State of Utah

DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL RESOURCES

BRIAN C. STEED
Executive Director

GARY R. HERBERT
Governor

SPENCER J. COX
Lieutenant Governor

Division of Forestry, Fire and State Lands

BRIAN L. COTTAM
Division Director / State Forester

TO: FFSL Personnel

FROM: Brian L. Cottam, Director/State Forester
             Utah Division of Forestry, Fire and State Lands

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SUBJECT: *Fire Program Guidance and Considerations for Wildfire Response During the COVID-19 Pandemic No. 2020-002*

Governmental agencies, particularly first responders, are now widely implementing various tactics to mitigate the exposure of their employees and the general public to COVID-19. For fire service agencies that have the responsibility to manage wildland fire to protect life, property and resources, it is imperative that we maintain the wellness, preparedness and capabilities of staff at all levels. We have the responsibility to maintain response capacity, even when we as a nation must do our part to mitigate exposure to and reduce the spread of coronavirus.

The Division of Forestry, Fire and State Lands is a key partner in the interagency response for local, state and federal wildland fire management. This document addresses response to wildfire in the current environment of COVID-19. The intent is to provide consistent Fire Program guidance and procedures for FFSL managers and firefighters. In addition, there should be a concerted effort by FFSL fire staff to work with local partners to help develop complementary procedures using this document as a guide, recognizing and respecting the unique geographic and organizational limits of each partner agency. The following program guidance is in effect until rescinded.

General considerations to ensure consistency and success:
- Health and safety of responders, the public and communities is paramount.
- Assure seasonal employee on-boarding guidance is used.
- Adhere to guidance to mitigate and minimize responder exposure to COVID-19.
- Assertive and increased prevention & public education efforts should help reduce exposure.
- Proactive implementation of Closed Fire Season and fire restrictions should reduce human-caused starts.
- Implementing social distancing in the office and in the field, whenever possible, at the module level (engine crew, squad).
- Consider expanding isolation and quarantine efforts before and after fires when exposure is suspected.
- Enhance efforts to prevent fire starts resulting from fuels mitigation projects, such as increasing fire prevention compliance inspections and limiting hours of operation during periods of elevated fire danger.
- Limit the use of traditional fire camps, and emphasize modular insulation and isolation.

- Stress off-duty responsibility in protecting yourself and, therefore, your crew from exposure.
- Perform daily health self-evaluations. (Am I fit? Am I healthy? Do I have symptoms?)
- Anticipate limitations to sharing of resources and an increased use of technology.
- Pre-screening of incoming resources from outside the local area is likely to delay arrival.
- Consider the increased use of aviation and dozers in initial attack to reduce assigned personnel.
- Plan to use strategic movement of available FFSL resources at an Area and statewide level.
- Local MOU resources return home every night if possible versus being at camp.
- Extensive communication and coordination with our workforce, interagency partners and cooperators, contractors and the public to ensure consistent and complementary practices.
- Be familiar with GACC and national guidance plans and directives for extended attack resources, including Type 1-3 IMTs.
- Explore various scenarios of reduced firefighter capacity and options, including Area-specific considerations for partner/cooperator and Division response with limited capacity.

Before the Fire

Prepare Firefighters, Develop Protocols, and Build New Systems

Capacity
- Follow the Division's April 10 "Novel Coronavirus Pandemic Directives for All Employees," including the:
  - Pre-Arrival Guidance for New Employees and Returning Seasonal Employees; and,
  - Daily Self-Assessment Protocols and Expectations for All FFSL Employees.
- Identify employee support tools for emotional well-being and ways to assist with personal logistical challenges related to COVID-19 (e.g., closed schools and children at home) that affect the availability of first responders to engage in assignments or travel
- Ensure caches are stocked and prepared.
- Emphasis on self-sufficiency by module.
- Monitor and follow State and County health authority recommendations.

Communications
- Communicate, communicate, communicate!
  - Increase and improve communication internally and with partners; more is better during this time.
- Develop communications tool, on-line platforms and strategies for effective interactive virtual meetings (consider internal, fire service partners, local government, and the public; each of which may require different tools & strategies)

Contracting and Logistics
- Procure in advance MREs, medical equipment, PPE, remote sensing, UAS and other necessary items. Don't wait until something is needed to begin the procurement process.
- Utilize Fire Business, Contracting and Logistics personnel for assistance for food services, PPE, sanitation supplies, contract personnel, equipment, etc.
- Plan and prepare for additional sanitation services, porta-potties, hand washing, laundry, garbage, etc.

Planning
- Identify and seek to mitigate potential sources of fires (e.g., mowing along high-risk roadways, fire line preparation, utility right-of-way clearing, WUI treatments, ag operations, etc.)
- Develop simulations to project and plan for local impacts.
- Ensure responders train for and utilize the Division's Operational Best Practices Amidst COVID-19 document.
- Consider severity scenarios and possible needs, and communicate these to the State FMO as early as possible.
- Ensure all wildland firefighters understand they have the absolute right to turn down an assignment because of concern about exposure to COVID-19.

Prevention
- Work with FFSL's Prevention & Communication Coordinator Kaitlyn Webb to implement public information campaigns to inform local officials and the public about fire response concerns, including fire restrictions to reduce the potential for human caused fires
- Fire restrictions will be coordinated with all partners for consistent messaging to the public.
- Educate yourself, your staff and your partners with a basic understanding of COVID-19 as well as effective mitigation practices
  - The Division's COVID-19 Tool Kit on the FFSL Enterprise is a great resource.
- Pause implementation of prescribed fire and carefully consider burn permits to the public to reduce impacts to first responders and public respiratory health.
- Survey first responders to develop lists of those predisposed to respiratory illness and factor this into their assigned roles and tasks during IA and on large incidents.
- Make sure vehicles are fully stocked with disinfecting wipes, hand sanitizers and soap.

Staffing
- Plan and prepare for resource shortages both internally and with your local partners.
- Understand that operations will begin from the position of severe resource limitations (consider being in a mindset of PL-4/PL-5 for the entire fire season).
- Prepare for staffing shortages due to isolation or quarantining:
  - **Isolation** separates sick people with a contagious illness from people who are not sick.
  - **Quarantine** separates and restricts the movement of people who were exposed to a contagious illness to see if they become sick.

Technology
- Use remote operations, briefings, sensing and surveillance, weather forecasts and models, fuel modeling/sensing, fire behavior modeling/projections, etc., to inform decisions.

Tracking
- Build systems to track firefighter exposure and infections on a local and statewide platform.
  - DNR, using FFSL's GIS staff, has created a GIS tool for all DNR employees. *This can be activated at the request of Division leadership.*
  - Similar firefighter status tracking should be considered at a local level.

<u>During the Fire</u>

Modify Strategies, Tactics and Logistics

Priority
- Initial attack response should align with direction to limit the risk of exposure to and spread of COVID-19. This should involve strategies and tactics that:
  - Minimizes the number of people needed to respond (e.g., using more aerial and mechanized assets); and,
  - Reduces incident duration while not compromising probability of success.
- Maintain social distancing standards between resources as practicable.
- Emphasize full containment in order to minimize assignment time.
- Consider strategies and tactics, when reasonable, that minimize the need for suppression repair.
- Limit mop-up and smoke exposure.
- Use IR technology when possible.
- Use UAVs as appropriate and authorized to gain intel and help limit resource needs.
- Use of heavy equipment and aircraft that can limit number of personnel needed is supported.
- Strongly encourage personnel to conduct regular—at least daily—self-assessments on extended attack incidents. (Am I fit? Am I healthy? Do I have symptoms?)

Camp
- When possible, shift operations and logistics from single, large camps to multiple, satellite camps that can better support social distancing standards and insulating the module.
- Plan and prepare for the support needed for local Type 3 IMTs for PPE and sanitation supplies, etc.
- Specify in any IMT delegation of authority that reducing possible exposure to COVID-19 is a priority.
  - Suggest the use of remote/virtual work where practical.
  - *Be aware of National and GACC level guidance for Type 1, 2 & 3 IMTs.*
- Briefings may be conducted via radios and/or other virtual tools in order to reduce face-to-face and large group interactions.
- Assess the current and emerging overhead structure. Expand and contract proactively to address the difficulties and challenges the pandemic will present to the suppression effort, span of control, and service & support of personnel.

Communication:
- Communicate, communicate, communicate—more is better at this time!
- Expanded use of technology and local networks for remote/virtual community meetings and updates use broadband channels to reach affected communities (e.g., radio, social media).

- Include daily COVID-19 specific information and a related safety message in operational briefings and Incident Action Plans (IAP).
- Regularly inform impacted communities during an incident—e.g., number of firefighters, where they will be located, what they are doing, the expected duration of the incident, exposure mitigation efforts for firefighters, etc.—and what precautions are being taken to minimize exposure of COVID-19 to the community.
    - Keep local officials updated and provide answers to their questions.
- Communication should be **CLEAR** and **CONCISE**
- Take adequate time to think about what you are going to communicate
- Critical communication needs to occur with your dispatch center(s)
- In the event of exposure, follow the Division's notification procedure* and notify your local health department and other key officials of numbers exposed and response actions taken.
  (*FFSL's notification procedure is still being crafted as of the date of this document and will be distributed ASAP.)

Medical
- Utilize expanded medical support (as needed and if possible)
- Contact local health authorities and facilities early-on. Inform them of any IMT arrivals and numbers of individuals responding to their area of responsibility.
- Provide incoming IMTs with accurate information about local health authorities and facilities as part of your in-briefing package.
- Have plans in place to manage exposure to COVID-19, including situations requiring transportation, isolation and/or quarantine of personnel.

Module insulation and isolation (dispersed camping)
- Two-way isolation:
    - closed camps with security
    - no leaving camp to travel into community
- Resources and modules should be supported and encouraged to order supplies and be self-sufficient in order to successfully isolate and avoid the need for centralized logistics and services.
- Define and implement rigorous cleaning and sanitation protocols for personnel, facilities, and equipment.
- Decentralize staging areas to limit face-to-face contact with other modules.

Technology
- Prepare for remote operations, briefings, sensing and surveillance.
- Use technology to communicate using virtual tools.
- Increase use of UAS.

<u>After the Fire</u>

Ensure Safety, Recovery and Rehabilitation

Communication
- Inform dispatch and SFMO of status of your Area:
  - Communicate potential exposure
  - Follow reporting guidance
  - Communicate your unit's limited capacity for response if compromised
  - Report local health authority response and recommendations

Decontamination
- Facilities, equipment and vehicles should be decontaminated daily.

Rest, Recovery and Reassignment
- Stress off-duty responsibility for protecting yourself, your subordinates, coworkers and other individuals from exposure. This should include the Division's Daily Self-Administered Employee Health Assessment and may also include:
  - COVID-19 testing as it is available
  - Module quarantine or isolation
  - Considering possible exposure and need for quarantine period
- Plan for increased employee support (and be prepared to provide it virtually):
  - EAP-Employee Assistance Program as directed by HR
  - Hospital and Family Liaison
  - Utah Emotional Health Hotline 833-442-2211
  - Utah Employee Assistance 800-926-9619
  - UFRA Peer Support Line 801-587-1800
  - UFRA Mental Fitness Page https://www.uvu.edu/ufra/fitness/index.html
  - GACC Peer support: https://gacc.nifc.gov/cism/
  - International Association of Fire Fighters (IAFF): https://www.iaffrecoverycenter.com/behavioral-health
  - IAFF Covid-19 Page https://www.iaffrecoverycenter.com/resources/#covid

Tracking
- All fire staff should monitor, track and be prepared to report all of their person-to-person, module-to-module, and community interactions in order to assist health officials track and respond to potential COVID-19 exposure.

AAR Specific to Wildfire Management and COVID-19
- We need to institutionalize what we learn from the COVID-19 crisis and incorporate that into our enterprise risk management as well as local SOPs.

Link to Utah Wildland Firefighter Covid 19 Toolbox:

https://sites.google.com/utah.gov/covid-toolbox/home