

INCIDENT COMMUNICATIONS:

“Common Speak” Lingo Needed

The Exotic Newcastle Disease (END) is a highly contagious and deadly virus that can affect all species of birds. It is one of the most infectious diseases to affect poultry worldwide. The only way to eradicate this disease is by the rapid destruction of all infected birds, imposition of strict quarantines, and an in-depth surveillance program. When two groups as diverse as the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) and the Interagency Incident Management Teams (IMT) were assigned to the eradication process, they soon realized they could not communicate effectively unless each group’s acronyms usage was mutually understood.

Lesson Learned: This led to the Incident Information staff putting together two acronym guides for APHIS and Incident Command System (ICS) terminologies. All IMTs and APHIS staff then incorporated the use of these guides throughout the incident structure. To access the *How to Speak APHIS* guide, go to: http://www.wildfirelessons.net/Library/Emergency_Mgt/How_To_Speak_APHIS.doc. To access the *How to Speak Incident Command* guide, go to: http://www.wildfirelessons.net/Library/IncidentMgt/How_To_Speak_Incident_Command.doc. Based on the success of these guides to date, one of the resulting recommendations was for an APHIS representative and an Interagency IMT person knowledgeable in ICS terminology to jointly expand these lists into a more comprehensive guide for future utilization.

Liaison with Local Law Enforcement

The continuity of communications with multiple law enforcement agencies proved critical on an incident last summer that involved the evacuation of a town and the closure of a nearby major highway. Due to local preplanning activities a success was achieved and rapport established among the involved multi-agency group of land management and law enforcement agencies. The wildfire preplan contained the key to this initial success because the local overhead team had the foresight to establish and then implemented the use of the current agency contact list as contained in their fire management preplan. This fire preplan list enabled local cooperators to be readily contacted and provide their input at briefings. The incoming regional Incident Management Team (IMT) also then had use of this pre-established list of direct contacts at these agencies, which provided them a simplified means to maintain this established continuity of emergent or daily communications throughout the incident.

Unified Command in Fire Use

In a recent fire use incident success was achieved among the Unified Command consisting of two state agencies and a federal agency. These organizations were able to interact effectively because clearly delineated responsibilities were agreed upon up front. All involved understood that the goal was to suppress the

fire on private lands and manage it for resource benefit on the federal land. Establishing and then clearly communicating these objectives to all responders was key to this understanding.

Host Agency Participation

An initial goal that cannot be overemphasized is the forming of a cooperative liaison between the host agency and the responding Incident Management Team (IMT). This liaison should include the active participation of an agency level administrator and resource advisor at every briefing and planning meeting. Since the IMT is responsible to the agency administrator, this participation needs to occur through all phases of the incident.

Staging Incident Management Teams (IMT)

When an IMT is staged before an assignment, the team can use this time to both brief and update on new policies and guidelines as well as train within their sections. This can be a good opportunity to familiarize new team members with the ISUITE computer program. This program is used to check in and track resources on an incident. Each IMT Section determines how they will use the ISUITE program and how it can be interfaced with other Sections.

Use of IMT websites

IMT websites are becoming critical as a fast and effective means for disseminating information beyond the incident. One New Mexico IMT web site was identified as being frequently checked by homeowners in Michigan inquiring about the status of their summer homes located near the fire.

Providing Closure after a Serious Incident

Holding a memorial service at the base camp for all incident personnel helped to provide a degree of closure after the recent C130 airtanker crash in California. Incident personnel were also given the opportunity to donate to a memorial fund.

Filling the Liaison Officer Position

A local Office of Emergency Management (OEM) coordinator can make an excellent liaison officer for an IMT. On one recent incident this coordinator, who knew all the local players, focused on improving relationships with local government that were strained at the time. The human relations skills of the OEM coordinator and his local knowledge was critical to the successful completion of the assignment.

