



United States Department of the Interior

BUREAU OF INDIAN AFFAIRS
Washington, DC 20240

May 27, 2020

Memorandum

To: All Regional Directors
Attention: All Regional Fire Management Officers
All Agency Superintendents
All Agency Fire Management Officers
Branch Chief, Branch of Wildland Fire Management

From: Director, Bureau of Indian Affairs

Subject: Expectations for Line Officers and Wildland Fire Management Staffs – Fire Season 2020

Purpose: The 2020 Fire Year is different; we will be managing wildfires across our diverse and vast landscape amid the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. It is during these challenging times that we are reminded of the significant responsibilities held by our Regional Directors, Agency Superintendents, and fire management staff. Outlined below are the expectations for line officers and fire management staff going into this fire season.

1. Coordination, communication and collaboration are keys to success in wildland fire management. The responsibilities of Regional Directors and Agency Superintendents are defined in the BIA Program Organization and Responsibilities of the Interagency Standards for Fire and Fire Aviation (Red Book), Chapter 6. Ensure that you and your staff understand your responsibilities before fire activity begins in your area of responsibility. The Bureau continues to hold inherent federal activities that cannot be delegated to a tribal program or representative. Line Officers must ensure that letters of delegation are properly issued on activities such as incidents and post-fire recovery and supporting fire management programs are signed and supported.
2. Wildfire prevention is critically important to the success of wildfire suppression operations in the spring/summer/fall fire seasons, but this year presents challenges due to the threats to and impacts on suppression resource availability because of COVID-19. Most prevention programs are minimally staffed, therefore accelerating their efforts presents a challenge. If an area enters into an unusually severe season, local staff could easily become overwhelmed. National and Regional Prevention Teams may not be as available due to the pandemic, and in some locations, outside resources may be restricted or prohibited. Agency program personnel represent a potential workforce to further the prevention mission this year. Please work with your leadership to develop appropriate coordination to support reducing human caused wildfires.

3. Keeping informed while managing expectations when responding to wildland fire incidents in conjunction with COVID-19 risks and mitigation procedures is vital during these complex times. The priority is to minimize COVID-19 exposure and transmission and smoke exposure to firefighters and communities. Prioritize the use of local suppression resources when available and commit resources only when there is a reasonable expectation of success in protecting life, critical property, infrastructure and values at risk.
 - a) Encourage the coordination and development of regional strategies for response to Initial Attack, Extended Attack and Complex Wildfires. Identify priorities for response that align with interagency mitigation techniques and geographic area coordination group's guidance and best management practices.
 - b) Each area or unit should take the opportunity to plan ahead and identify a short-term response strategy that identifies considerations for COVID-19 mitigation.
 - c) Consideration should be given to staffing levels, response times, fire danger ratings and availability of cooperator and protection agreement resources.
4. When a large fire does occur, stay engaged with the assigned Incident Management Team (IMT) by attending all meetings, signing appropriate legal documents (e.g., Wildland Fire Decision Support Document (WFDSS)) and ensuring the trust responsibility is upheld.
5. Due to the inherently dangerous nature of this work, it's critical that you and your staff familiarize yourselves with the accident notification process. Chapter 7 of the Red Book identifies the reporting requirements for accident/injuries and BIA's use of the Early Alert tool. Agency, regional and central office staff will use this internal communications tool to provide clear, factual, and timely (within 6 hours) information up, down and across our organization and the interagency fire community. The accident notification process must be used for COVID-19 cases among fire crews and personnel.
6. We must continue to work alongside our interagency wildland fire community to ensure that the protection of people, communities, and natural resources are at the forefront of our wildland fire management activities. When resources are limited, either due to increased fire activity or COVID-19, we must support the engagement of as many employees from across the bureau as possible to support response efforts. Our militia workforce is part of a surge capacity the Bureau and partner agencies depend upon to meet the needs of the national response framework. Line officers should continue to encourage all of their employees to take National Wildland Fire Coordinating Group (NWCG) training when it becomes available. These are rewarding and challenging positions that encompass a broad range of opportunities including finance, Information Technology, public information, logistics and many others.

Your work continues to be essential during these complex and uncertain times as we strive to meet our trust responsibility to the hundreds of federally recognized Tribes we serve. Your professionalism and expertise are recognized by all. Please take care of yourselves and your coworkers; be cognizant of both physical and mental fatigue, and continue to make your environment the safest possible.

If you have questions, please contact Leon Ben Jr., Branch Chief, Branch of Wildland Fire Management, at (208) 387-5697 or email at leon.ben@bia.gov.