

2020 Interagency COVID-19 Key Messages



- The safety of the public and all wildland fire responders is always the number one priority for all wildland fire agencies.
- While COVID-19 circumstances are rapidly evolving, and federal guidance continues to adapt with the situation, the wildland fire agencies are prepared for wildland fire activity during the COVID-19 outbreak.
- As leaders, we see challenges as opportunities, and the 2020 fire year is an opportunity to fully embrace core risk management principles and employ new decision support tools and tactics.
- To further ensure the highest degree of readiness, the National Multi-Agency Coordinating Group (NMAC) assigned three regional Area Command Teams to work with partners at all levels in the fire community to develop protocols for wildfire response in areas where there is known COVID-19 exposure.
- The protocols have been integrated into Wildland Fire Response Plans and are available to all Incident Management Teams and fire units to guide effective wildfire response. The plans are posted on the NIFC website's COVID-19 webpage.
- Response plans include procedures for potential wildland fire personnel infection, which will be led by the local State Health Department following Centers for Disease Control and Prevention guidance and protocol.
- Local unit fire managers can use the WFRPs to develop their own unit strategic and tactical plans for fire suppression operations during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Additionally, the National Interagency Mobilization Guide provides a framework and protocols for potential situations, including the possibility for potential COVID-19 infection throughout a large percentage of the wildland firefighting workforce.
- As the pandemic situation changes, the federal wildland fire agencies will adapt guidance and plans to provide safe, efficient fire suppression operations.

Fire Suppression Tactics

- There will be wildland firefighters on the ground, but the public will see a different approach to fire suppression. These fire suppression organizations will be smaller in nature using some of the same fire suppression tactics and strategies that have been used in the past.
- Fire managers will consider new tactics, such as avoiding the establishment of condensed fire camps and Incident Command Posts (ICPs) when feasible to limit exposure and COVID-19 spread potential.
- To keep firefighters and communities healthy and safe, all fire personnel are asked to follow recommendations from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to reduce the spread of illness, however in some cases, firefighters will not be able to follow all CDC guidelines. For example, in some situations, wildland fire personnel will not be able to adhere to social distancing in order to conduct safe, efficient wildland fire suppression operations.
- The wildland fire agencies are working to insulate employees from virus spread as much as possible.
- One tactic to limit spread involves advising BLM crews and modules limit close contact with other resources, providing insulation to these crews so they can function as a “Module as One” or family unit. This is the same concept families have used to limit exposure to the COVID-19 virus; we are encouraging our crews to manage themselves more like families than individuals.

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- In our incident response strategies and tactics, we will commit responders to operations where we understand the fire environment risks and virus spread potential as much as possible - and where responders can be most successful with the least exposure necessary to meet reasonable objectives.
- Every year, the federal wildland fire agencies work with state and local partners to conduct initial attack on all wildland fire incidents to suppress wildfires as soon as they ignite.
- Aggressive initial attack is the single most important method to ensure the safety of firefighters and the public, and it also limits suppression costs. During the COVID-19 outbreak, the wildland fire agencies will work to suppress wildfires, with the overall goal of reducing wildfire size and intensity.

Providing Personal Protective Equipment

- In addition to standard clothing (Nomex pants and shirts) and equipment, such as hardhats, used to protect fire personnel from workplace hazards, COVID-19 PPE includes items to protect against exposure.
- The types of PPE required during a COVID-19 outbreak will be based on the risk of being infected while working and job tasks that may lead to exposure.
- Any workers, including those who work within six feet of patients known to be, or suspected of being, infected with SARS-CoV-2, need to use respirators and comply with the OSHA respirator standard. N95 filtering facepiece respirators are critical supplies that must continue to be reserved for healthcare workers and other medical first responders.
- Disposable face or surgical masks should be worn by personnel with known or suspected COVID-19 to contain secretions during interaction with other personnel or during transport. They cannot be used in place of a respirator.
- The federal wildland fire agencies have ordered N-95 masks for emergency situations, such as an emergency transport of a person who has contracted COVID-19. These masks are not intended for daily operational use, as wildland firefighters do not routinely come into contact with COVID-19 patients in the same manner as municipal firefighters.
- The federal wildland fire agencies are also working to provide cloth face covers for all wildland fire personnel, along with cleaning and sanitizing materials to address routine cleaning processes.
- The interagency wildland fire cache system has also ordered protective medical gowns, masks, and other medical supplies for trained medical personnel who may experience exposure to the virus.

Testing

- The Wildland Fire COVID-19 Medical and Public Health Advisory Team (MPHAT) maintains its recommendation against utilizing testing as a COVID-19 risk mitigation strategy among wildland firefighters.
- The MPHAT offers the following precautions to entities choosing to require testing for asymptomatic responders:
 - » Required asymptomatic testing will not ensure responders are COVID-19 -free. Current tests yield a significant number of false-negative results. Reliance on poor-quality tests resulting in erroneous false-negative findings will significantly increase the likelihood of exposing employees within the fire camp environment to COVID-19 infection while providing a false sense of security.

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- » Required testing should not forgo the key prevention and mitigation strategies that have been recommended, such as use of protective barriers, screening procedures and social distancing.
- Required testing and wait times for pre-deployment test results must be considered in scale and cost. For example, if all responders were tested pre-deployment during last year's Alaska fire season, there could potentially be significant delays in response.
- MPHAT discusses the issue of testing weekly and is considering any changes in availability, quality and fit for wildland fire. At this time, MPHAT recommends testing only for those who present symptoms through screening.

Wildland Fire Activity Outlook

Key Message: There is potential for above normal fire activity in some areas of the country this year. The COVID-19 pandemic could challenge wildfire suppression operations if we experience above normal fire activity.

Talking Points:

- While NIFC's Predictive Services specialists closely analyze weather, vegetation, and other factors that affect fire activity, predictions can quickly change if weather and other factors alter current conditions.
- Following a dry fall and winter, drought has emerged and expanded across California, Oregon, and Nevada. Mountain snowpack has melted at a faster than average rate. Long-range forecast data predicts overall warmer and drier than average conditions this summer for the West.
- The combination of these factors is expected to create normal to above normal significant wildland fire potential across the West this year, especially for Northern California and Oregon.
- Though many forest and recreational closures are occurring, there is an increased use of our public lands. This use could cause an increase in the potential for human-caused fires nationally.

Fuels Management

- Reducing wildfire risk through fuels management remains an essential activity.
- In addressing priority work, federal agencies are working to limit COVID-19 risks to ensure firefighter health and safety. They are also working through established frameworks to consider prescribed fire impacts, including potential prescribed fire smoke impacts on people who have contracted COVID-19 or who may be at risk.
- Some prescribed fire and fuels projects may need to be postponed as local wildland fire agencies readjust project strategies to fit the current situation and ensure public and wildland fire personnel safety.