



**Southern California Firestorm 2003**  
**Report for the Wildland Fire  
Lessons Learned Center**

*For:*  
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This report was prepared by two private consulting firms with the input of federal agency employees assisting the Wildland Fire Lessons Learned Center.



Mission-Centered Solutions, Inc., a small business enterprise located in the Denver metro area, provides training development and delivery services for government, military, and corporate clients. Our areas of training and expertise focus on disciplines that enhance crew or team resiliency and effectiveness, including leadership, error reduction and management, communication, and crew resource management. We also provide specific training and consulting to assist management of high-risk organizations to bring about and support targeted changes.

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Guidance Group provides strategic services to fire service organizations; and specializes in leadership, strategy and organizational improvement. The Guidance Group provides a unique blend of real world fire management experience as well as facilitative and consulting skills that may not be available within the client organization. The result is a practical, professional and experienced approach to fire service strategy, leadership and organizational needs including strategic planning; professional development; goal setting; collaborative problem solving; program evaluation; and support to field studies and field research.

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**The following is an excerpt from the entire report. It is suggested that the reader also view the Introduction to the report to put this section into context.**

# Preparing for Post Incident

This section describes the lessons learned regarding preparing for post incident.

## Critical Incident Stress

Some senior leaders reported a concern that their agencies would not provide an effective bridge between the critical incident stress counseling services available at incidents and an ongoing, comprehensive program at home units. Respondents reported that they believed that critical incident stress resulting from these incidents, affected a tremendous number of people in the agency workforce. Many respondents took advantage of the services of critical incident stress debriefing (CISD) teams at incidents, and voiced the opinion that a lot of people still needed someone to talk to about their experiences.

Several leaders felt that CISD teams should be ordered as standard procedure for large, late-season fires. They indicated that even though firefighters routinely experience these kinds of stresses, extreme, late-season fires involve firefighters who have already have logged hundreds of hours of overtime and are likely to be dealing with cumulative stress. Respondents indicated that this stress buildup was an increasing trend as fire seasons lengthen and firefighters are called-on to perform out-of-the-ordinary missions such as the *Columbia* shuttle recovery and post-9/11 recovery.

### **Summary of Lessons Learned—Critical Incident Stress**

- Ordering a CISD team early was effective for these large, complex incidents. Most firefighters had already had a long fire season and stress buildup is an increasing problem.
- Resources found on-site CISD services helpful. Senior leaders feel this is still an open issue and would like to see these services continue for firefighters and support staff at their home units.

## Utilities and Service Restoration

Respondents recommended that, following evacuations, IMTs must coordinate service restoration and the return of evacuees.

Other respondents reported significant conflicts between fire operations and utility restoration operations. At times, the operations of utility companies were almost as large as those of the fire organization, with camps, helicopters, dozers, and fleets of vehicles. Road congestion became a significant issue, particularly on narrow roads in residential areas. Respondents indicated that fire agencies must be prepared to interact more extensively with utilities crews as major WUI incidents become more common.

Respondents indicated operations went more smoothly in areas where multi-agency, pre-incident planning was in place. However, respondents reported that, even in these areas, coordination and planning between fire agencies and utilities represented a weak point in incident planning. Respondents recommend that, in the absence of pre-incident planning, IMTs must anticipate this issue and involve utilities in the incident organization as soon as possible, either through a liaison or by involving the utilities in unified command.

Operations section chiefs, planning section chiefs, and deputy ICs should be most cognizant of this issue.

***Summary of Lessons Learned—Utilities and Service Restoration***

- Pre-incident planning improved coordination between fire agencies and utilities but many incident overhead did not anticipate the difficulties in sequencing the return of evacuees and services restoration. They said that in the future they would involve utilities in the incident organization and planning early to coordinate restoration of services.

## **Integrating Suppression and Resource Advisor Functions**

Several respondents reported a need to better integrate the fire suppression and resource advisor functions during fire suppression operations and rehabilitation efforts. Some reported unnecessary, unproductive, and adversarial relationships between the fire suppression organization and the natural resource specialists. The fire suppression organization works under delegated authority from the line officer, and the natural resource specialists are representatives of the district or forest, providing an interface between the line officer and the IMT.

Both fire suppression and natural resource respondents reported that they felt it would be more effective for the IMT to work collaboratively with line officers and natural and cultural resource specialists on resource protection and environmental compliance issues. Fire suppression and natural resource management goals are often in conflict with one another. Respondents pointed out that it is unproductive when the land management agency line officer, resource specialists, and the incident organizations do not have the same goals. Respondents indicated that common goals should translate into unified planning, with plans consistently communicated throughout the community.

In one case, respondents reported that a change in strategy—reduced urgency for completing a fuels break brought about by changing fire conditions—created an impression in the community that the agency placed natural resource values over the safety of the community. Most of those interviewed felt this situation could have been avoided if an initial strategy regarding cost and environmental constraints had been worked out among the line officer, natural and cultural resource specialists assigned as resource advisors, and the IMT.

***Summary of Lessons Learned—Integrating Suppression and Resource Advisor Functions***

- Respondents felt this was a weakness overall and said that next time they recommended:

Working closely with line officers and their resource advisors to create a unified strategy, which must be communicated to the community consistently;

Coordinating plans and operations with resource advisors;

Positioning a resource advisor with the Operations Section to provide direction in mobilizing equipment, handle equipment issues, and coordinate with suppression

operations. WUI strategies would be more effective if a dedicated resource advisor from the host agency's natural and cultural resource staff is assigned from the start.

## **Burned Area Emergency Rehabilitation (BAER) Team Structure**

In some areas managers report some difficulties in communicating important rehabilitation information to the public in a timely and effective manner. One respondent suggested that it would be valuable to add a qualified fire information officer (FIO) to the Burned Area Emergency Rehabilitation (BAER) team on large WUI fires. The FIO can assist with information flow from the BAER team back to the IMT and manage an effective public information program pertaining to rehabilitation efforts.

Another respondent said that including an archeologist on BAER teams as standard practice would be beneficial. Large WUI fires will likely threaten cultural resources. However, BAER teams rarely include an archeologist or cultural resource specialist. On one incident, BAER operations were delayed when the IMT had to order an archeologist through the dispatch system.

### ***Summary of Lessons Learned—BAER Team Structure***

- One recommendation was to assign a FIO to the BAER team to assist in the communication of important rehabilitation and safety information through a distribution campaign.
- A delay occurred when the need for an archeologist wasn't realized until later on in one incident. The team recommended ordering an archeologist (or any unique resource) as soon as it appears those values are likely to be impacted.