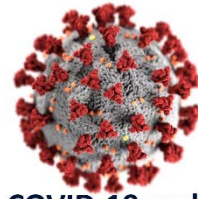


**Event Type:** COVID Response and Assignment Refusal on the Hyndman Fire

**Date:** April 23-24, 2020

**Location:** Blaine County, Idaho



**COVID-19 and Fire Season 2020 Lessons**  
For the latest on COVID-19 visit [CDC.gov/COVID19](https://www.cdc.gov/COVID19) 

## Responding to a Fire Located in a National Hotspot for COVID-19

By Matt Filbert, Zone Fire Management Officer  
Sawtooth National Forest

*The focus of this RLS is to look at the issue from a psychological and thought process based-perspective to help firefighters think about how the pandemic may affect their perceptions and reasoning.*

This RLS is a synthesis of conversations with firefighters, observations of behaviors throughout the operational periods, as well as discussion and comments from an After Action Review conducted on April 24. Many lessons learned over the course of the Hyndman Fire were physical actions that could be done differently. Many of such COVID mitigation actions have already been addressed in other recently documented AARs from other incidents.

Therefore, the focus of this RLS is to look at the issue from a psychological and thought process based-perspective to help firefighters think about how the pandemic may affect their perceptions and reasoning.

There is likely going to be an overwhelming amount of information flowing forth in the coming weeks and months regarding how COVID-19 is affecting firefighters and the management of wildland fire. Because processing all of this information would be an overwhelming task, choosing what is relevant to you will be important.

It is our hope that this RLS will prove beneficial to you as you enter this unusual fire season.

### 1. Observations and Things to Consider

#### Address the Elephant in the Room Early

Many firefighters on the Hyndman Fire agreed that the Incident Command Post setting was awkward. Some people worked to maintain social distance while others demonstrated no apparent concern with COVID as they extended their hand to shake or moved into others' personal bubble.

#### County Hit Especially Hard by COVID-19

On April 23, multiple municipal fire departments along with Bureau of Land Management and U.S. Forest Service resources responded to a wildland fire in Blaine County, Idaho. Private land, structures and BLM lands were threatened. Approximately 50 firefighters were on scene for the first operational period. The next day, federal resources continued containment efforts with 30 firefighters.

Blaine County, Idaho, has been hit especially hard by COVID-19. The County Emergency Operations Center was activated on March 13, followed by an "Isolation Order" on March 21. A state-wide "Stay At Home Order" followed shortly thereafter.

Approximately 470 Blaine County residents have been positively diagnosed with COVID-19. While this number is not excessively large, on a per capita basis, Blaine County has the 5<sup>th</sup> highest rate of COVID cases in the country at over 2,100 cases/100,000 people—making this location a state and national hotspot for COVID-19.

The IC Trainee adapted well and the following day briefed incoming resources with a COVID message that was summarized as follows:

*“The people that we interact with all have their own personal values, perspectives, experiences and beliefs regarding the pandemic. For some, the effects of this virus hit very close to home. For others, it may seem like a distant issue.*

*We must respect people’s comfort level and what they need to do to protect themselves, their families and their co-workers.*

*For some, the way that we interact with people today is contrary to a lifetime of developing one’s social skills. This can be awkward at times. People may feel like an outsider, they may feel disrespected, they may feel upset. It is important for all to recognize our own behavior and how that can be perceived by someone else.”*

If necessary, take some time to address the pandemic from the personal values perspective. It may help you with communication throughout the incident.

### **Our Capacity to Accomplish Tasks may be Diminished this Year**

Regardless of how one feels about the pandemic, it likely will occupy—and has already occupied—some amount of our time and thoughts this season. The way others are dealing with COVID may affect you as well.

Give yourself an extra margin of safety in your decision making to allow for COVID-related inefficiencies and distractions. Consider assessing yourself personally, as well as at the module and unit level, as to just what level of capacity you are at going into this season.

When asked this level of capacity question on the Hyndman Fire, most people suggested that they were at about 75% capacity, exclusive of the “normal” early fire season lack of preparation.

### **Accepting or Declining Assignments**

At this point in time, we are supportive of employee’s decisions about accepting or declining assignments. Will we have that opinion/position later in the 2020 season?

It’s important to support our employee’s decisions, as the pandemic is similar to other risks that anyone has the right to refuse.

### **Statements from employees when asked why they declined the Hyndman Fire assignment:**

#### **Avoiding Areas with Community Spread**

*“I think for me the biggest factor to decline the assignment is the lack of direction and erring on the side of caution with all of our seasonal workforce coming on in the next two weeks. We are asking our seasonals if they have been exposed to COVID-19 or if they have been in an area where community spread is prevalent. If they have, we are going to be asking them to quarantine for 14 days.*



*Multiple municipal fire departments along with Bureau of Land Management and U.S. Forest Service resources responded to the Hyndman Fire in Blaine County, Idaho.*



*The Hyndman Fire threatened private land, structures and BLM lands.*

*With preparing for the season and needing to be able to finish things in the office and be prepared for our temp workforce, I wasn't willing to increase my risk of having to quarantine because I had an exposure enroute to or on the Hyndman Fire.*

*I accept that this is going to be a risk as the fire season progresses and that my module will go to where the need is. I felt I owe it to my module to be taking the preseason precautions I am asking them to take—avoiding areas with community spread.”*

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#### **Not Appealing:**

##### **Going to What is Basically 'Ground Zero' for the Pandemic**

*“When I got the call Thursday evening asking if I wanted to go a fire, as soon I realized it was up north in Blaine County I was fairly apprehensive to accept it. I'm sure at some point I, or someone I know here, will get COVID-19 this fire season. But that doesn't mean I want to get it and going to what is basically 'Ground Zero' for the pandemic in Idaho wasn't very appealing.*

*Also, a thought I had later after the first phone call was: 'Wouldn't I have to quarantine/isolate as I would have just come from a county hardest hit by all this?'*

*Based off the questions we're asking the seasonals before their report date, I would think we'd have to make sure that we didn't potentially contaminate the office or our fellow coworkers. With seasonals coming on in one pay period, the prospect of potentially still being in quarantine/isolation for their first day(s) wouldn't be acceptable in my view.”*

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#### **My Personal Risk was a Factor:**

##### **I Have Two Kids Who Frequently Visit Their Grandparents**

*“The Hyndman Fire was in Blaine County, which is where the pandemic first occurred in Idaho and where some of the first stay-at-home and shutdown orders were issued. Blaine County also had one of the highest per capita virus cases in the nation within the first few weeks of the outbreak. (Source: Idaho Statesman 04/08/2020, “Idaho's Blaine County has more coronavirus cases per capita than Italy and New York City”).*

*The information that was given to me was that the fire was in a subdivision and they needed a falling team to go through the area. In my mind, I had pictured myself walking through a community, falling trees on private property in a 'Hot Zone' for the virus.*

*I felt that potential exposure to myself from a gas station fuel nozzle or having to sleep in a local park would be a higher risk to myself and outweighs my response—traveling from a farther distance—than closer resources.*

*I also have two kids that frequently visit grandparents who are in the high-risk category for the illness. My personal risk seemed to be more of a factor for me in my decision. I believe if there was a fire in an open area and not in a location where the city was not heavily covered by the media I would be willing to respond.”*

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### **We Should Stick to 'One Module Family Guide'**

*“Anyone who was showing up without an apparatus was being staged and would be configured into needed positions assisting other crews. Module A employee and Module B employee were tasked as a Falling Team. Module C employee, Module D employee, and Module E employee were placed on Engine 631 to make an Engine Module.*

*The blending of resources goes against the 'One Module Family Isolation' term. Being a different type of season due to current events, I feel that we should be sticking to this 'One Module Family Guide'.”*

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## **2. Noteworthy Comments**

- ❖ Concern about stopping anywhere in Blaine County re: gas, bathrooms, grocery store.
- ❖ On the fireline, everyone agreed there was really no concern about COVID. It felt very good and “normal” to be on the line.
- ❖ One Forest Service firefighter, who is also an ambulance driver in Blaine County, noted that she put an N95 style dust mask on at the fire station and connected the oxygen saturation sensor to her finger. Her O<sub>2</sub> saturation was 93%. Upon removing the mask, it went to 98%. Though this is anecdotal, it may warrant some research and possibly reevaluation of wearing N95 masks or similar face coverings. Is 93% a concern in the medical community regarding driving/piloting/working?
- ❖ Several resources have contemplated becoming more self-sufficient when going on assignments. MREs are not a healthy option. Fresh food, cook stoves and sanitation are the primary items needed. Does fresh food purchasing have limitations? What does sanitation look like? Is there funding for self-sufficient supplies?
- ❖ Forest Service employees said the agency is doing the best it can, and—given the unknowns—having an overly cautious approach is appropriate.

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**This RLS was submitted by:  
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