

On 4/21/20 at 1410 Lolo Interagency Hotshots received a call from Missoula Dispatch Center regarding their availability to respond to a wildfire (Henry Creek Fire) on MT DNRC State ground roughly 2 miles S. of Plains, MT. The following bullet points represent lessons learned during dispatch, response, operational engagement, and subsequent demobilization regarding COVID-19.

WHAT WAS PLANNED?

- Assist an interagency partner in suppression of a roughly 40-acre wildfire on DNRC State protection lands
- Initial problems arose when it was unclear what the true meaning of Lolo IHC's availability was regarding our ability to respond to wildfires.
 - What does "Available Local" mean?
 - Further direction from Forest and District FMO clarified that it meant "respond to a wildfire but be able to return to home unit that same night."
 - It is uncertain if this is a Northern Rockies Coordinating Center definition, direction from Regional Forester, or local dispatch unit?
 - Given the 1.5 hr drive time to fire (initial inquiry of 1410) we deemed it inappropriate for safety reasons to respond to the fire and return the same night
 - Furthermore, if the agency requesting wanted our support for multiple shifts it simply did not make sense to drive home each night (safety first)
 - Who is making these rules and defining "Available Local" without asking the responding resources if they are comfortable staying and traveling in a location other than their duty station?
 - Mitigation to staying overnight included camping out on the Forest Service compound (Plains RD) in Plains, MT. The compound had appropriate sleeping space, fresh water, and a bathroom to use.
- After mitigations were discussed and agreed upon with forest AFMO and FMO, Lolo IHC received the official order at 1459 and headed for the fire at approximately 1515

WHAT ACTUALLY HAPPENED?

MASKS/DRIVING TO INCIDENT

- Lolo IHC has written into their COVID-19 SOP's that "when social distancing (6 ft.) guidelines will be "broke" for a long duration >5-minutes we will don masks," which includes driving. We wore masks while driving but found that...
 - Wearing masks while driving long distances is more difficult than anticipated
 - We are beginning to question the safety tradeoffs of wearing masks while driving vs. the benefit they bring regarding COVID mitigation
 - Simply, they are hot, distracting, and uncomfortable to wear for long distances (and the outside temp was merely 60 degrees)

- Some folks report feeling sleepier and more lethargic while wearing the masks which in turn reduces situational awareness with regards to driving and paying attention to the fire environment (is it worth the tradeoff to wear masks)?
 - This may sound odd, but folks did not hydrate and or/eat because they did not want to touch their face, play with their mask while driving, or be distracted (again, tradeoff). Hydration and nutrition are important components of an alert and functioning firefighter
- We did not make any stops en route to the fire once we departed our work center.
 - Travel time was short. Longer distance travel time will necessitate the use of bathrooms at gas stations. If so, masks and gloves would be used when entering foreign facilities.

VEHICLES

The Northern Region has developed guidance on government vehicle occupancy and cleaning during the COVID-19 pandemic. In short, Mission Critical work, as defined our regional forester's leadership intent document may require more than one person in a vehicle on occasion.

- Since the guidance regarding vehicles requires less people or distancing in vehicles of 6 ft (which is actually not possible) we have added 3 vehicles to our fleet for a total of 7-vehicles.
- While responding to the fire it was somewhat difficult to ensure appropriate information about the fire was being passed to all 7 vehicles. We cleaned up our system but it still adds a level of complexity to information sharing that in an emerging incident would increase the burden of supervision
- Upon arrival, it was not possible to park all 7 vehicles at the fire. We initially decided to shuttle folks in the back of trucks. At the end of our first shift we hiked out and decided to hike into the fire on our second shift
 - If this was an emerging incident with evacuations, tight road parking, smoke, significant fire growth not only would this be an impossible feat to park all the vehicles we would be putting my crew in significant danger. And we just arrived on incident.
 - I have to ask myself is limiting the number of vehicle occupants/more vehicles actually worth the risk of being together in our normal vehicle configurations when responding to an incident?
 - Having more vehicles also means more drivers. Ask a sawyer that just cut saw line for 16-hours to drive back to camp on a dirt road at 2230. Is this what we want? I don't.
 - I know its not business as usual but we are putting an unusual burden on our firefighting resources before we ever arrive on an incident.

SOCIAL INTERACTIONS

- We talked extensively on the crew about social distancing
- We practice this as best we can during training, exercise, and now wildfires
- It is damn tough to take these practices to the fireline
 - Difficult (but doable) to get a good briefing 6-ft away
 - Not all agencies, people, have the same discipline or beliefs regarding COVID (and that is ok). I am not here to change anyone's beliefs

- One way to think of fuel geysering is to treat a saw like a loaded gun. One way to approach COVID is to treat everyone like they have it...
- People will try and handshake, they will come up on you (close), you must be vigilant and tell them to back off. And that is a great part of fire culture. Just not the right time.
- Someone might try and sign your time and not have a pen. Get them one and don't take it back
 - I asked myself why do I even need to get time signed? Was this necessary. On assignment we should get 16-hr days bottom line this season.
- It is easy to slip back into "ops normal" in the fire environment (less sanitizing). As a supervisor, you must fall back to your SOP's and learn to make modifications on the fly.

FIRELINE OPERATIONS

- Once briefing was complete this part was simple (will not always be, our fire was limited in complexity)
- Maintaining social distance (while also in open air) is straight-forward
- We did not wear masks on the actual fireline
 - This seems like an unnecessary action from my perspective
 - It reduces situational awareness
 - It is simply uncomfortable (hot, sweaty, distracting)

SANITIZING

- At the end of each shift we sanitized
 - Hand washing is difficult. Each person always has a hand sanitizer in their pockets (Lolo IHC SOP's). Hands get dirty on the fireline.
 - Extra bottled water with soap would be useful to at least get some of the grime off after shift
 - We cleaned all tools, hands, before entering back into each vehicle
 - When we arrived home we hit the re-set button and sanitized the trucks and building
- We used a bathroom at the Plains RD
 - I forgot to clean the bathroom before we used it
 - Suggest cleaning any foreign bathroom before use and reset for your crews use. This would be nearly impossible at gas stations with 20+ people
 - We did clean the Plains RD bathroom when we departed the facility
- We stopped for fuel in Plains, MT
 - We only fueled our trucks
 - No one was allowed inside the store
 - And yes, this sucks. Fire personnel always bulk up their food storage (because we know the food provided in lunches is inadequate)
 - Used disposable gloves while fueling and then tossed them into the garbage
- We added a gallon of bleach and more spray bottles to our arsenal on the vehicles for field cleaning.
- We modified our SOP's to include steps to clean in the field.

FOOD/FEEDING

- We received sack lunches on the fireline
 - 1 sandwich, 2 bags chips, peanut butter crackers, tootsie roll
 - If we are limiting or not allowing store stops, we need more food or at least can count on contractors to provide adequate nutrition (calories, fiber, nutrients, protein) based on the National Contract
 - **We know the science (2700-6200 kcal/day/person)**
 - A concern from one of my crewmembers was “where is our food coming from, are they a trusted vendor?”
 - Maybe a sticker saying these lunches built with COVID PPE

WHAT CAN WE DO NEXT TIME...?

- Clarify availability? What does this mean? And ask the resources that are responding, do not just come up with something without inquiry from responding resources (do they feel comfortable responding multiple days, have they mitigated concerns)
- Our indecisions are forcing responders to making decisions. It is still very unclear what decision space a supervisor has regarding COVID operations and mitigations and what decision space the agency is not delegating down to a supervisor.
- Address the appropriate wearing of masks?
- We need to get away from responding with so many vehicles. It is a big safety concern.
- Maintain vigilance with your programs SOP's regarding COVID. Not all agencies, groups with agencies, and people feel the same about the pandemic. **Just be truly prepared for this while on fire assignment.**
- I think my assistant summed it up best, “we cannot fully maintain an ability to manage COVID as an agency or interagency, we can do diligence in managing it within the unit (crew, engine, helicopter, etc.). We need to limit the spread from unit to unit. This is what will cripple us collectively.”
- Personally, managing covid should follow a logical path. We start at the unit level (on-boarding, housing, unit SOP's), then dispatch (mobilization), arrival at incident (travel, vehicles, briefings, information sharing, logistics), incident (feeding, sleeping, finance, planning, operations), sanitization (all levels), and then demobilization (finance, refurb, planning). We should not move on to the next step until each unit at least has some answers
- We would have separate group to figure out COVID-19 specific action items
 - Folks getting sick while at home unit
 - Documentation, finance, OWCP
 - Folks getting sick while on assignment
- I saw holes in each level. Getting on a fire was the best thing regarding my own awareness of our deficiencies and what operations my program needs to be aware of.

- I became fully cognizant of the pull that COVID will play on situational awareness. It will undeniably be a much bigger hurdle to operations and engagement – you must fall back to our fire principles regardless.
- **Virtual training is great in theory but it lacks the real content of the world outside my unit. We can train all we want using Teams, video presentations, staying at home and working virtually. Fact of the matter, it comes with many holes that will be exposed when the assignment arrives on your desk. It is like a brutal audit when you arrive on assignment. Crew cohesion and teamwork exponentially increased over a 48-hour period that we did not get during critical training (especially this year with no prescribed fire). We must respond to fires. That is our job. We need to do it with diligence and vigilance and expect the unexpected.**

Shawn M. Faiella

Superintendent

Lolo Interagency Hotshots