jason Hofman	Michael Utecht	Scott Morrow
Carl Dorsey	John Lutzow	Michael Henry	Sean Cross
Cheryl Molis	John Moulder	Michelle Moore	Shannon Orr
Christopher Doggett	John Gebhard	Mike Haydon	Shepard Crim
Cindy Callahan	Jose Lopez	Mike Tuominen	Stephen German
Dan Eakins	Kenneth Frederick	Patrick Lorton	Terry O'connell
Dan Zach	Kevin Staley	Paul Naman	Thomas Boatner
Daniel Buckley	Kurt Borcharding	Paul Broyles	Thomas Romanello
Danny Rodwell	Kurt Larue	Phil Gerhardson	Tim Melchert
David Zuares	Larry Sutton	Phillip Street	Tim Sexton
Dawn Graham	Larry Van Bussum	Randy Culver	Tim Schaeffer
Dennis Geving	Louis Leezer	Rhonda Toronto	Todd Johnson
Don Clark	Madonna Lengerich	Richard Turner	Todd Jinks
Eric Walker	Marie Bates	Richard Tholen	Trish Casiano
Hallie Locklear	Mark Hilton	Robert McCormick	Vincenzo Mazzier
Hardie Griggs	Mark Koontz	Robert Swofford	Zuri Betz