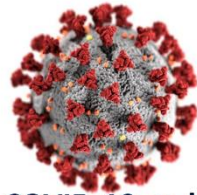


# Rapid Lesson Sharing

**Event Type:** COVID Lessons  
from a Rappel Training Event

**Date:** April 24-25, 2020

**Location:** Oregon



**COVID-19 and  
Fire Season 2020 Lessons**  
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## COVID Lessons from the Central Oregon Rappellers

By Chad Schmidt, Airbase Manager  
Ochoco National Forest

*“Are some of these mitigations creating a larger hazard  
than the original hazard they were intended to mitigate?”*

The following are some thoughts and experiences related to a recent rappel training event held in John Day, Oregon.

The plan was to recertify rappellers simultaneously at multiple sites by utilizing the National Rappel Program’s “PACE” training model. The Central Oregon Rappellers were scheduled to go to John Day, Oregon to utilize the rappel tower and then spike out on the national forest and utilize a remote helibase site for the live operations.

Rappel re-certification events are typically attended by multiple crews who train together in inter-mixed groups to promote standardization and cohesion among the national rappel community. However, due to COVID-19 concerns, the plan was to have crews work through their re-certification training as isolated modules with minimal interaction from outside personnel.

### **Vehicle Assignments and Helicopter Loads**

Going into the event, the crew had intended to mitigate social distancing by being very selective about vehicle assignments and helicopter loads during tower work, ground simulator training, and live rappels. Prior to the event, the crew had conducted multiple virtual meetings regarding the plan and the mitigations. Strong planning emphasis took place on isolating the rookie training cadre from the rest of the crew.

Mobilization from the base to John Day started at 0600 on Day 1. Earlier in the week prior to mobilization, equipment and certifying paperwork was assigned to rappellers and placed in their specific assigned vehicle to limit the need for personnel to access the base the morning of departure.

Three personnel drove POVs to the event. One needed to be there earlier in the week as a Check Spotter. The two others, who were helping with crew logistics, decided to utilize POVs as a social distance mitigation. Because these two logistics personnel wouldn’t be interacting with anyone in an aircraft setting, it seemed logical to grant their request for POV use to maintain social distancing throughout the event.

The rappel recertification went as well as it could have with no COVID issues presenting themselves and we returned home as a crew on Day 2. Two to three days onsite is a normal time to complete rappel recertification training for a crew.

## Lessons, Thoughts and Musings

### Masks/Face Coverings

Masks/face coverings were worn by some folks during various stages of the training in an attempt to evaluate efficacy and see if there were any potential issues with their use.

While driving vehicles, complaints centered on the inconvenience of the mask for drinking water and coffee, eating, and the fogging of sunglasses. Communication was slightly hampered inside a vehicle but not so much so that anyone would consider it a concern.

Cotton masks created a distraction while riding in the vehicle, mainly from the itching and subsequent face touching that resulted. I don't think the mask wearing made it longer than 20 minutes into the 2.5 hour drive.

Face coverings were utilized inside the aircraft during live operations by various folks, both rappellers and spotters. One individual used a Nomex Balaclava, the remainder of the folks used a thin neck gaiter designed for UV protection.

The positive outcomes from wearing a face covering or mask are difficult to measure, so I won't attempt to do so.

### Mask/Face Covering Issues During Helicopter Operations:

- ❖ Much like wearing a mask in the vehicle, wearing something during live helicopter operations is distracting. People found themselves adjusting the covering. This often resulted in gloved hands touching the face.
- ❖ Masks/face coverings channel your breath differently, resulting in the helmet visor or eye protection fogging up. This can be reduced by pulling the covering down to below the nose—but then begs the question: *Are we effective anymore?*
- ❖ It was noted from numerous participants how much non-verbal communication is utilized during these operations. While this one is hard to measure, it's worth noting that communication styles might need to be adjusted when using face masks/coverings. More on this later . . .
- ❖ Using masks/face coverings during physical exertion events also brought up some issues for people. Breathing becomes labored sooner and a claustrophobic type response was experienced by some.

### This Incident Begs Some Questions

We experienced a situation in which a required element of PPE (chin strap) was missed during a self-check—and then missed by a Spotter Check. It was eventually caught by a rappeller inside the aircraft during the boarding sequence.

The Spotter had removed the chinstrap between loads to pull the helmet away from the ear to listen to a conversation outside the aircraft between rappel loads. The Spotter was wearing a dark neck gaiter, had a dark helmet and dark chinstrap. In retrospect, the Spotter noted how having the neck gaiter on gave the feeling of the pressure under the chin—that a chin strap usually does.

The rappeller missed this anomaly during the Spotter Check presumably due to the PPE/helmet/chin strap being the same color and “blending in”. Although it was eventually caught and didn't result in an issue, this course of events begs some questions, including:

- ❖ Are some of these mitigations creating a larger hazard than the original hazard they were intended to mitigate?
  - ✓ Temperatures were in the 30s-40s during our live operations. Having used a neck covering myself during this event, I could forecast that using one during usual fire season environments will create new issues with the warmer temperatures.

**Social Distancing – Does This Diligence Become a Distraction?**

- ❖ During this event, it was realized how much people work together, in close proximity, in everything we do. This includes loading helicopters with equipment, moving gear around in vehicles, trying to have a conversation in noisy environments, etc. We have numerous tasks that rely on help or close distance.
- ❖ We planned on having our rookie trainers stay away from the rest of the crew as much as possible. Without complete isolation or separation, this becomes difficult. Human nature is to work together. Without intense diligence, folks will tend to relax their idea of social distancing to interact and get the job done. I saw this within the crew as well as with folks who were present during our event but not part of the crew. Human nature.
- ❖ Without engineering controls or physical barriers in place, people will tend to creep back to normal. We either accept this or we remain diligent. My main concern here is: *Does this diligence become a distraction?*

**Be Prepared to Make Real-Time Adjustments**

- ❖ Noted from a senior crewmember from our AAR: *The baseline mitigation for our activities seems very valuable. Wash hands, don't touch other people's stuff, try to space out. Beyond that, we need to be ready to adjust.*
- ❖ One crew chose to drive 14 POVs to the event as a mitigation. Right, wrong, or indifferent, I think it shows folks will approach these mitigations from different angles and with different values.
- ❖ Best laid plans will fail related to these mitigations. We should therefore be prepared to make real-time adjustments.

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**This RLS was submitted by:  
Chad Schmidt, Airbase Manager  
Ochoco National Forest**

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