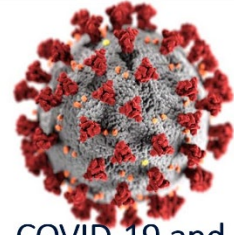


Rapid Lesson Sharing

Event Type: COVID Mitigations
on Three Pacific Northwest Fires

Date: April 16, 2020

Location: Washington State



COVID-19 and
Fire Season 2020 Lessons

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COVID Mitigations on the Porter Creek Fire – Successes and Challenges

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*The intermixing of resources within agency is also being intentionally avoided.
For example, the IA crew module avoided intermixing with the engine
personnel.*

Background

This RLS was developed from information provided by Kurt Ranta, Superintendent of the Baker River Hotshot Crew. It spotlights important insights and lessons into how COVID mitigations were implemented on the Porter Creek Fire—including successes and challenges. These details were provided on the morning of April 16, just a few hours after engagement with the fire.

Resources on the Porter Creek Fire include a mix of Washington State Department of Natural Resources (DNR) and U.S. Forest Service personnel. “We can only confirm the validity of some of these mitigations for Forest Service employees, given that our two agencies made an effort to maintain separation,” explains Superintendent Ranta.

Pre-Fire COVID Mitigations

- To mitigate for social distancing in vehicles, travel to the incident was conducted in more vehicles than are typically used. An example is that Engine 11 chased the engine with their crew cab pickup when they typically—under normal circumstances—wouldn’t do so. Given that no public interaction was anticipated and no stops were made during travel to the incident, no COVID-related PPE was used in travel status.
- Prior to travel, intentional discussions with module leaders occurred concerning continuing social distancing and sanitation measures as much as possible.
- One of the Forest Service crewmembers was purposefully not assigned because of precautionary quarantine due to physical contact with a member of the public earlier this week.

Porter Creek Fire Details

The DNR personnel consist of five two-person engines, five miscellaneous overhead, and three helicopters. The Forest Service personnel currently on the fire consist of one five-person engine, one five-person IHC module, and one four-person IA crew module. Contract resources consist of one dozer operator.

The fire is burning in slash and reprod with heavy fuel loading on a 75 percent slope. Main value at risk is timber. No structures are threatened. Fire activity is low to moderate with moderate operational tempo. Tactics employed are mainly direct in timber edge and reprod.

Initially, physical distancing was a challenge during briefing. Feedback suggests it got better with subsequent smaller briefings and breakouts. On a positive note, this issue was identified on-the-spot and likely led to additional effort to mitigate.

On-Incident Considerations

Successes

- During the morning briefing, the DNR Incident Commander verbally incorporated COVID mitigations and social distancing into the objectives on the fire. He said that the firefighters would do the best they can to maintain social distancing while fighting the fire. For those who arrived after the main briefing, the message was carried forward via individual briefings.
- All resources seemed to come into the fire on the same page regarding the importance of social distancing.
- Tactical assignments were based somewhat on keeping resources separate from each other. For example, to prevent modules intermixing, engines were following well behind hand crew resources.
- Some sanitation of equipment/devices did occur when changing hands—from one person to another. In one instance, an iPad with a map was sanitized before changing hands. (We can only speak for Forest Service use of this practice.)
- Organizationally, the two agencies split management of each other's resources. For example, all Forest Service resources were managed by Forest Service overhead.
- Intermixing of resources within agency is also being intentionally avoided. For example, the IA crew module avoided intermixing with the engine personnel.
- When pulling up to a resource in a vehicle, it was encouraged that people engage from the passenger side window—assuming there was no passenger in that seat. Even so, it was hard to break the habit of people leaning into the open window and putting their hands on the door.
- Meals were pre-packaged dinners and were distributed by one individual.
- Briefing on day two of the fire was split into two agency-specific briefings.
- The DNR was open to implementing “catch and release” strategy and tactics—meaning catch the fire fast as possible in order to get it out quick and downsize/release personnel.
- Another example of shifting from normal strategy was the use of helicopters and hose lays as a replacement for putting in direct hand line around the entire perimeter, where COVID-19 exposure is potentially high.

Challenges

- Given the direct tactics being employed (direct line in heavy fuel loading) and lack of hand crew resources, some intermixing of the IHC and IA crew mods has occurred intentionally, knowing that it compromises the physical separation.
- The sharing of maps caused the huddling of resources and a breach in social distancing due to the small size and limited number of maps and lack of knowledge on “air dropping” maps from one device to another. Consider having quick access to a face-covering for this type of scenario.
- Initially, physical distancing was a challenge during briefing. Feedback suggests it got better with subsequent smaller briefings and breakouts. On a positive note, this issue was identified on-the-spot and led to additional effort to mitigate.

- While establishing and using hose lays, it is very difficult and impractical to avoid contact with hose sections and fittings that haven't been handled by others, especially during complex lays or rapid deployment during Initial Attack. There was concern that leather gloves are not effective PPE against cross-contamination.
- When resources were working around machinery (dozer, chainsaw, helicopter), it was hard to maintain voice contact while maintaining the six-foot separation. Consider having quick access to a face-covering for this type of scenario.

COVID Mitigation Observations from Two More DNR Fires

Reach out to local cooperators before the fire to discuss best practices related to COVID-19 transmission mitigations.

Here are additional insights and revelations from two other current DNR incidents, the Brotherhood Fire and the Giles Road Fire. Both incidents were in Initial Attack phase and were estimated at several acres each.

Brotherhood Fire

- Cloning of radios challenged the social distancing measures. Consider having quick access to a face-covering for this type of scenario.
- Contact with the public and volunteer fire departments occurred. Neither adhered to the same social distancing measures.

Giles Road Fire

- The Forest Service and DNR resources did relatively well at social distancing and not sharing equipment.
- The rural fire department and structure resources on scene did not practice social distancing and shared equipment between departments.

This RLS was submitted by:
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