

# **2004 Hurricane Response**

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**Initial Impressions Report (IIR) from Hurricanes  
Charley, Frances, and Ivan**

*For:*  
**Wildland Fire Lessons Learned Center  
3265 East Universal Way  
Tucson, AZ 85706**



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# Contents

**Contents ..... i**

**Introduction ..... 4**

**The Information Collection Effort..... 5**

**Report Organization ..... 6**

**Information Collection Team ..... 6**

**Data Analysis and Report ..... 7**

**Section 1: Situation Description ..... Error! Bookmark not defined.**

**Wildland Fire’s Role in Disaster Relief OperationsError! Bookmark not defined.**

**The Federal Emergency Management Organization (FEMA)Error! Bookmark not defined.**

FEMA History ..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**

FEMA as a Response Organization..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**

The Federal Response Plan ..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**

Overview - Wildland Firefighting and the Federal Response Plan**Error! Bookmark not defined.**

Federal Response Plan Organization ..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**

The Role of Wildland IMTs in Disaster Response ..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**

**Overview – the FEMA Hurricane Disaster Response SequenceError! Bookmark not defined.**

1. Pending Disaster is Identified ..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**

2. FEMA Regional Response..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**

3. Disaster Occurs..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**

4. Presidential Declaration ..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**

5. Response ..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**

**The 2004 Hurricanes ..... Error! Bookmark not defined.**

Tropical Storm Bonnie ..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**

Hurricane Charley ..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**

Hurricane Frances..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**

Hurricane Ivan..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**

Hurricane Jeanne..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**

**Pressures on the Reponse System**.....Error! Bookmark not defined.

**Section 2: Lessons Learned** ..... Error! Bookmark not defined.

**Regional Operations and Coordination** ..... Error! Bookmark not defined.

    Regional Operations Response ..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**

    Briefings ..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**

    Command and Control.....**Error! Bookmark not defined.**

    Systems Compatibility.....**Error! Bookmark not defined.**

    Incident Business Advisors .....**Error! Bookmark not defined.**

    Charge Codes and Financial Tracking.....**Error! Bookmark not defined.**

    Buying Teams .....**Error! Bookmark not defined.**

**Emergency Support Function (ESF) #4** ..... Error! Bookmark not defined.

**Mission Assignment Construction** .....Error! Bookmark not defined.

**ESF#4 – The Job, the Person** .....Error! Bookmark not defined.

**Incident Management Team Operations** ..... Error! Bookmark not defined.

**The Core Mission – People Management** .....Error! Bookmark not defined.

**Staging and Ordering**.....Error! Bookmark not defined.

**IMT Organization** .....Error! Bookmark not defined.

**Unified Command**.....Error! Bookmark not defined.

**Plans and Logistics**.....Error! Bookmark not defined.

**Information**.....Error! Bookmark not defined.

**Fatigue**.....Error! Bookmark not defined.

**FEMA and ICS**..... Error! Bookmark not defined.

**Area Command**..... Error! Bookmark not defined.

**Global Impressions**..... Error! Bookmark not defined.

**The Role of Politics and Competition** .....Error! Bookmark not defined.

**Managing the Unexpected** .....Error! Bookmark not defined.  
    Setting Expectations ..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**  
    Discipline ..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**  
    Perspective ..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**  
    Identity..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**

**Section 3: Issues for Organizational Leaders**Error! Bookmark not defined.

**Are We “In” or Are We “Out”?**.....Error! Bookmark not defined.  
    Can Do vs. Should Do ..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**  
    Development of All-Risk Doctrine ..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**  
    Policy Development ..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**  
    Mission and Risk Integration..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**  
    Training and Preparedness..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**  
    FEMA Training and Presenting a Unified Front ..... **Error! Bookmark not defined.**

**Analyst Comments—Forging a Larger Solution...**Error! Bookmark not defined.

## Introduction

*The only thing that remains the same is that it is different every time we do this.*  
- First Interviewee – repeated many times by others

Between August 12 and September 26, 2004, six tropical weather systems made landfall on the shores of the southeastern USA. Four were hurricane strength when they arrived (75 MPH or greater). In two weeks, they ravaged central and northern Florida as well as southern Alabama. They set into motion a national disaster response effort unprecedented in the history of modern emergency management.

Over the two-month period stretching from mid-August through mid-October, approximately 1,900 personnel from the wildland fire community were committed to this hurricane response effort, including 14 of the nation's 17 Type 1 Incident Management Teams (IMTs), all four Area Command Teams, and all 12 national Buying Teams. The effort was considered the largest application of the Incident Command System to a natural disaster response. At its height, two Area Command Teams and eight Type 1 IMTs were fielded to manage mission assignments under the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), which included the management of base camps, special needs facilities, logistics staging areas, and receiving and distribution centers. Based upon the information released by the upper management of the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), FEMA and the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), the hurricane response effort of 2004 was considered a success on both organizational and political levels.

While on an organizational level the effort was deemed successful, the reported ground experience varied widely. Some of the "successes" reported in the field were likely influenced by political or personal agendas, which is not uncommon in such sweeping and politically charged events. Generally, greater success was reported by personnel who participated in the latter weeks of the response than from those who took part in the first weeks. Most respondents in the latter phases of the effort reported success in crafting order from chaos and in delivering the goods to those in need. A majority of respondents reported facing huge organizational and political hurdles.

One of the first (and then repeated) phrases during the collection effort was, "*The only thing that remains the same is that it's different every time.*" Respondents reported widely that there was little in the form of procedures, systems, or processes to work with prior to or upon arrival, and that the events were driven as much by personalities and luck as they were guided by standardization.

Nearly everywhere that success was reported, it had usually been preceded by a series of failures and frustrations. Many respondents only reported failure and frustration as differing policies, relationships, practices, doctrine, and undefined or poorly reconciled visions produced widely varying problems. In attempting to resolve them, wildland fire personnel sometimes took disparate and unpredictable actions. In most cases, most job stress and frustrations resulted from poor organizational alignment and an inability to act, rather than anything resulting directly from the disaster itself. Managing and correcting these problems, when possible, sometimes took nearly super-human efforts by agency personnel trying to provide aid and comfort to the populace. Many of the wildland

personnel who did not get assigned to meaningful or productive assignments became deeply discouraged and depressed, vowing not to accept such assignments in the future.

Respondents emphasized the virtues of patience, professionalism, adaptability and flexibility as keys that kept them functional and positive throughout the experience. During the interviews, leaders continually stressed the importance of building and maintaining positive relationships as a core competency.

At the roots of these challenges are two organizations—FEMA and Interagency Wildland Fire—both very invested in their own systems and processes, both attempting to understand how they fit together and can help each other in a new, all-risk world.

Although all respondents did not succeed in their response activities, all were dedicated to the process of learning and improving based upon their experiences. Yet, few “tactical” lessons, recommendations, or practices captured by the ICT are new. Most have been documented in prior reports or reviews of hurricane response efforts, many on account of a strong conviction that “...we shouldn’t have to keep going through this again.” Many respondents expressed doubt that the contents of this report would make any difference. Most believed that the solutions that came out of previous reports were rarely implemented as a standardized practice, or at best, were implemented by just a few individual IMTs.

Apart from this general report, IMTs, Buying Teams, and other groups will be conducting more detailed After Action Reviews on their part of this response effort. Together, all these reports should provide a basis from which to plan further action.

## The Information Collection Effort

In mid-September 2004, the United States Forest Service (*USFS*) Southern Regional Office invited the Wildland Fire Lessons Learned Center (*LLC*) to collect lessons and initial impressions from the deployed wildland fire resources participating in the response effort for hurricanes Charley, Frances, and Ivan. The Information Collection Team (*ICT*) was on site in Atlanta, GA, Florida, and Alabama, from September 12 through 20, 2004. The team primarily interviewed IMT staff and regional operations personnel. The purpose of this collection effort was to prepare future all-risk response teams, gather information for training, document agreed upon best practices, identify knowledge gaps, and illuminate issues of strategic or organizational significance. It focuses on the data collected during an eight day “snapshot” while the ICT was on site. As an IIR, it does not represent the experiences of all participating IMTs, nor does it speak to the Federal Emergency Management Administration (*FEMA*) beyond its interface with wildland fire resources during this series of incidents.

The Wildland Fire Lessons Learned Center would like to thank the respondents for the time and effort spent with the information collection team members and for the education they provided during this effort. We especially thank the USFS Southern Regional Operations staff for their critical support and education during the collection process.

## Report Organization

This report has been organized into three sections:

**Section 1 – Situation Description** is context for readers who are unfamiliar with the details of the 2004 Hurricane Response effort.

- To assist readers who are not familiar with the FEMA organization, hurricane response efforts, the United States Forest Service (*USFS*) and other national fire agencies working under Emergency Support Function #4 in the Federal Response Plan, a quick overview is contained in: ***Overview of Wildland Fire’s Role in Disaster Relief Operation.***
- For those readers not familiar with the 2004 hurricanes that set off the national response relating to this report, there is a brief overview of each hurricane and a sequence progression in: ***The 2004 Hurricanes.***

**Section 2 – Initial Impressions** contains impressions and preliminary conclusions derived from discussions with multiple sources. These are loosely organized according to the following categories:

- ***Regional Operations and Coordination***
- ***Emergency Support Function (ESF) #4***
- ***Incident Management Team Operations***
- ***FEMA and ICS***
- ***Area Command***
- ***Global Impressions***

**Section 3 – Issues for Organizational Leaders** is dedicated to illuminating the foundational issues that serve to produce problems and confusion during the response.

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## Data Analysis and Report

The analysis of the raw data collected by the Information Collection Team was fielded by the Wildland Fire Lessons Learned Center (*LLC*). Mission-Centered Solutions, Inc. (*MCS*) completed this report under contract to the LLC. The summations and conclusions contained herein are MCS's. The content of this report is the property of the Wildland Fire Lessons Learned Center to use in whole or in part.

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