

IMT Lessons Learned: Dealing with an Incident Within an Incident –  
Fatality accidents  
September 2004

When a fatal accident occurs, the Forest/Unit is in need of assistance that is beyond most Forest's/Unit's experience and is hard to define. In conjunction with the loss and grief people feel, the accident dominates their focus from multiple aspects:

- 1) Handling any additional injuries;
- 2) Media attention – which begins almost immediately;
- 3) Dealing with on-incident resources;
- 4) Coordination with local County Sheriff;
- 5) Coordination with Regional Officer/next level;
- 6) Coordination with victim(s) families;
- 7) Delayed shock for all involved resources – on-incident, Emergency Coordination Center (dispatch), Forest/Unit.

To the host Forest/Unit, the incident itself becomes secondary to the accident.

An incoming Incident Management Team (IMT) will be, in effect, managing the incident and an "Incident within an Incident". Management, coordination and support have new aspects the IMT will need to be aware of and be prepared to provide additional assistance.

Listed below are a few **Lessons Learned** and thoughts on how to best support the Forest/Unit and your IMT upon arrival.

**Support – beyond standard incident issues** An IMT should adopt the attitude of relieving the Forest/Unit of as much incident related management issues and concerns as possible; allow the Forest/Unit to focus with accident related issues and impacts.

The impacts of a fatal accident are huge and long lasting to the Forest/Unit and all its employees. If the victim(s) was an employee of the Forest/Unit, the loss is extremely personal. The victim(s) may have been related to other Forest/Unit employees, close working associates and/or long time friends. If the victim(s) are an employee of another Forest/Unit or agency the loss is keenly felt and coordination with another entity is required. For example, 12 hours after assuming management of a fire, a major injury accident occurred during night operations. The victim was a Native American fire crew member from another state. Several members of the same fire crew were related to the victim and required immediate counseling and support. Early the following morning, the victim passed away from severe injury. Coordinating with the Forest in another state soon revealed that the victim was Native American and coordination with the Tribal Governor was essential. Their religious practices required that warriors are buried, in their tribe's sacred burial ground, before the sunset the day of the death. Coordination with the family, State Coroner, Tribal Governor,

IMT Lessons Learned: Dealing with an Incident Within an Incident –  
Fatality accidents  
September 2004

the Geographic Area Coordination Center, the home Forest and the incident was critical. Assigning the Deputy Incident Commander (IC) a “short” team consisting of a Logistics, Air Operations and HRSP person was critical to meeting all family, tribal and agency expectations.

Because of the frequent interaction between agencies in the Fire Service, it is likely that someone on your IMT, or on incident, knew the victim(s). Because of the culture within the Fire Service, an individual may not express the need for emotional support. A Chaplain or a Critical Incident Stress Debriefing Counselor in the ICP/Base Camp can provide a measure of comfort by their presence. These invaluable resources can be the IC’s “dedicated lookout” for signs of stress among incident personnel. Chaplains or Critical Incident Stress Debriefing personnel can help identify those folks who may require assistance and assist an IC deal with situations that arise. For example, an IMT assumed management of an incident after a local area fire fighter, who had been involved in the initial attack, was killed in a single vehicle accident on the way home from the fire. An assigned incident fire fighter, from the same fire department as the victim, felt an overwhelming need to work nonstop until the incident contained. Two days after the fatal accident, this individual began reacting oddly in base camp. An onsite critical incident stress debriefing counselor was able to help the IC deal with the individual immediately.

The Human Resource Specialist can also be a solid resource to help the IC determine whether members of his/her team or incident are adversely affected by an incident within an incident.

**When the accident occurs before the IMT is ordered** When a fatal accident occurs on an incident during initial or extended attack, a Type 1 IMT will be called to manage the incident, regardless of the size or complexity of the incident. For the hosting Forest/Unit, the effects of the accident and subsequent investigation are the primary concern. The IMT needs to be prepared to:

- Arrive as soon as possible. The Forest/Unit is most likely overwhelmed by the impacts of the accident. The IA IC may need Operational support immediately. Planning for the next operational period may need to be performed and coordinated by the incoming IMT.
- Assume management as quickly as possible. Engaging Operations and other Command and general Staff positions immediately, even before assumption of management, will greatly assist the Forest/Unit.
- Ensure all accident - involved resources are relieved from the incident and available for investigation team interviews. Providing hotel rooms, phone access and Critical Incident Stress Debriefing and/or Counseling services may need to be arranged by the IMT if the Forest/Unit is unable to do so.

**Accident Site Management** The IMT should ensure the accident site is secured. Initially, the County Sheriff's Department may keep the site secured until the victim(s) are removed. Coordination with their representative is needed in the event the site is released before the Accident Investigation Team arrives/has concluded their work. Agency LE&I officers may be needed to ensure the site remains secure. All items, such as crew gear, tools, shelters, etc must remain in place until the accident investigation team "releases" removal of the items. In most cases, these items will be removed and retained by the accident investigation team.

**Information management** will be a crucial, "immediate need" item. The IC, Agency Administrator and Accident Investigation Team Leader will need to clearly define who will provide and approve media releases regarding the accident; who will handle media accident site escorts; and who will provide accident related interviews. Typical scenarios an IC could expect are as follows:

- a) The Forest/Unit may want to handle the media releases about the fatality and allow the IMT to deal with media releases about the accident. Key roles would include:
  - a. The Agency Administrator would approve releases about the accident and ongoing investigation using Forest/Unit Public Affairs Services; IC handles releases about the ongoing progress of the incident using Fire Information section.
  - b. Fire Information ensures there is a consistent, reliable interaction process between the incident and Forest to ensure the media/public receive the same information about the accident and ongoing incident.
- b) The Forest/unit may want to establish a joint information center (JIC) to handle media contacts and phone calls regarding the accident. Forest/Unit or other involved agency may want to assign an IMT specifically to deal with the accident related information needs, memorial services, etc.
  - a. This works particularly well with multiple agencies involved.
  - b. The IC ensures there is a consistent, reliable interaction process between the incident and Forest to ensure the media/public receive the same information. Coordination with the second IMT can be accomplished through assigning a Deputy IC, Liaison or FIO as a contact for the second IMT.
- c) The Accident investigation Team may want to handle all media releases. Be aware that Accident Investigation Teams are usually formed at the time needed and may not be well versed in coordinating efforts, media information or on-site activities with an IMT. It is incumbent on the IC to ensure positive, reliable coordination occurs.

**Coordination** There will be multiple “teams” or groups requiring access to the accident site on the incident. There is not a requirement for any or all of the groups to work together, nor to “check in” with the incident.

The following teams or organized groups are typically associated with a fatality accident.

- Accident Investigation Team: There is usually one lead agency accident investigation Team, with various agencies involved as team member. If the accident is aircraft related, National Transportation System Board (NTSB) will lead the Investigation Team.
- OIG is required to investigate all wildland fire related fatality accidents and burnovers. OIG may be a member of the agency accident investigation team or may opt to investigate on their own.
- OSHA: if the victim(s) are federal employees, federal OSHA will be involved; if the victim(s) are state/local employees, State OSHA will be involved. OSHA accident investigation personnel may begin their work with the agency accident investigation team; although they are not required to do so. Frequently, OSHA will disassociate from an accident investigation team when the interview process is completed.
- Agency LE&I: Agency Law Enforcement will generally become involved with fire cause investigation. When a wildland fire is human-caused and a fatality occurs, LE&I (generally) takes the lead on fire cause investigation. If the causal investigation can identify and lead to a particular person(s), involuntary manslaughter may be considered as additional charges in court cases.
- Media: Accident site footage, especially when the gear, tools, etc. are still on-site as when the accident occurred, is considered the “best” background/story footage. In California, the media cannot be restricted from the site unless the County Sheriff has not released the accident site.
- Victim(s) Family Members: A victim(s) family members may come to the accident site or ICP. The IC may deal with a wide range of reaction and questions from family members. Coordination with the County Sheriff, Agency Administrator, Accident Investigation Team Leader and IC will be critical in meeting the family’s need.

Clearly an IMT is concerned for the safety and accountability of personnel on the incident; including any other teams or groups. The key to coordinating with these groups is for IC to have daily contact with each team or group.

Points of discussion with other teams/groups include:

- 1) A briefing of what operations the incident will have in the general vicinity of the accident investigation or fire causal site(s).
- 2) A briefing of what the team/group activities for that day.

IMT Lessons Learned: Dealing with an Incident Within an Incident –  
Fatality accidents  
September 2004

- 3) It is important for the IMT to know who is on site, where they will be located, how long they will be there, what level of fireline qualifications they have and what kind/type of PPE each on-site person will require.
  - a. Consider identifying the accident site and/or point of origin as a Branch, with a Branch Director to coordinate with the various teams/groups that may access these areas. The Branch also serves as an incident communication contact.
  - b. Consider providing a Division Group Supervisor as a dedicated safety coordinator as a mitigation for teams/group/individuals who lack of fireline qualifications.

**Incident Wrap-Up** An IC may consider minimizing the number of transitions a Forest/Unit deals with as the incident downscales. Transitioning the on-site IMT to a short team configuration may be better for the Forest/Unit to interact and rely upon to handle the later stages of an incident. Minimizing closeout briefings to a small group is another action to consider.

If the accident occurred during the IMT's management of the incident, an IC ought to consider a team critical incident stress debriefing of some type when the incident is concluded and before individuals return home. A sense of failure among team members is commonly held in abeyance until after the incident is released to another IMT or turned back to the host Forest/Unit. Critical Incident Stress Briefing counselors can be valuable to the IMT. Team discussion and interaction is crucial to the IMT confidence and future interaction.

The impacts of dealing with a fatal accident during an incident are long lasting. The illusion of "it won't happen to me" is stripped away. The reality of the inherent danger in this particular line of work is driven home in a manner that affects each individual differently, but affects each individual.

Whatever an IMT can do to take care of incident personnel, the Forest/Unit and themselves after a fatal accident will have a greater effect on the IMT's and individual perspectives than any other incident assignment.