

THE LEARNING CURVE

LESSONS LEARNED AND EFFECTIVE PRACTICES FROM THE 2006 AAR ROLLUPS MARCH 2008 – 11TH EDITION

OPERATIONS

Division Supervisor Nightly Meetings Creates Cohesiveness

When managing multiple divisions in extended operations on a large fire, an Incident Management Team (IMT) may be supervising many Division Supervisors (DIVS) who not only may be new to the team but who also may have never worked with one another before.



Photo Courtesy of SW Area Type 1

Lessons Learned:

One IMT holds a 9:00 PM meeting with all DIVS each night to discuss strategy and tactics, to share information, and to plan activities for next day. According to the Incident Commander (IC), "These meetings resulted in more intelligent and efficient implementation of actions...and allowed for team cohesiveness to develop."

Simulating an Incident within an Incident is Vital to Success

While the Command and General staff (C&GS) may be experienced in working together in fire management operations, experiencing an incident within an incident, such as a vehicle accident or medical emergency, can pull the team's attention in multiple directions and make for a stressful situation. It is one IC's practice to convene the C&GS to share ideas, propose solutions, decide upon a strategy, and initiate action. The IC believes that doing so would be much more difficult without the entire C&GS together.

Lessons Learned:

During a fire assignment in 2006, one IMT simulated an incident within an incident consisting of simultaneous medical emergencies and vehicle accidents. Operations personnel, Communications and the Medical Unit were tasked with specific responses during the simulation. At the conclusion of the operational period, the team completed an After Action Review (AAR) for the simulation, and adjustments were made to procedures for next time.

Coincidentally, the team experienced an incident within an incident on the very next assignment. As a result of having worked through the simulation and an AAR

on the previous incident, the team addressed the actual emergency faster and with less stress than they had during the simulation.

PLANNING

Creative Responses to National Resource Shortages

At the height of fire season when the National Preparedness Level is climbing, and multiple national IMTs are deployed, there is competition for resources among geographic areas. IMTs may place orders for resources, but find their requests coming back unable to fill (UTF) for days at a time. This includes resources for leadership and overhead positions in addition to fire crews. While national resource shortages require management attention, IMTs use some strategies in the spirit of “Do what you can with what you have,” with varying degrees of success.



Photo Courtesy of WA IMT # 1

Lessons Learned:

Look Up, Down, and Around, but Locally. One IMT reported that with the number of incidents throughout the west it was impossible to fill most if not all of their resource orders, so the team cobbled together resources in the area that they could borrow from other agencies and from other IMTs. The team utilized 15 National Park Service employees that had been on the fire for two days, a 10 person initial attack crew from the Forest, eight borrowed smokejumpers, the loan of a heavy helicopter for several days, the use of a Forest rappel crew for a day, a Washington DNR blasting crew for two days, and the loan of a Type 2 crew for two days. As a result, the team was successful in stopping the northward spread of the fire which would otherwise have necessitated the evacuation of a small community. The real success of the fire, however, was the ability of the agencies and other IMTs to work together and share resources.

Be Flexible. Due to confusion over operation protocols by the local dispatch center, an IMT was never able to establish an Incident Base Camp and to fully implement normal operations for one of their assignments. Nevertheless, the Planning Section was able to use the basement of the local library to set up several of the team’s laptops, and they also carved out an area for the Situation Unit to produce their maps. Finance, having never been hooked into I-Suite, tracked time and costs by hand. The IC concluded that despite facing these kinds of obstacles, flexibility by the team was the key to making this operation successful.

Pinch Hit. To address shortages in overhead resources, some IMTs asked their members to fill positions within the incident other than their primary assignment to meet critical needs. Examples from one team include: Resource Unit Leader to Firefighter Type 1 (FFT1) Squad Leader, Expanded Dispatch Recorder Trainee sent to expanded dispatch, Resource Advisor to FFT1 Squad Leader, Deputy Finance/Admin Section Chief to Cost Unit Leader for new fire, Ground Support utilizing pack string, and Camp Crew Supervisor working as Base Camp Manager.

Another team utilizing spike camps asked Emergency Medical Technicians (EMTs) assigned to the lines to also collect weather observations for spot weather forecasts. A third team, whose request for a Field Observer was never filled, relied upon good intelligence from DIVS and forest personnel to estimate fire perimeter shapes. A fourth team experiencing shortages in communications and camp crews temporarily used an Incident Medical Specialist team member who was also qualified as a Radio Operator to cover the radio until orders were filled. As for the shortage of camp crews, the team was approached by a local person who asked how they could help with the incident. The team asked if the community could put a camp crew together, and they did. According to the IC the local camp crew performed very well.

Prioritize and Then Prioritize Again. One team facing a shortage of critical fireline resources, including Type 1 and Type 2 hand crews and all types of



Photo Courtesy of WA IMT # 1

helicopters, prioritized Operations to accomplish objectives. Many lower priority divisions were left unstaffed, with only the DIVS assigned. The DIVS would develop tactics and scout line locations until resources could be moved to their area. Divisions were prioritized so that those with threatened structures or other critical resources received attention first, with other areas (such as those in the wilderness) being staffed after objectives were met on the priority divisions. Resources such as hand crews were moved from division to division on a daily basis, and only kept on the division until lines were constructed and burned out. Engines crews were used to hold and mop-up divisions after burning, freeing up the resources for unstaffed divisions. Multiple divisions were also combined once they could be placed into patrol and mop-up mode.

Think Globally. An IMT assigned to a complex in 2006 filled up to 20 critical Operations Branch Director and DIVS positions with experienced wildland and structure firefighters from Australia and New Zealand. The team found these international resources to be highly skilled and needing very little shadowing time or mentoring. In fact, they performed at a level that “exceeded our expectations.” The IC added that “their excellent work ethic and high degree of professionalism (not to mention their great sense of humor) boosted morale and really helped to motivate the workforce.” The team believes that it would not have been nearly as

successful without the help of this international contingent who were so vital to helping to create safe and effective fireline operations.

Protect Your Assets. According to one IMT who experienced a shortage of resources on a fire in Nevada, their primary operational goal was to not burn out the crews they did have available to them. They were careful not to continually send their one experienced Type 1 hand crew to every initial attack assignment. They were also cautious of wearing out their less experienced crews or having them become ineffective through injury, so they assigned them to divisions based on their experience and skill levels. Many teams ensured that crews went through appropriate work/rest cycles by tracking their crew report dates, last day of assignment and travel days on a spreadsheet. This lets the Operations Section Chief keep up to date for the assignment of resources.



Photo Courtesy of OR Type 2 Blue Team

When All Else Fails, Grow Your Own. On a fire in Washington State, one IMT faced a shortage of both equipment and operators for roadside mechanical fuels reduction. As a result, they contracted with local providers who brought their own equipment to fill the needs for the incident. Required training was provided at the Incident Command Post (ICP). A different team, also working in Washington State, pointed out that when the military is mobilized to help, troops may arrive having had no chainsaw training. When they faced this situation, the area Smokejumper Base and employees of the nearby forest stepped in to help train their temporary crews in proper chainsaw techniques and safety.

Spin-Off Benefits of Internet Availability

An IMT faced seemingly insurmountable obstacles in attempting to establish reliable long distance phone lines at base camp. Nevertheless, the team was able to request and obtain a reliable internet connection, which made it possible to complete certain tasks in less time than it would have taken by telephone.

Lesson Learned:

One team reported that they were never able to establish a reliable long distance phone line during one particular incident in the Northern Rockies, and potentially faced the prospect of conducting a complex demobilization without phone or fax service to an out-of-area Expanded Dispatch. However, the IMT requested, and was able to obtain, a DSL (Digital Subscriber Line) to gain access to the internet. After that, it was possible for the Demobilization unit to e-mail requests for air travel, to receive itineraries, and to disseminate important demobilization information to various parties. This saved a significant amount of time for the team

as compared to doing these same tasks over the telephone. Spin-off benefits from high-speed access to the internet included better access to weather information



and the Geographic Information System (GIS) for the Situation Unit, the ability for the Cost unit to email accruals, and access to the National Interagency Resource Ordering and Status System (ROSS) for the Supply unit.

The Planning Section for this team also regularly posts its Incident Action Plan (IAP) on its IMT website and then gives the various agencies and cooperators clear, written directions for accessing the website. The team finds this preferable to spending many frustrating hours faxing IAPs to numerous agencies and cooperators. Additionally, the team received favorable responses from cooperators who accessed the IAP from their website.

*Photo Courtesy of Eastern AZ
Type 2 IMT*

LOGISTICS

Preplanning of Base Camp Locations & Equipment

Extreme summer temperatures can make setting up an outdoor base camp nearly impossible for IMTs dispatched to the Southwest.

Lesson Learned:

One IMT was grateful that the local forest had done preplanning for potential Base Camp locations, including scouting out local schools, arenas, and event centers. Being able to utilize a school for both Base Camp and the ICP not only enabled the crews to receive adequate rest in a climate controlled environment, but it also expedited the team transition, allowing the IMT to ramp up more quickly on the management of the incident. On a different assignment, Air Operations found it useful to borrow



Photo Courtesy of Idaho-Nevada AC

a mobile command post from a local fire agency to coordinate its efforts; this team recommends preplanning for such borrowed resources in the future. Another IMT established an ICP and Base Camp at a preplanned school, but at a time while school was still in session. This posed a unique challenge when an inmate crew was assigned to the team. The team worked with the school superintendent and the principal to create a workable solution. Ultimately, they agreed to inform school

staff of the situation and to limit students' access to only certain areas of the school.

In some cases, a preplanned facility that seems ideal at first must be rejected for other reasons. For example, one team faced the challenge of finding an appropriate camp location with enough space on the south end of a major Southwest city. A large high school that initially seemed like an ideal choice was ultimately rejected for safety reasons when it was determined that all of the resources would have to travel back and forth on a narrow canyon road as well as through the city itself. The team ultimately negotiated an agreement with a different school, which had not been a preplanned location, because it was directly across the highway from the roadway access to the fire, allowing for safer travel to and from the firelines.

Changing Traffic Patterns to Avoid Traffic Congestion

Preplanned community facilities such as schools and event centers can be ideal locations for the ICP and Base Camp. However, they can increase traffic flow in these areas, which can introduce new traffic hazards and cause concerns among community members.

Lessons Learned:

An IMT assigned to a California fire, having established their Base Camp at a local school, also created a Road Use Agreement with local residents for the road behind the school. The team reported that this allowed for a safe traffic pattern at base camp. The team also entered into a Land Use Agreement with the local school district to use the parking lot in front of another nearby school. This not only provided relief from traffic congestion but it also created a space for vehicle inspection, repair and staging.

Another team assigned to a fire in Idaho found that their only access to the fire was on a very heavily used one lane road along the Salmon River. The fire introduced many more large vehicles along the route, adding to existing safety concerns for fire personnel and the public. The team worked closely with outfitters in town to coordinate the movement of heavy traffic, which reduced potential conflicts with the local community. The team reported that as a result of this careful planning there were no accidents during the incident.

Designating Crew Sleeping Areas Improves Safety

As part of base camp or spike camp planning, the Logistics unit typically designates a specific area for sleeping. However, one team discovered that it may also be a good idea to designate areas for specific crews rather than have individual crew members choose their own spots within the general crew sleeping area.

Lessons Learned:

At one fire complex in the Northern Rockies, a team's Logistics unit designated a general sleeping area at the Base Camp without providing any further guidance as to where specific crews should camp. However, the team reported that some "adverse social actions" occurred among members of different crews, specifically at places where the crews had intermixed. One incident led to a serious situation involving a Sheriff's investigation and an arrest.



Photo Courtesy of FDNY Type 2

The team is strongly considering flagging or fencing off areas for each crew for the following reasons: to be better organized, to prevent some of the same adverse social actions, and to increase personal and gear security. In addition to the safety concerns, the team believes that this arrangement will also make it easier to locate or notify a crew at any hour of the day or night.