

**Testimony of Norm McDonald, Alaska Type I Team Incident Commander and  
Chief of Fire and Aviation, Alaska Division of Forestry  
Submitted to the U.S. Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources  
June 7, 2020**

Good morning, Chairman Murkowski, Ranking Member Manchin, and Members of the Committee. My name is Norm McDonald, Chief of Fire and Aviation for the Division of Forestry, Alaska Department of Natural Resources, and I serve as one of the Incident Commanders (IC) on the Alaska Type I Incident Management Team (IMT). I'm a member of the Alaska State Fire Chiefs Association and involved in several national wildland fire committees including the Western State Fire Managers, the Incident Positions and Standards Committee under the National Wildland Fire Coordinating Group, and the Northwest Compact which provides for state and international assistance in fire response. I appreciate the opportunity to speak with you today and submit written testimony as the Committee examines the outlook for the remainder of the 2020 fire year, the complex issues surrounding Incident Management Teams (IMTs) and the management of large fires, and the unique challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **Incident Management Team Organization and Operation**

As you may be aware, there are sixteen national Type I IMTs that are available for wildland fire and all-risk response anywhere in the country.<sup>1</sup> The Teams are on a rotation list and spend seven days at a time as the “ready” Team should a request be made. The next Team on the rotation list bumps into the open lead slot to ensure a Team can always respond when requested. A Team is composed of approximately 50 members and can scale up or down depending on the needs of an incident. The Team has a Command Staff that consists of an IC, Deputy IC, Safety Officer, Liaison Officer, Public Information Officer, and the General Staff consisting of four Section Leads that include: Operations, Planning, Logistics, and Finance (Figure 1). The sections are divided further into Units with specific functions and Unit Leaders. Each section and unit focus on their specific tasks to meet the overall objectives established for the Team. The Team works for a suppression or protection agency with input from the jurisdictional agency (landowner or manager).

A typical fire camp has an Incident Command Post (ICP) and satellite forward operating bases, “spike” camps, aviation bases or helibases and various support functions located near the incident. Often these functions are spread out over a relatively large geographic area, but all are conveniently located to support the incident. The number of firefighters and support staff can swell to several thousand on a large Type I incident. A common description of the operation can be compared to building and running a small city, that sprung up over a few days. With all the issues and challenges you can imagine, while fighting fire.

The typical day starts early with breakfast followed by the operations briefing for all personnel, which utilizes the Incident Action Plan (IAP) that is produced daily. This briefing is commonly held in-person at the ICP and is broadcasted over the radio to all line personnel who may be spiked

---

<sup>1</sup> Per National Interagency Fire Center (NIFC) webpage. There are additional Type I and Type II Teams that the various geographic coordinating groups sponsor for use in their jurisdictions.



*Figure 1. Basic Incident Command Team structure.*

at various locations on the fire. A mid-morning there is a cooperater meeting at the ICP that is attended by local government, fire departments, sheriff departments, utility companies, agency administrators and other key partners in the response. Operations on the fire are ongoing and many incidents run a day shift and night shift. Dinner is usually provided in camp and this is another high-risk period for the gathering of many personnel. Public meetings are held as needed, and usually are attended by many people from local communities.

The overlay of the COVID-19 pandemic on this environment creates many new challenges to everything we do, and I'd like to describe some of the concerns that Teams from around the country have been identifying, discussing and encountering as the fire season unfolds.

### **Resource Mobilization Concerns**

Before a Team can engage on a large fire, they need resources, and the mobilization of resources from around the country is a concern. The Incident Command System (ICS) works well in normal times to draw resources from areas of the country not experiencing fire activity, to locations where they are needed. Even with the mitigation measures that have been developed and put in place, mobilization will not be as prompt as in years past. Resources (crews, equipment, single resource staff) move by both road and air, and each of these methods present their own challenges. To help maintain social distancing, the National Interagency Coordination Center (NICC) jet may only transport three 20 person crews at a time as opposed to the normal five. In 2019, Alaska brought 122 crews to the state during a very active fire year. To move the same number of crews into the state this year, 16 more jet trips would be needed to accomplish the task! NICC should consider putting a second jet on contract to help facilitate crew and personnel movement nationwide.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> NICC has actively been discussing adding a second contract jet to facilitate crew and personnel movement and will have a second jet on Call When Needed (CWN) contract by the same vendor if needed.

A similar concern for Team mobilization is also present. Many IMTs depend on retired fire staff to fill a portion of their rosters, and there is uncertainty if this higher risk demographic will fully participate this year. Participation will likely depend on the location of the deployment, and if it is a high-risk location for COVID-19. Many may opt out and not be available for an assignment. This would degrade Team capabilities if replacements are not available and there is a short supply of qualified and experienced staff for many functions.

Suppression agencies also depend on local cooperator assistance, but some fire departments are keeping a tight hold on their staff and there is concern that this workforce will not be allowed to mobilize as freely compared to previous years. Along these same lines, most agencies are practicing the “family unit” concept with crews and modules to limit staff exposure. While this is a good concept, it can be practiced too aggressively and limit the mobility and availability during times of high fire activity or large incidents. No one mitigation measure is enough or the right one every time, and a full range of mitigation protocols will be required to help address these concerns and to ensure resources are available.

To this point, testing is still not widely available in all locations, but it can be an important part of an overall mitigation strategy. In Alaska, all incoming personnel are being asked to take a COVID-19 test upon arrival. For federal employees, this is voluntary, but an expectation memo is attached to each resource order outlining the expectation along with other mitigation measures that are being employed. Testing occurs at either of the two major jetports upon arrival, and results are available in 24-48 hours. The incoming staff are asked to quarantine at their billets until test results are provided. Provisions have been made for urgent demands for resources on the fireline, a test still occurs, but staff deploy as needed. Any positive results will be notified and subsequently isolated and cared for while contact tracing occurs.

Alaska is fortunate to have a turn-key testing arrangement in place that was developed by our state Health and Social Services (HSS) agency and the Unified Command Team that Alaska has deployed to address COVID-19 in the state. This service will also assist with any COVID-19 cases in the fire ranks and will transport, care for, isolate, house and feed any firefighters that come down with COVID-19 while on assignment in Alaska. The medical unit on the fire will provide initial care and transport to a handoff location while following all Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) and related protocols. This is a unique arrangement, but it will help to allow Teams to stay focused on what they know best, fighting fire, while third party medical units care for staff infected with COVID-19. These services are provided at no cost to the sending agencies.

At the national level, the National Wildfire Coordination Committee (NWCG), Emergency Medical Committee has recently published the [Medical Unit COVID-19 Concept of Operations Plan](#) to help provide a baseline of information and protocols for addressing this topic.<sup>3</sup> Individual jurisdictions can further refine this approach to meet their local needs and capabilities.

---

<sup>3</sup> A copy of this document is available at this link: <https://www.nwcg.gov/committees/emergency-medical-committee/medical-unit-covid19-cop>

## **Incident Management Concerns**

Aside from the mobilization topics, there are specific concerns at the incident level that also need discussion. Here is a running list of some of the most common topics and is by no means a complete list:

- PPE- availability and use
- Team In-Coming and Out-Going Briefings
- Personnel Check-In/Out - at the incident upon arrival and departure
- Camp Life- sleeping areas, feeding, common use facilities
- Vehicle and Aviation Use- fixed-wing and helicopter
- Operations Briefing
- Cooperator and Public Meetings

Mr. Geissler’s oral and written testimony, on behalf of the National Association of State Foresters, provides a full discussion of the guidance documents developed at the national level to assist local geographic areas, Teams, and suppression agencies. The goal of this effort was to provide common operating recommendations and protocols that could be further refined to meet specific circumstances and needs of agencies around the country. In Alaska, this work complemented our own efforts to develop more detailed plans and protocols for our specific work environments. My agency established an internal “short” IMT to develop these plans and documents, including a webpage to provide staff and incoming resources a ready list of up-to-date information concerning our approach to COVID-19.<sup>4</sup> I’d encourage members and staff to visit the site. It is a good one-stop place to find very timely and usable information including the Division of Forestry COVID-19 Handbook<sup>5</sup> (Figure2).

## **Incident Management Mitigations and Protocols**

Each of the items listed above have been addressed through several different methods which may include: Mitigation Plans, Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs), Best Management Practices (BMPs) and/or Protocols and Continuity of Operations Plans (COOPs). Briefly, here are some of the current mitigations for each of the listed items above, and it should be noted, this is not a complete list of measures:

- Currently the availability of PPE has improved in most locations. The fire caches have been procuring supplies, and training for use has been developed and provided. Many situations will allow the use of cloth masks as opposed to N-95 medical grade masks. These higher-grade masks will be used only in specific situations and in medical response.
- In some situations masks will not be practicable, such as on the fireline in certain circumstances, but when in vehicles, aircraft or other close quarters, they should be worn unless there is an overriding safety concern, such as clear communication over flight

---

<sup>4</sup> Alaska Division of Forestry COVID-19 Response Tools: <http://forestry.alaska.gov/covid>

<sup>5</sup> Division of Forestry COVID-19 Handbook: [http://forestry.alaska.gov/Assets/pdfs/covid/DOF%20COVID-19%20Handbook\\_version%204.pdf](http://forestry.alaska.gov/Assets/pdfs/covid/DOF%20COVID-19%20Handbook_version%204.pdf)

intercoms or radios. Each situation will need personnel to use their judgement and training to determine the best actions for the situation.



*Figure 2. DOF COVID-19 Handbook Cover*

- In and Out briefings for Teams will be conducted using Microsoft Teams or other similar virtual meeting platforms to limit contact. Documents such as the Delegation of Authority, Leaders Intent and the Wildland Fire Decision Support System planning tool can be communicated and signed electronically. When in-person meetings are needed, social distancing and appropriate use of PPE should occur.
- Checking in/out of incidents can also be accommodated via remote methods and will limit contact between personnel.
- Camp management has several challenges but spacing out staff and resources will be a key method for limiting contact outside of “family units”. Sleeping areas will be spread out, individual tents and the use of more spike camps will be utilized to keep staff from congregating in base camps or the ICP area. Food vendors will provide meals in single serve containers and the standard mess tent area will not be used. Units will eat as family groups and practice appropriate protocols for hygiene and social distancing. Extra wash stations and shower units will be provided where feasible.
- The various types of meetings that occur daily will use a variety of protocols to reduce person-to-person gatherings. Many public meetings are already webcasted live, and various social media platforms will be utilized to provide timely and accurate information. The daily morning briefing can be webcasted, broadcasted on the radio net

(already a SOP) and the IAP downloaded by scanning a QR-code as opposed to distributing paper copies.

- Incidents always have several safety officers and it has been suggested that extra safety officers be put in-place to focus solely on COVID-19. They can help remind personnel to utilize the mitigations and protocols established and provide specific COVID-19 safety messages during the daily operations briefing and in the IAP.
- IMT staff will also spread out between and within their work sections and units. Some functions may be accomplished by telecommuting.

### **Adaptability and Continuous Improvement**

A range of tools and options exist to help mitigate and manage in the COVID-19 environment, however even in the best of circumstances, this will be a challenging task. The key to successfully managing this issue will be adaptability and learning from others. To this end, there is an aggressive sharing by suppression agencies through After-Action Reviews (AARs), during action reviews, and lessons learned of what is working, and what is not working. There is a national website for posting these informal and formal recommendations and reports to rapidly share this information to peers, managers and personnel working at all levels and functions. This includes staff in our dispatch centers, warehouse and fire caches, administrative offices, aviation units and frontline firefighters. It takes a team to successfully respond to wildland fire and it will take a team to accomplish the same for COVID-19.

### **Conclusion**

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before the Committee today on behalf the Alaska Division of Forestry, Alaska Type I Team, and other Incident Management Teams from around the country. I have tried to provide you with a good representation of the issues being discussed and raised by team members, fire managers and leaders and the rank and file employees that comprise our agencies. We all appreciate the support and work this Committee has accomplished to help us manage this fire season and look forward to working with you to continue to address these important topics.