

**LESSONS LEARNED 2003**

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**SUCCESSSES AND CHALLENGES  
FROM AAR ROLL-UPS**



**For: Wildland Fire Lessons Learned Center  
C/O The National Advanced Fire & Resource Institute  
3265 East Universal Way  
Tucson, Arizona 85706**

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## **LESSONS LEARNED RELATED TO THE INFORMATION FUNCTION**

### **Information On an All Risk Incident**

**Background:** The Space Shuttle recovery effort brought together a mix of agencies that normally do not work together. Working under the Incident Command System (ICS) and unified command, various local, state and federal agencies including the National Aeronautical and Space Administration (NASA), the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the USDA Forest Service, the Texas Forest Service (TFS) and the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) were able to effectively manage the information function. Respondents reported that they learned from the following successes and challenges several key areas.

One IMT identified the need to relocate certain functions within the camp to better serve the mission, including locating the information function at the front of the camp to allow easy access to the public. This team also reported other notable experiences in the Information function.

Several community meetings were conducted prior to the arrival of the IMT, with the intent of updating residents and local media on incident strategies. In addition, community volunteers were very involved in all aspects of the recovery effort during the early stages, but were displaced when the IMTs were activated. When the IMT arrived, at the request of NASA, they scheduled town meetings in two communities with the objectives of providing an update, beginning to move toward “closure,” showing appreciation for the communities, and re-engaging them. The town meetings employed an MS PowerPoint presentation that was intended to show appreciation for the efforts of the local residents during the initial stages of the incident, and linked their efforts to both the crews currently searching the area and the IMTs. The presentation began with a memorial to the astronauts, followed by scenes featuring local residents and firefighters involved in the search effort. The presentation concluded with slides supplied and narrated by NASA, identifying specific shuttle materials and a presentation describing the role of the EPA in the search. The town meetings also included addresses by community leaders and incident management personnel. The town meeting results were very positive and no additional meetings were necessary.

A Joint Information Center (JIC) retained responsibility for media relations and specific information pertaining to shuttle material, personal effects and human remains. One IMT reported that since there was little media interest during their time on the incident, and team personnel were able to focus on other functions including posting information authorized by the JIC at public locations, postings within camp, camp tours, VIP visits, motivational presentations and community meetings.

**Lessons Learned:**

- ☀ Locate the Information function within the ICP/camp in such a way (front of the camp) to allow easy access by the public and the media.
- ☀ Community meetings can provide an effective vehicle to show appreciation for the efforts of local residents during initial stages of an incident and to link their efforts to the agency incident resources IMTs.
- ☀ Presentations using MS PowerPoint and other presentation software provide an effective tool for organizing community meetings.
- ☀ Joint Information Centers (JIC) can provide service to multiple incidents that free IMT Information staff from routine media relations functions, allowing team personnel to focus on other functions including providing information to incident personnel, providing camp tours for the media, very important persons (VIPs,) and the community, developing presentations, and planning community meetings.

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**Informational Meetings for the Community**

**Background:** IMTs reported their successes at providing informational meetings to local communities. For example, at their in-briefing, an IMT was assigned to conduct information meetings in two communities on the following two nights. Both information meetings were very successful in sharing critical information about evacuation planning, fire behavior and suppression activities.

Approximately 300 people attended in one community and 200 people came in the other. The IMT used local phone trees, handbills, notices posted at community gathering spots, and news releases to spread the word about the information meetings. A standard agenda template was used with standard attachments including the latest news release, the Incident Status Summary (ICS 209) and an incident map. Also included were Evacuation Planning documents including a narrative description of the stages of Evacuation Planning and a map showing the management action lines associated with the different stages of evacuation. A toll free number for regional information and a website address were also included.

Another IMT held a public information meeting the evening of their first operational period. The IMT maintains a policy of conducting this first night meeting whenever public interest is adequate. In this case, the meeting was very successful because it resulted in the efficient sharing of information, especially regarding evacuation planning. A follow-up public meeting was held later in the week to update residents on fire activity and current plans. Fire camp tours were held on two days to allow local residents an inside look at the activities in camp, and these were well received.

**Lessons Learned:**

- ☀ Community information meetings can provide an effective vehicle for disseminating critical information about evacuation planning, fire behavior and suppression activities. Use local phone trees, handbills, notices posted at community gathering spots, and news releases to spread the word about information meetings.
  
- ☀ Develop and maintain a standard community information meeting agenda template and standard attachment templates. Be prepared to include regional or other information, toll free numbers and websites.
  
- ☀ Fire camp tours that give local residents, VIPs and the media an inside look at the activities in camp and can provide an effective public relations tool.

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**Use of a Local Fuels/Prevention Trailer**

**Background:** The hosting unit provided an interagency fuels reduction/prevention trailer that was fully staffed and stocked with assorted prevention materials. This trailer was assigned to a local community near a major highway, and was able to provide information on the fire, defensible space and other prevention messages to over 250 people in the first four days of the fire.

**Lesson Learned:** IMT information staffs can use local fire prevention/outreach resources to supplement the team's public information efforts. Check with the host unit to see what is available.

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**Joint Information Functions and Other Assistance**

**Background:** Several teams reported on their experiences with joint information centers (JIC). JICs are designed to provide IMTs with all their media and public phone call service on an interagency basis. Most, but not all IMTs found that JICs provided a significant advantage to their information staff, and reported on a variety of working relationships.

At one incident, daily fact sheets and other fire information routinely moved back and forth between the emergency mobile communications center, located at the ICP, and the JIC located in a nearby community. This system was in place when the team arrived, and they found that it served as an excellent aid to information distribution.

Another IMT reported that proactive cooperation from the local interagency dispatch center provided a coordinated, multi-agency information distribution point and a place to field media calls. At this incident, representatives of the State Fire Marshall's Office, state forestry organization and other agencies were successfully integrated into the information management effort.

Not all IMTs had completely positive experiences with joint information functions. One team, assigned to the recovery effort, reports that information management presented a unique challenge in that all information dissemination was controlled through a JIC that initially proved very reluctant to provide even the most basic information to the media. In this case, the Incident Commander (IC) and the Information Officer worked with the JIC to sponsor a “media day,” and the JIC provided a Space Flight Awareness team for the IMT to work with, allowing greater freedom for information dissemination.

**Lessons Learned:**

- ☀ Joint Information Centers (JIC), set up in nearby communities, can provide very effective service to Incident Management Teams (IMT), including media and public phone call service, providing significant advantages for the IMT information staff. On multi-agency incidents, integrate representatives of the cooperating agencies into a joint information management effort.
  
- ☀ In the absence of a Joint Information Center (JIC), interagency dispatch centers may be able to provide many of the same services normally associated with the JIC, such as providing a point of contact for media and public phone calls.

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**Large Distances Covered by IMT Information Staff**

**Background:** An IMT reported that the territory covered by their information staff included 313 highway miles in two states. In addition, the Information staff of the IMT served a coordinating role much like an Area Command. This IMT overcame the geographic and management challenges by developing a suitable organization, producing operating protocols, and achieving excellent cooperation across the involved agency units and zones. Other teams reported similar experiences and similar approaches to overcoming the associated challenges.

**Lesson Learned:** When the information function of an IMT is covering an unusually large area or faces travel or geographic challenges, they need to develop an organization to handle the job, order resources to staff the organization, adapt operating protocols, and develop effective working relationships with host agencies and their cooperators.

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### **Cooperation Between Information Staffs**

**Background:** One IMT reported that establishing an effective, cooperative relationship between their information staff and the host agency's information staff presented a challenge. According to the IMT, the host unit wanted complete control of media releases, though no single, specific person was designated to receive the releases. Members of this IMT report that they could have made the host unit look good if they had been able to reach-out to the host and operate with less constraint.

**Lesson Learned:** Effective, cooperative relationships between the information function of the IMT and the information function of the host agency are key to a successful, coordinated information management function.

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