



Covering Wildfire

In Virginia

A GUIDE FOR NEWS MEDIA

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This guide is dedicated to the firefighters throughout Virginia who risk their lives protecting Virginia’s Natural Resources and presented as a public service for media in Virginia and other interested organizations by the Virginia Department of Forestry (VDOT) For more information, please visit our web site at www.dof.state.va.us

Introduction to Getting Your Story

Wildfires and other catastrophes are major news events and attract considerable media attention. This is particularly true for those areas in Virginia with smaller markets where stories about wildfire often lead on the broadcast news and make headlines in the local papers. The public definitely has a right to information about such incidents; however, access to incidents is often complicated by the emergency nature of what is going on.

The purpose of this brochure is to help you better understand the organization, policies and terminology associated with suppression of major wildland fires. This information will help you cover your story more easily, so that you can keep your audiences better informed. This brochure also introduces you to the major fire organizations in Virginia responsible for the suppression of wildland fires.

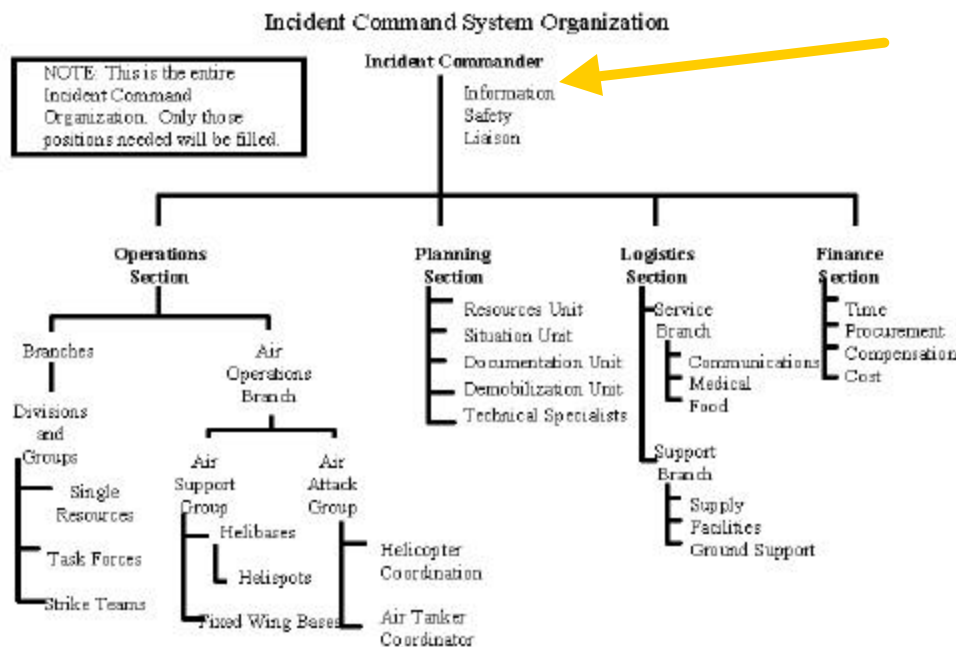
The public agencies involved in the suppression of wildland fires invite media coverage. In fact, these agencies recognize that news media coverage of wildland fires is an integral part of keeping the public informed and spreading the wildland fire prevention message. Our biggest concern is that everyone approaches wildland fires safely and in a manner which does not interfere with emergency efforts.

The principles discussed in this brochure also apply to other emergency or incident management situations that involve federal and state land management agencies operating under what is called the **National Interagency Incident Command System (ICS)**. More on this valuable tool coming up soon. Read on!

Interagency Cooperation

There is no way one agency can fight all the wildland fires that crop up in Virginia. For the past several years, the land management and fire fighting agencies on many levels of government have worked together under a very carefully coordinated system to fight fires as they arise.

The Incident Command System



Resource mobilization for larger fires in Virginia originates at the **Virginia Interagency Coordination Center** in Charlottesville. Housed at the Virginia Department of Forestry Central Office, there is one full time coordinator at the center. Additional help arrives on-demand as fire needs dictate.

In addition to local resources, VIC Center can also draw upon fire fighting resources from throughout the country through the Southern Area Coordination Center (SACC), who in turn can draw resources through the [National Interagency Fire Center](#) (NIFC), the national interagency command center located in Boise. When wildfires are burning in several parts of the country, or when local fires become increasingly complex, NIFC can dispatch specialized teams to help local firefighters plan and coordinate their resources.

Who to Contact when a Fire Breaks

When a fire erupts in Virginia, the first reaction is to jump in the van and follow the smoke. Sometimes, however, that's not always the best option. For one thing, a smoke column may not be a wildland fire. For another, if it *is* a wildland fire, you should thoroughly check things out beforehand to make sure you're not running headlong into a dangerous situation. The story is important, but your safety is our primary concern. After all, you can't tell your story from the back of an ambulance, or worse, from the morgue!

So, when the fire breaks out, follow this quick checklist before you run:

<p>1. Is it a wildland fire?</p>	<p>Virginia derives much of its economy from agriculture. Farmers found out long ago that the quickest way to break down leftover organic matter after harvest is to burn it. As the season gets later, agriculture fires (commonly called "ag burns") become more common. <i>These fires are generally well contained and burn out within a short time.</i> Fire Prevention officers work all year to help local farmers and private property owners to practice safe fire behavior when burning fields, ditches, or debris.</p>
<p>2. It's a wildland fire! Who do I call?</p>	<p>If you're the first person to see it, go ahead and report it by calling 911, your local fire department or the nearest Virginia Department of Forestry office. www.dof.state.va.us</p>
<p>3. Who is my main source for information on the fire?</p>	<p>If it's already been reported and the Virginia Department of Forestry has responded to it, the next person you want to talk to is the local Fire Information Officer (FIO). Often the dispatchers are busy coordinating resources; each Region has Information Officers to help handle information requests like yours. These information officers are most likely local Forestry Department public affairs specialists. The FIO's job is to collect complete and accurate information about the incident's size, cause, status, people and equipment involved, and respond to matters of general interest. Although the FIO is usually on staff at the Dispatch Center, he or she may report to the Incident Command Center at the fire if it is close to an urban area or of significant size.</p>

<p>4. Who else should I call?</p>	<p>If the fire is particularly complex, sometimes a special overhead team will be called in to help manage the fire. Sometimes this team will also have a Fire Information Officer (FIO) on staff.</p>
<p>5. What if a FIO is not available? What next?</p>	<p>In the unlikely event that a FIO is unavailable, some information might be available through the IC, or Incident Commander. The Incident Commander manages all aspects of a fire, including tracking firefighters, the fire's growth or movement, and requesting additional resources. However, you can imagine that this is a busy person! If the IC is unavailable at the moment to talk about the fire, you can bet an Information Officer is not far away.</p>
<p>6. Is there any way I can help?</p>	<p>Occasionally, the Information Officer may request that the news media help with sending out information the public needs to know about. Frequently the public, curious about all the excitement, will venture close to the fire lines for a better look. Often the added traffic can block engine access to the fire, or nearby cars may reduce a plane's ability to drop retardant from the air.</p> <p>The media plays a very important role as an information resource to help local residents stay informed... AND SAFE.</p>

Bottom Line

The Fire Information Officers are there to help you get the best story you can. Sometimes they may limit your access to the fire because of safety reasons, but for the most part, they are there to help you avoid the "run-around." They may escort you to the scene of the fire, and can also help arrange interviews with firefighters and the Incident Commander. The Information Officer should always be your "first call" person when a fire breaks.

How to Get to the Fire Line!

There is one overall rule for covering wildland fire stories: **SAFETY FIRST!**

As a common sense rule, nothing will be allowed to jeopardize the safety of the news media or those involved with suppression activities. The Fire Information Officer will explain to you the rationale for any specific access restrictions. If you want to go out to the fire line, you'll be advised of the danger. You will be discouraged from going off by yourself. In some locations, the Fire Information Officer or other responsible official will escort you to the line. Usually, there are areas you can safely go and see the action.

Although no physical test is required, the Incident Commander may deny access to any individual who appears to be at risk if exposed to hazardous conditions on the fire line, or who may be a risk to others involved in managing the fire. Denial of access is usually the exception, though, and not the rule.

Here are some other things to consider before going out to the fire line:

1. **Location.** Access to wildland fires in Virginia can be easy or difficult, depending on the location and availability of access roads. In some remote locations, access by non-emergency personnel may be limited to foot travel or four-wheel drive. Some wilderness locations do not allow motorized access at all. The key to finding the fire is by getting in contact with the Information Officer before you start chasing smoke columns.

2. **Personal Protective Equipment.** All firefighters are required to wear personal protective equipment while out on the line. You are no different. Most of today's synthetic clothes are not fire retardant, and some may actually be harmful to you if a fire got too close to you. Likewise, some hairsprays and makeup may be **flammable** if you got in close proximity to a fire.

Again, SAFETY FIRST!

Today's personal protective equipment worn by firefighters is designed to ensure safety, and must be worn by all persons at or near the fire line. Sometimes personal protective gear will be available for your use at the scene. This will include:

- A hardhat
- Nomex fire resistant pants and shirt
- Gloves
- An emergency fire shelter and instructions on how to use it, and
- An escort to the fire line when needed.

If you don't have these at your place of work, the Fire Information Officer can issue you the clothing on a temporary basis. You will need to provide your own leather boots (no sneakers, hightops, dress shoes allowed), and cotton undergarments (synthetics are more combustibile or tend to melt to skin when exposed to high temperatures).

How About a Plane Ride?

One question that is frequently asked is "Can we get a ride up in one of your planes for some aerial shots?" The answer is **NO** – by Federal regulation only persons who are essential for the mission are allowed on these flights. On rare occasions, a media flight will be organized to allow reporters to view fires. Seating on these flights is limited and will be divided between representatives of various media groups. Your best way of getting aerial coverage is to contract a local charter service or flight operation. This method also has limitations, as airspace may be restricted in the area around and approaching the fire for safety reasons. Any aerial access to a fire must be cleared in advance. (Talk to your pilot about FAA flight restrictions under 91.137a.) Pre-approved flyovers can usually be arranged, but they must be coordinated with the Incident Commander first. This is something the Fire Information Officer can help you in arranging. He or she will coordinate your flight with the IC and Air Operations.



Other Parts to the Story

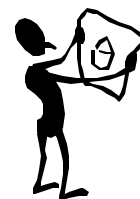
There are numerous angles to follow when reporting a wildland fire beyond the simple facts of the fire. Here are some ideas:



Detection. While many fires are man-made, some are naturally caused. The Virginia Department of Forestry and its partners use a variety of methods to find fires. Some are simple, like a toll-free cell phone call. Others are very complex, like using infrared satellite imagery to find hot spots, mapping locations and fire perimeters using the Global Positioning System, or detecting potential fires with a sophisticated lightning detection system.

Logistics. Getting people and resources to a fire is no easy task. Fires can break any time, day or night, and VDOF uses a small army of people to get equipment and firefighters to the scene. Their work continues even after the fires are "out" to get people and equipment home and the bills paid.

Planning. The Planning Section of the fire collects and evaluates the latest information on the fire, evaluates suppression strategies and shift plans, and distributes information on the fire to other sections of the Incident Command System. This function may be located in the VDOF Dispatch Center or at fire site depending on the situation.

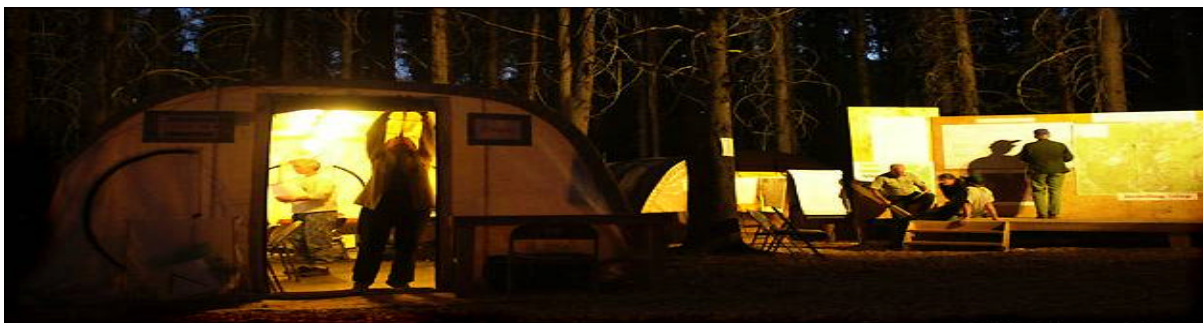


The Camp. Fire camps are often small communities within themselves. The men and women who are our firefighters can range in age from 18 to 60+ years old, come from all different nationalities and backgrounds, and generally work 12-hour shifts. Fire camps may contain as many as 500 firefighters, depending on the size and complexity of the fires.

Services within the camp also vary in size depending on the number of people involved. If a base camp has been established, a media representative can usually find an Information Officer to help. The Information Officer will orient you, the reporter, to what facilities and services are available, like:

- Access to team members for interviews
- Maps, shift plans, special interest items and general information
- Contacts or coordination with local law enforcement, security personnel, or government officials
- Access to telephones or other media services
- First Aid or medical needs
- Sanitation facilities and wash area

On a case-by-case basis, they may also help with ground or air transportation, food service, shower services, and overnight accommodations.





Fire Prevention. The Virginia Department of Forestry has had a very active Fire Prevention program, especially in locations outside cities and towns near public lands. Many serious wildland fires are caused by the careless acts of people. The news media is especially valuable in making the public aware of potentially dangerous fire situations, the conditions that contribute to wildland fires, and what can be done to prevent fires.

Rehabilitation. Now that the fire's out, what next? There may be many reasons we would choose to rehabilitate a burned area: to reduce wind erosion, to prevent the invasion of cheatgrass or noxious weeds, or to prevent damage to water quality, among others. Rehabilitation can include reseeding an area with native or non-native vegetation, smoothing or removing berms in fire line roads, protecting stream channels and soils, or other activities. A team of specialists from the local forestry department is usually assigned after a fire to determine what rehabilitation, if any, needs to be done. Sometimes the plan is developed and implemented while the fire is still burning.

Tactics. Aircraft are one of the tools used to fight the fire, and often many different types of aircraft are used. Many are helicopters that transport small amounts of people or equipment to remote areas. Some are large tankers filled with retardant, a chemical mixture added to water and designed to slow a fire's progress. The retardant is usually a fertilizer-based mixture that's used to slow the rate of spread and cool the flames. Once the fire is out, the fertilizer in the retardant will help spur plant growth. These are just a few of the many tactics firefighters may use.



Causes of Wildland Fires

Records indicate that people cause most of Virginia's wildfires. Virginia is growing more rapidly than many other states, and its population has doubled in the last 45 years. People are moving into residential developments in forested areas, and there is an increased use of the forests for recreational uses. All this increases the risk of wildfires and requires continued fire prevention and protection activities.

In any given year, the number of fires and the cause of those fires change because it directly influenced by environmental conditions. The following table indicates the historic average of number of fires by cause for an "average" year.

Cause	Average Fires Per Year
Smoking	95
Camping	15
Equipment Use	100
Debris Burning	500
Railroad	25
Children	110
Arson	165
Lightning	35

Virginia's Forest Fire Laws

Virginia's forest fire laws are designed and have been successful over the years in protecting the forest resources of the Commonwealth. The Department of Forestry's Special Forest Wardens, commissioned by the Governor, enforce these fire laws. These laws address fire issues such as liability for escaped fires, responsibility for unattended fires near flammable material, failure to take proper care and precaution when burning, and various statutes pertinent to maliciously and intentionally set fires. The 4PM Burning Law has historically served as a successful fire prevention tool in protecting Virginia's forest resources as evidenced by the state's low fire occurrence as compared to other southern states. The following web site will give you complete information on all forest fire laws in Virginia.

www.dof.state.va.us/fire/firelaw.htm

Frequently Asked Questions

Q: How are wildfires put out?

A: You need three things to keep a fire going: fuel, oxygen, and heat. The total fire suppression effort removes one or more of these necessary ingredients. For example, fire lines remove vegetation - a fire's access to fuel. The fire is sometimes smothered in dirt to remove its oxygen supply. Water and retardant may be used to cool flames and remove heat.

Q: What's the difference between "Containment" of a fire and "Controlling" a fire?

A: A fire is not considered "controlled" until it is all the way out. Until then, firefighters work toward "containing" the fire. Here is one way to think of it: Think of a container -- say, a mason jar. A fire is contained when it's all "bottled in," like in a container. The fire may still be burning, but if a distinct fire line is built around the entire perimeter so that there is no chance for the fire to escape or spot over outside the line, then the firefighters declare the fire "contained." After containing the fire, the next step is to get it under control -- that is, make sure it is **dead out** -- no hot spots, no floating embers, nothing that will flare up again if a breeze should come along.

Q: What is the difference between a "prescribed fire" and a "wildfire?"

A: A *wildfire* is an unplanned or unwanted fire. Such a fire may be a threat to resources, structures, or people. Despite the cause, these fires are suppressed using strategies and tactics appropriate to the threat. A *prescribed fire* is one that is started intentionally by qualified, trained personnel. There are many reasons why the government would choose to start a fire intentionally, such as reducing the number of large, old trees to give ground vegetation a chance to grow and improve habitat for wildlife. Another reason may be to reduce the amount of fuel that would otherwise burn in a large, catastrophic wildfire. Like a doctor's prescription, there are specific conditions that must be met before the agency lights a prescribed fire, including favorable temperatures, low winds, and optimum humidity. Other precautions also include a well-defined containment area to minimize the possibility of the fire escaping. Even if most of these conditions are in place, the supervisors in charge of igniting the fire may stop the ignition for a variety of reasons. If they determine that weather conditions are too unstable, that the lines are not sufficiently defined, if enough fire fighting equipment and people are not available, if there is a threat to public or firefighter safety, or for many other reasons. If these conditions are not in place, just as if the doctor's prescription is not followed carefully, the "remedy" may prove just as harmful as the problem.

Q: What is "mop-up?"

A: Once the fire stops its spread, firefighters begin the task of mop-up. This involves extinguishing, cooling or removing burning material along or near the control line to reduce further spread of the fire.

Fire Season

Fire “season” in Virginia peaks traditionally in the Spring and again during the Fall of each year. The Spring season normally starts the latter part of February and continues through the end of April. Our Fall season runs from the middle of October till early December. Fires can and do occur throughout the year, not just during these peak fire seasons. Should the weather turn very hot and dry in the Summer, we may have numerous fires during a time which fire activity normally is at a low.

Please go to the following web site for more information.

www.crh.noaa.gov/pub/firepeak.htm



FEBRUARY



MARCH

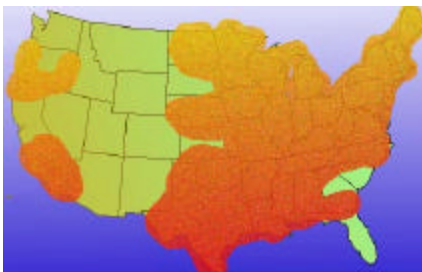


APRIL



MAY

The orange/red coloring on the maps indicate the areas of the country that are in "fire season" for the specific months identified.



OCTOBER



NOVEMBER



DECEMBER

Key Definitions

- Air Tanker** – A large fixed wing aircraft capable of delivering nearly 2,000 gallons of water or retardant on a fire in a bombing fashion.
- Backfire (or Backburn)** – A fire set along the inner edge of a control line to consume the fuel in the path of a wildland fire, and/or to change the direction of force on the fire's "convection column."
- Blow-Up** – A sudden increase in fire activity or rate of spread sufficient to preclude direct control or upset existing control plans. Often accompanied by a violent convection and may have other characteristics of a firestorm.
- Burning Out** – Setting backfires on a small scale and with closer control, in order to consume patches of unburned fuel and aid in construction of control lines.
- Closed Area** – An area in which specific activities - or even entry - is temporarily restricted to reduce the risk of fires caused by people.
- Closure** – Legal restriction of specific activities such as smoking, camping, or entry into an area.
- Confine a fire** – To restrict a fire within determined boundaries established either prior to, or during, a fire.
- Contain a fire** – To take suppression action, as needed, which can reasonably be expected to check the fire's spread under prevailing conditions. In short, to "bottle a fire in."
- Control a fire** – To complete a control line around a fire, any spot fires, and any interior islands to be saved. Also, to burn out any unburned areas adjacent to the fire sides of the control lines, and to cool down all "hotspots" that are immediate threats to the control line so that the control line can be expected to hold under any foreseeable conditions.
- Crew** – A group of firefighters, usually with 20 members (including a crew boss)
- Crown Fire** – A fire which burns in tree tops (going from tree top to tree top), and which burns all or a large part of the upper branches and foliage of the trees.
- Drought Index** – Also referred to as KBDI or CSI, a measure of how dry the ground moisture is. The scale goes from 0 to 800 with 0 being complete ground saturation and 800 being desert like conditions.
- Engine** – Any ground vehicle providing specified levels of water pumping capabilities.
- Escaped fire** – A fire that has exceeded initial attack capabilities, and is spreading.
- Fireline** – A break in the fuel, used to stop the spread of the fire.
- Fire Shelter** – A personal protection item carried by firefighters which, when deployed, unfolds to form a tent-like shelter of heat reflective materials.
- Fuel Type** – Refers to the type of vegetation in which a fire is burning. The fuel type is used in predicting fire behavior and determining effects of a fire.
- Initial Attack** – The control efforts undertaken by firefighters who are first to arrive at the incident.
- Lead Plane** – A plane used to guide other aircraft usually air tankers to the "drop" location.
- Prescribed Burn** – Controlled application of fire to wildland fuels, under specified environmental and weather conditions, to produce a fire that is confined to a pre-determined area. The reason for such burning is to produce the intensity of heat and rate of spread required to attain a planned resource management objective such as reducing the amount of old, dead logging slash that might fuel a major wildland fire.

Resources – All personnel and major items of equipment available, or potentially available, for assignment to a fire incident.

Slop Over – A fire which has breached the fireline.

Spot Fire – Unwanted fire that occurs outside the perimeter of the main fire, caused by flying sparks or embers. Usually some distance beyond the fireline.

Strike Team – Specified combinations of the same kind and type of resources, with common communications and a leader.

S.E.A.T.S – Single Engine Air Tanker (s) A smaller version of the Air Tanker, this carries up to 200 gallons of water.

Torching – A tree that suddenly erupts into flames from the base to the top.

Wildfire – Any fire occurring on wildland, except a fire that is under prescription.

Wildland – An area in which development is essentially non-existent, except for roads, railroads, power lines, and similar transportation or utility structures.

