

THE LEARNING CURVE

FIVE LESSONS LEARNED AND BEST PRACTICES FROM AAR ROLLUPS OCTOBER 2003 – 6TH EDITION

INCIDENT COMMUNICATIONS

Cooperation Between Ranchers and Operations

When an Incident Management Team (IMT) assumed responsibility of a Northern Rockies wildfire in August 2003, they quickly learned that several local ranchers were already engaged in their own fire suppression activities. Ranchers continually approached operations personnel in the field and advised them how they believed the fire should be fought. Many times the ranchers expressed hostility towards the line personnel they encountered.

Lesson Learned: The IMT found an effective solution by providing a means of information exchange to keep the ranchers informed, listening to their concerns, and explaining the objectives behind the chosen tactics. The team also performed the critical task of informing the ranchers of the risks they exposed themselves to when unqualified personnel went out on the fireline. The ranchers began participating in the daily briefings and the IMT listened to their input. A few ranchers, who were qualified, assisted with the suppression effort. Through this continual communication, the ranchers developed a better understanding of the incident objectives and became partners rather than adversaries.

SAFETY

IMT Enhances Transportation and Driving Safety

Driving and transportation presented a challenge on a 2003 incident, where the operating environment included narrow dirt roads with steep side slopes, and mixed traffic including water tenders, buses, engines, and the private vehicles of area residents. These roadway conditions, coupled with excessive speed by some vehicle operators, presented a hazard requiring immediate attention. The IMT, cognizant of the serious vehicle accidents involving wildland fire personnel earlier in the season and during the previous fire season, instituted steps to alleviate the driving and transportation challenges.

Lesson Learned: To help alleviate the potential for vehicle accidents, the IMT instituted an aggressive driver awareness and education program that included reproducing the Pacific Northwest IMT#2 Driving Policy in the Incident Action Plan and providing this as part of a daily briefing reminder to incident personnel. The IMT then established a one-way traffic system on the highest hazard roads, using road guards to control the traffic flow. National Guard personnel staffed these road closure points, reminding each vehicle operator entering the areas of the safety protocols. The IMT also requested enforcement patrols on the affected county roads, which the county Sheriff's Office provided. Enforcement included taking a tough line by immediately demobilizing personnel ticketed for speeding, reckless driving, or other serious vehicle operations violations. The IMT believes these actions contributed to both the necessary mindset and the avoidance of driving-related accidents occurring during the Incident. To view the 2003 Emergency Incident Driving Regulations go to:
<http://www.wildfirelessons.net/Library/IncidentMgt/NWCGDrivingRegs.doc>

PLANNING/OPERATIONS

Value of Sand Table on Incidents

Originally developed by the military, field fire personnel have been using sand tables as an aid to illustrate fireline tactics, as part of learning exercises. The sand table provides an excellent tool because it depicts the topography of the land. Recently, an Incident Management Team (IMT) found that sand tables are also extremely valuable as a planning and informational tool during wildfire assignments.

Lessons Learned: While assigned to a Northern Rockies incident in 2003, the IMT used the sand table in three ways. First, the IMT used the sand table to facilitate tactical discussions with the Operations Section as they planned upcoming operational periods. The sand table also facilitated tactical and strategic discussions with the entire IMT and agency administrators. Lastly, this tool proved very effective in guiding discussions with local officials, landowners, and residents. The IMT plans to use the sand table on future assignments having worked out some of the deficiencies they initially encountered with the tool. These included resolving problems with sand consistency and how best to make symbols for division and branch breaks. To view the IMT using a sand table to brief county commissioners at the incident go to:
http://www.jimott.org/fires/crazyhorse/photos/8_21LakeCountyComTour/index.htm
To view a sand table showroom go to:
http://www.fireleadership.gov/toolbox/documents/Sand_Table_Showroom.pdf

OPERATIONS

Right Tool for the Assignment

On a 2003 incident in the Southwest, an Air Operations Branch Director had maintained numerous types of helicopters at a helibase located near the fire. Some of these helicopters were Type 1, ordered based on both national and regional emphasis on reserving large fixed-wing airtankers for initial attack. Type 1 helicopters can be very effective, but are not necessarily the best tool for every line building retardant situation. This incident, though beyond initial attack, proved to need fixed-wing tanker support.

Lesson Learned: Incident Management Teams handling large fires need flexibility in situations where extended retardant lines need to be built quickly to support and enhance the safety of crews and dozers building fireline in critical situations, The Southwest Multi-Agency Coordinating Group and Southwest Coordination Center recognized the need, and its priority, and furnished airtankers to the incident.

A more flexible policy approach is needed regarding the prioritizing of fixed wing airtanker assignment to incidents, so that policy enables the most sensible and effective allocation of all potential resources.

LOGISTICS

Locating Repeater Sites

Establishing effective communications coverage represents a critical task and often is a considerable challenge for an Incident Management Team (IMT). Typically this involves locating the best peaks and ridges on which to erect portable repeater sites. This can prove a challenging and difficult problem, especially on incidents having the potential to extend over large geographic areas. One IMT recently started using a tool that significantly improves their incident radio service coverage.

Lessons Learned: The IMT Communications Unit utilized a radio propagation and virtual mapping program to develop an onsite strategy for effectively providing fire incident radio coverage. The program aids the Communications Unit Leader in determining the best repeater locations, and possible sources of communications interference from other fires or radio networks. The IMT has found that by using the program and the related map it generates, they can identify repeater locations more suitable than those suggested by ground personnel or local resources. For more information on this program go to: <http://www.cplus.org/rmw/english1.html>