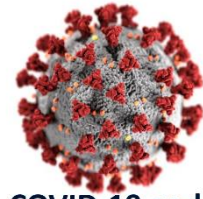


Rapid Lesson Sharing

Event Type: Fire Information Office
Challenges and Resolutions

Date: June 2020

Location: Bush Fire, Arizona
Fire Information Office—at ICP,
Remote and Virtual



**COVID-19 and
Fire Season 2020 Lessons**
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PIO Challenges and Resolutions in the COVID-19 Era

By Michelle Fidler
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Southwest Area Type 1 IMT #1

Narrative

This was the Southwest Area Type 1 IMT #1's second deployment during the COVID-19 pandemic. The Bush Fire is currently the fifth largest wildfire in Arizona history. The team also managed the nearby Central Fire. We assumed command from a Type 2 IMT and transferred command back to a Type 3 IMT.

We inherited three several onsite PIOs from the Type 2 IMT and brought three incoming team PIOs which replaced their three outgoing team PIOs onsite. One additional PIO that we had ordered to work virtually arrived onsite and was integrated into ICP operations.

We were limited by space at ICP. In order to maintain social distancing, we asked PIOs to work from home or hotel rooms vs. the ICP office as much as possible when not in the field for media interviews, trapline, etc.

We had three virtual branches, the leads of each reported directly to the leads. We had a media/phone branch, an odd combination but it worked as there was overlap in coordinating messaging and helped in managing span of control. Our community branch oversaw trapline—both physical and virtual. And our tech tools branch handled Inciweb, FireNet, and social media. The leads and team trainee handled VIP visits and virtual community meetings.

We had approximately 28 staff at the peak of operations, including an American Sign Language (ASL) interpreter, a Captioning Access Real Time (CART) captioner, and a Technical Specialist (THSP) Virtual Operations Support Team (VOST). We had 14 trainees; five PIOF(t), five PIO2(t), and four PIO1(t).

What are the Lessons?

“Focus on what we NEED to do and work up to what we WANT to do.” – Michelle Fidler

Challenge: The pace of injects did not let up.

Managing information in a new hybrid on-site/remote/virtual environment, using new tech tools, while working in a COVID-19 environment, during an election year, in 2020, a year of unrelenting challenges kept us on our toes.

Challenges involve much more discussion and deliberation, as there's no precedent for the situations we're facing. We dropped a lot of balls on doing things we would traditionally do, but had to live with the reality that we could only do so much and move on.

Resolution: Focus on what we need to do and work up to what we want to do.

Our first priority was reaching out to evacuees. From there we reached out to local communities bordering the fire, then expanded our virtual trapline to ensure we were reaching communities affected by smoke. We had conversations with the IC, PAOs, and Agency Administrators about what the ask was and how best we could meet the need.

The administrivia (CTRs, demob, etc.) ate our lunch. When established systems proved problematic (finance was struggling with FireNet challenges just as we were), we had to prioritize ensuring we supported finance in tracking CTRs and following-up on demob status to take care of our staff.

“We’re trying to support the right skills, in the right place, at the right time.”

– Michelle Fidler

Challenge: The current ordering system does not adequately support ordering PIOs for virtual assignments.

We experienced a wide range of inconsistencies on verbiage on resource orders, dispatch and PIO understanding of resource order verbiage and expectations. When resources ordered for a virtual assignment travel onsite it presents unnecessary complexities in inefficiencies. When resource order language is inconsistent with direction from the NWCG Standards for Interagency Incident Business Management we have concerns about individuals’ and home units’ support for virtual assignments.

Resolution: We name requested key leadership positions and many other personnel in an attempt to be able to facilitate being able to recruit necessary skillsets and provide expectations for a virtual assignment in advance.

The essential pieces to try to get included on the resource order are “Reporting location: virtual” and “Call PIO (insert name and #) for instructions.”

“Focus on process over products.” – Michelle Fidler

Challenge: It was a challenge to provide quality training opportunities virtually and some tasks were not possible virtually (ie. escort media, etc.).

However, we were also able to facilitate some innovative training opportunities. This assignment also challenged our PIOs to work beyond the scope of a regular trainee assignment in terms of requiring them to incorporate FireNet, Inciweb, Social Media, Zoom, etc. which fall outside the scope of NWCG training and taskbooks but are integral to our operations.

Resolution: A key component to our success was leveraging local resources as part of our operations, as they were able to help orient our virtual staff and ensure we could address community concerns.

Figuring out specific skills when PIOs are in-briefed and then determine who needs access to what systems. Focus on the systems—especially if dealing with more than one fire or incident.

“Be prepared to perpetually log in to FireNet.” – Michelle Fidler

Challenge: The minutia of FireNet (requesting accounts, requesting access for PIOs, approving access to documents, etc.) was a significant time sink and distraction for the Lead PIO.

There is a need to have communication systems in place before we mobilize and the ability to delegate minutia tasks so the lead can focus on the big picture and PIOs are able to obtain access and help in a timely manner to ensure overall efficiencies.

FireNet limitations for "Guest" accounts and distribution lists continues to be a challenge. More people were defaulted to be added to the fire’s email accounts (2020.bush@FireNet.gov & 2020.central@FireNet.gov) than who actually use it.

Resolution: Figured out ways to work within the system but also make recommendations for the next incident(s) on how the system can evolve and grow to meet the needs of a Type 1 incident.

We worked with subject matter experts (a PIO who is on the FireNet board) and ITSS incident personnel who support the FireNet helpdesk to identify challenges, help orient and train our personnel, and discuss constructive suggestions for alternative practices moving forward.

***“We’re building the plane as we fly it.” – Brad Pitassi,
Deputy Public Information Officer, Southwest Area Type 1 IMT #1***

Challenge: Overcoming the traditional in-person mindset.

Several of our PIOs were frustrated adapting mindset and practices in virtual and COVID-19 environment. At least one said this is their first virtual assignment and it will be their last as they understand the importance of our function, but missed the comradery of traditional assignments.

Resolution: We worked to help assist our staff in getting access and learning FireNet, Zoom, etc. and trying to find innovative ways of engaging virtual staff and adapting to frustrations, encouraging outside the box thinking, etc.

While some PIOs feel like they are missing out not being onsite, it’s important to understand onsite operations are significantly different this year as well.

“Our metrics for success are totally flipped. Normally we’d value the number of contacts on trapline. In the COVID-19 environment minimizing contacts is essential.” – Brad Pitassi

Challenge: Physical trapline and desire for information in the COVID-era.

Even though the PIO shop decreased its physical footprint in the COVID-era, the number of public doesn’t change and so the number of inquiries jump significantly online as there is still a desire for information.

Resolution: Take the staff that would be on a physical trapline and move them over to the digital side.

PIOs that would have normally been on trapline assisted in responding to the increase in email and social media questions.

“You don’t have to be an expert, but you do have to use FireNet.” – Michelle Fidler

Challenge: Access to FireNet and training for FireNet

Information Officers arriving on the incident had various levels of experience working with the new FireNet platform (which recently transitioned to a new platform that most PIOs are unfamiliar with). In addition, due to the backlog in assigning accounts to users, some arrived to the incident without access, limiting their productivity and requiring the use of guest accounts.

An additional issue with FireNet is the requirement to re-verify credentials so frequently. There is no good time to login and keep the access up and running during busy times of the incident. Especially when fire activity is high and communication is imperative.

Resolution: All PIOs obtained FireNet by the end of the incident.

However, it would have been much more helpful had they all had them initially. Additional work needs to be conducted to create user accounts for PIOs that are already Red Carded, rather than waiting until they arrive on an incident. A preseason requirement should be to have the sponsoring agency conduct the necessary technology security training for individuals and profiles should be created for those users.

“When working virtual, stay in your home time zone on your CTRs.” – Finance

Challenge: Staff working across multiple time zones.

Resource orders were filled for information officers working virtually in five time zones. Ranging from the east coast to Alaska, it was difficult to maintain awareness of the time shift for staff. Normally, when someone arrives on the incident coming from the east coast, they arrive late in the afternoon/evening and adjust their biological clock at the start of the next shift. With no travel involved, we needed to be aware of folks working in different time zones. Finance advised PIOs should stay on their home time zone when working virtually.

Resolution: Everyone synched their clocks to “fire time” and made sure to refer to events and meetings as occurring in the time zone for the fires.

Operational efficiency could have used the time zones to allow for some individuals located farther east to start shift early and have products available for others. The daily update or media calls/interview for the major networks could be conducted. Individuals in western time zones could answer calls later into the evening. Better scheduling of staff needs should occur. Not everyone needs to be at each meeting—as long as situational awareness is maintained and work is being accomplished.

“The most important thing we do is taking care of ourselves and each other.

– Michelle Fidler

Challenge: Incident-within-an-incident plan for remote/virtual employees.

While on a typical incident, a protocol exists for dealing with an incident-within-an-incident (IWI). However, what if the IWI is due to something that effects a virtual employee? On this incident while two PIOs were on a video chat, the one that was located in California experienced a 5.8 magnitude earthquake and took shelter under their desk. What if that employee had been injured, what are the notifications needed to have that reported back to the Information staff and the IMT? What if the video chat was not going and nobody heard from that PIO for a period of time, how often do we need to check in on remote staff, and by what mechanisms do we keep in touch? Of note, later the same day a second PIO experienced a 4.8 magnitude earthquake that evening in Idaho.

Resolution: When filling out a check-in form for the incident, ensure that the Lead PIO has easy access to Emergency Contact information from Plans, but also make sure that the remote employee has given the incident contact information to someone trusted that is outside of their household, perhaps a supervisor, or agency sponsor.

Yes, it can all be obtained from IROC (Interagency Resource Ordering Capability) and dispatch centers, but there could be a significant lag time for making contact after an emergency. Encourage PIOs to make sure they have updated emergency contact info on file with their host unit. Sample emergency contact info forms that should be updated and filed with agency contacts pre-season are available in the [Preparedness Guide for Firefighters and their Families](#).

“Check in now lives up to a taskbook challenge.” – Brad Pitassi

Challenge: A need for having one Point of Contact for incoming PIOs.

In the special needs section of the resource orders, the resources were given a PIO point of contact phone number for the lead and deputy PIOs. Note: this was the intent, but IROC dropped most of the requested language and most PIOs did not receive this information. However, even when incoming PIOs reached out it was difficult to reach lead or deputy directly in a timely manner due to the complexity of their positions. Example: The Lead PIO had to text a dispatch center during a planning meeting to try to cancel an east coast PIO’s flight plans when there was confusion about what a virtual assignment was.

Resolution: The lead delegated in-briefing to Branch leads.

However, in the future we will try to identify one PIO, who is not the lead or deputy, who can track resource order requests, inbrief PIOs, help ensure they are checked in with check in and training specialist, track their info within the info section, etc. Ideally, this point of contact would also track on daily CTRs and demob as well. This is not a fun job, as it is primarily administrative, but streamlining the administrivia and ensuring consistency is essential to overall success.

“Patience is key. There are good people trying their best trying to make broken systems work.” – Michelle Fidler

Challenge: Forms are not designed for the virtual world.

The update of documents and forms has been occurring in the fire community for years, but some of the forms that are used need to be updated for a virtual world and allow for digital signatures. CTR, Performance Evaluations, Trainee Documentation/Taskbooks are just some of the documents that need to be set up for digital signatures.

Resolution:

For some forms, like thank you request forms, we were able to convert them to digital Microsoft Teams forms. The IMT also utilized electronic CTR forms, however these continued to be problematic as oftentimes once signed and e-mailed, the signature would remain but the time info would disappear or vice versa. In some cases we reverted to printing out copies, signing them in ink, then scanning them to resend. Naming conventions were also important, especially when sending CTRs, including listing the O# and CTR date in the subject line when sending to finance. We also printed out taskbooks, signed in ink, then scanned and sent, however there would be efficiencies if digital signatures could be accepted in the future.

This RLS was submitted by:
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