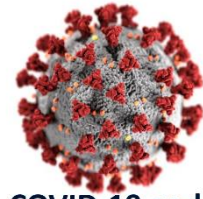




Event Type: Lessons from an Interagency Confirmed COVID-19 Positive Case

Date: August 3, 2020

Location: Montrose Public Lands Center; Montrose, Colo.



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

Lessons from a COVID-19 Positive Employee Incident in an Interagency Environment

The Montrose Public Lands Center (Montrose Complex)—located in Montrose, Colo.—serves employees of the:

- Bureau of Land Management Southwest District,
- Uncompahgre Field Office,
- Southwest Colorado Fire and Aviation Management Unit,
- U.S. Forest Service R2 Grand Mesa, Uncompahgre, and Gunnison National Forests,
- Several BLM State Office employees,
- Occasional multi-agency fire personnel who stage out of the Complex.

On Monday, August 3rd, agency administrators for the BLM and USFS were notified of a single asymptomatic positive case of COVID-19 in an employee who works and was present on the Montrose Complex.

Responding to a COVID Positive Case

Day 1 felt like more of a knee-jerk reaction than a planned event, which was surprising considering that the pandemic has been going on for several months.

There is so much guidance, direction, and information regarding COVID that it is difficult to know where to begin and to find what you need quickly. Actually reading and understanding the content of this information is often put off until the initial time that a positive case occurs. As information is updated and revised, it is difficult to keep up.

A Type 3 Incident Management Team was set-up on the second day following the notification to help coordinate and distribute information regarding the response. During the initial operational periods, some SMEs were inadvertently not notified of the briefings. Preparing an agenda for subsequent calls was recommended.

Establish a small team prior to getting a positive case so the team can begin to establish relationships and prepare for the response.

When a positive case is confirmed, plan for how to manage and expand your response to handle additional cases that may occur.

The situation seemed to stabilize quickly.

Determining level of Exposure

It is critical to determine the level of exposure because this will determine what measures should be taken next regarding quarantine, testing, notification, etc.

It may be difficult for some people to determine their level of exposure to the positive case.

Close contacts are the most critical people to identify first.

Fire resources use the terminology of tiers 1, 2, and 3 to describe different exposure categories. Non-fire resources generally have used the terminology “close contact” and “casual contact.”

While the contact tracing and levels of exposure were being determined, tier 2 and 3 firefighters appreciated being able work away from the office and still be available to go on a fire and get the same hours as if they were in station.

Notifications

For the BLM, some written information (such as postings and emails) pertaining to COVID-19 must have State Office approval prior to dissemination. This can make the timely notification of employees who may have entered Montrose Complex facilities and posting of pertinent information through emails and other written communications more difficult. All-hands meetings were conducted via Microsoft Teams, however, some employees did not feel like they received timely situational information.

It was unclear when and how to notify other bunkhouse residents when a resident was feeling sick. The sick employee has an important role here. While the bunkhouse provides private rooms and bathrooms where isolation can be easily achieved, it does have a common kitchen and eating area. It was determined that the bunkhouse was lightly occupied during the recent case and the resident had informed the only other resident. A higher occupancy rate coupled with a sick resident who is reluctant to share their symptoms with other residents highlights the need to establish clear written protocols and lines of communication.

All-employee contact lists can be difficult to keep up-to-date during the field season when the workforce fluctuates regularly, however, this is an important tool for notifying everyone with time-critical information such as building closures.

Testing

There was confusion on who should get tested and where they should get tested. Employees want better information sharing about who needs to be tested and why. Establishing contacts for each county would help alleviate this confusion.

Differences in BLM vs. FS protocols are confusing.

Rapid testing helped put people more at ease, even if it may have been “too soon” (who really knows if it was too soon anyway).

For some occupations, such as wildland firefighters and law enforcement, a retesting strategy may be appropriate to determine the return to work timeframe for close contacts of a confirmed positive COVID case. Consultation with public health and the testing center is critical. Retesting is not necessarily recommended by all agencies for all occupations, so there may be differences in who gets tested and how long quarantine lasts. Identify testing locations and which locations will retest critical infrastructure workers per “FMB memorandum 20-012b”.

Because an employee could experience extended time away from work or miss a fire assignment, there may be a disincentive to acknowledge close contact with other employees or to report symptoms or illness. The rapid test (with same day results) appears to offer a sense of expediency to employees for quickly determining what the disruption will be.

Who should be tested?

- Individuals who have symptoms of COVID and for whom a test is recommended by a Public Health Official or a medical provider

- Close contacts of an individual who has tested positive for COVID and is recommended for a test by a Public Health Official or medical provider

When should someone be tested?

- Testing immediately after exposure isn't helpful because it may be too early in the incubation period and there isn't enough viral material for the test to detect.
- While it's a good idea to wait at about seven days to be tested after the date of exposure, some people may not become ill for up to 14 days. For that reason, people who believe they have been exposed to COVID-19 should minimize their contact with others for 14 days from the date of their exposure, even if they test negative before the full two weeks have passed.
- During this time, the individual should quarantine and be on the lookout for symptoms.

When is testing required for employees?

- If an employee is in travel status or assigned to an incident, they may be required to be tested if they are experiencing symptoms while performing their duties or if they have had direct exposure while performing their work assignments to an individual who tests positive for COVID-19.

Cleaning

The cleaning service contracted to clean and disinfect the facilities showed up immediately after being contacted and without prior notification. While timeliness of services is critical to ensuring continuity of operations, scheduling around and ensuring that facilities were unoccupied during the cleaning process was made more difficult as a result.

Several people wondered how the office was cleaned because it looked the same. (This is a product of info not getting passed to the people on what exactly was being done).

Social Distancing Practices/Administrative Controls

Social distancing among the local BLM/USFS engine modules at the Montrose Campus was effective in keeping more employees from being identified as close contacts.

Utilize staging areas supplied with porta potties, hand washing, and other logistical needs for off district fire crews so they aren't impacting local office buildings. (At the Montrose office, off district crews were using the office bathrooms and ice machines. Employees made note that other stations [Dolores] had porta potties and hand washing stations set up for off district crews.)

What do we want to do differently? Action Items

1. Share one page information sheets ("Responding to COVID for BLM Managers", "Responding to COVID for BLM Fire", and "If You Are Sick") and lessons learned with relevant staff.
2. Establish team for the next COVID response on campus including both BLM and FS safety managers as initial points of contacts.
3. Share and update Norwood Ranger District bunkhouse protocol for use at Montrose Complex Bunkhouse.

This RLS was submitted by:
Type 3 COVID Response Team

Do you have a Rapid Lesson to share?

[Share Your Lessons](#)