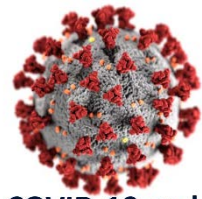


# Rapid Lesson Sharing

**Event Type:** COVID-19 Positive Test Response

**Date:** April 30-May 4, 2020

**Location:** Huron-Manistee National Forest



**COVID-19 and  
Fire Season 2020 Lessons**  
For the latest on COVID-19 visit  
[CDC.gov/COVID19](https://www.cdc.gov/COVID19)

## How the Huron-Manistee Forest Responded When a Fire Employee Tested Positive for COVID-19

**By John Norton-Jensen**  
**Huron Zone Fire Management Officer**

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### I What Happened? Thursday, April 30

On Thursday, April 30, one of my Zone's key overhead firefighters was notified of a positive COVID-19 test result.

This employee had mostly been working from home. He did not feel the best, was looking to potentially travel out of state, so he went to his primary care doctor.

On April 30, he was informed that he had tested positive for strep throat and COVID-19. I was informed of this at 0915 in the morning. Most of the fire employees for that duty station were working from home due to a "LOW" staffing level, but employee safety/exposure was a primary concern.

#### A. Chain of Events

**0920** – I notify all fire leadership in Mio (Engine Captains and Equipment Operators) and tell them to stay away from the office.

**0930** – I notify both District Rangers.

**0944** – I notify Fire Staff.

### Background

The Huron Zone consists of the Mio Ranger District, based out of Mio, Michigan and the Huron Shores Ranger District, based out of Oscoda, Michigan. The Huron Zone Fire program consists of 27 firefighters spread out between 4 engines, 3 dozers, fuels positions, and Zone overhead.

So far this spring, our prescribed burn program has been put on pause due to COVID-19 concerns. From the beginning of April, initial attack activity has been steady. We've responded to approximately 30 fires. Our Forest resources combined with aviation assets (Air Attack, 2 Fire Bosses, Heli-tanker) have been successfully keeping fires under 30 acres/impacting values at risk less (several structures and outbuildings have been lost so far this year).

The last couple of weeks of April and May are traditionally the meat of the large fire season for the Huron Zone. On April 29, I worked with the Forest Duty Officer to secure the Midewin Interagency Hotshot Crew and an additional Type 6 Engine to increase initial attack forces for an upcoming dry spell—May 1 thru 9.

We have been purposely minimizing the amount of off-Forest resources brought into the area due to COVID-19 concerns. But with tree needle moistures being low and densities high and the Michigan Department of Natural Resources (DNR) lifting its outdoor burning ban, it seemed appropriate to bring in these additional resources for the increased fire activity that was expected.

**0945** – On our morning fire briefing call, I notify all Fire Staff on Zone scheduled to work that day. I implement the FIRE COVID exposure contingency plan, communicate verbally, text message, and by the following email:

**Greetings Huron Zone Fire,**

As I have discussed with many of you on the phone, at briefing, and on our group text message string, we have a positive COVID-19 test result for a HURON ZONE firefighter in Mio.

**PLAN OF ATTACK**

1. All Huron Zone Fire employees will work from home until further notice.
  - a. Only potential bunkhouse issue we have right now is for a Mio female.
  - b. Returning to work to perform fire Reponse duties will be fixed based upon testing/exposure level.
2. All Huron Zone Fire Employees will get a COVID-19 test ASAP.
  - a. Your primary care physician.
  - b. 1-888-591-0500 is the number to call to set up testing.
3. MIO Fire Facilities and vehicle will be cleaned by COVID certified Hazmat cleaner, ServPro.
  - a. I have made contact, meeting someone at the site today to get an estimate.
4. I will work with Forest D.O. for Zone Fire coverage for at least 48-72 hours.
  - a. Test results are taking around 48 hours to be communicated to individuals.
5. Bolton (Ranger), Wiese (Ranger), and Alyea (Fire Staff) are in the loop, will be following the playbook for the main Mio Office/Forest level.

Stay tuned...

**John Norton-Jensen**

**0950** – I notified Zone fire folks who were on their days off.

**1000** – Discuss more with Ranger on infected individual's contacts.

**1015** – Speak with ServPro to arrange one of their folks to come to Mio and do an estimate for fire office space cleaning and fire vehicle cleaning.

**1045** – Documented where COVID positive employee has traveled in last week and who he has been in close contact with:

- ✓ Came into Mio District Office on Wednesday (4/29) for 10 minutes.
- ✓ Came into Fire Bays Saturday/Sunday (4/25-26)
- ✓ Spent lots of time in overhead vehicle.
- ✓ Came into close contact with VFDs and sheriff's deputies on a fire on 4/20 and on a DNR assist on 4/27.
- ✓ Has been in shared space with District fire employees on Saturday and Sunday—and very quickly on Wednesday.
- ✓ Was in close space with USFS fire employees from both sides of Zone on 4/20 and with Mio employees on 4/25 and 4/26.

**1200 -1600** – Employees successfully getting testing appointments. Health department advising not to return to work until test results come back.



The River Road Fire was one of the many fires on the Huron Zone that occurred in April—concurrently with the COVID hazard.  
Photo by Christian Schuck, Senior Firefighter on E-352.

*I planned for my entire fire program to possibly be quarantined, pending the COVID test results—during our busiest time of the year regarding wildfire response.*

**1230** – One of my Battalion Chiefs will be dealing with MIO fire facilities cleaning estimate with SERVPRO.

**1300** – I notified VFD/County Sheriff fire cooperators who could have been exposed to my infected employee on 4/20 and 4/27. Several phone calls, VFD Fire Chief/Sheriff Deputy indicates he will have his people get COVID testing.

**1400** – Passed onto to Huron-Manistee Forest (HMF) Fire Staff that it would be a good idea to give Hiawatha National Forest a phone call (we had 2 Type 6 Engines on the Zone on 4/20 and 4/21). I clearly stated that both engine crews did not have contact with the infected individual and that they only had personnel interactions with two people from my Zone and we were all 6 feet or more apart. Also passed on that the State DNR should be notified due to some potential interactions on a wildfire 10 days prior (4/20).

**1430** – I planned for my entire fire program to possibly be quarantined, pending the COVID test results—during our busiest time of the year regarding wildfire response.



Huron Zone FMO John Norton-Jensen wearing his “COVID bandana”.

## B. Fire Staffing Plan

Once employee safety and facilities were addressed, I implemented the following fire staffing plan, using our “Huron-Manistee COVID-19 Wildfire Response Plan” and “Huron Zone Firefighter Gets Sick Action Plan” (both completed at the beginning of April). I ran this staffing plan by both my District Rangers and Forest Fire Staff:

1. All personnel who were exposed to the infected individual one week since he went in for testing were to work from home until they pass a COVID test.
2. All personnel who had contact with the infected person more than 10 days ago would come into work to staff for the moderate fire danger day on 5/1 (one engine module, one dozer module, 2 overhead, including myself). **“Exposure” definition according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) website: greater than 10 minutes and less than 6 feet apart.**
3. Mio side of the Zone was going to be down: one ICT3/DIVS, two engine modules and a dozer module. Huron Shores side of the Zone was going to be down: an engine module and a fuels technician. Worked with Forest Duty Officer to backfill most of the resources that were quarantined—ordered two additional Type 6

### Huron- Manistee COVID-19 Wildfire Response Plan

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The “Contents” page from the Huron-Manistee COVID-19 Wildfire Response Plan.

Engines, ICT3, and one dozer module.

4. “Worst Case Scenario” discussed with Forest Duty Officer: basically, for every positive test, try to backfill that position/module lost. I reached out to folks I trusted to backfill my position as Zone Fire Management Officer.
5. On the same day, April 30, all employees—except two—were tested in drive-thru COVID testing facilities based on their duty station (two duty stations for the Zone). Two more employees were tested the following morning.

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*The COVID-positive employee expressed concern about not having enough sick leave to cover illness for self and for family.*

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#### **Friday, May 1**

**0930** – Spoke with the State Health Department Nurse who only wanted my employees and cooperators that had been exposed to the COVID-positive employee 48 hours prior to his test results (4/28). She wasn’t concerned about any other folks who were exposed beyond that 48-hour window or were secondarily exposed—7 degrees of separation, basically folks that hung out with folks that may have been exposed.

**0945** – Submitted that list of folks to the State Health Department.

**1100** – Spoke at length with the Michigan Department of Natural Resources (DNR) fire cooperator main contact. Explained the situation I had going on, the resources I was bringing in to cover my folks off in quarantine, and to relay that my infected employee was potentially exposed to one of his employees on a fire on 4/20—11 days ago. I wanted to ensure that they knew of this potential exposure.

**1230** and **1330** – Spoke with the Fire Management overhead from the Hiawatha NF, repeatedly conveyed that their fire personnel were not exposed to my infected employee and that the only human interaction they had with Huron Zone Fire folks was on 4/20 to an employee of the Regional Office and on 4/21 to myself and my fuels technician. In this 4/21 interaction, the Hiawatha employees were never closer than 6 feet to us in a conversation that lasted approximately 12 minutes.

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*The USFS Human Resources update provides information on how The Emergency Paid Sick Leave Act can assist USFS employees in certain COVID situations by providing up to 80 hours of leave. I made sure that my COVID-positive employee was aware of this update to the leave policy.*

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**1400** – The COVID-positive employee expressed concern about not having enough sick leave to cover illness for self and for family.

**1500** – ServPro finalizes estimate to clean COVID-impacted facilities and vehicle, says they cannot complete the work until Monday, 5/4.

**1600** – The USFS Human Resources update provides information on how The Emergency Paid Sick Leave Act can assist USFS employees in certain COVID situations by providing up to 80 hours of leave. I made sure that my COVID-positive employee was aware of this update to the leave policy.

#### **Saturday, May 2**

- ❖ COVID test results start trickling in: 4 negatives. This allows for a dozer module to be back in service for 5/3.

#### **Sunday, May 3**

- ❖ One more COVID test result is negative. This allows an additional dozer module to back in service for 5/4.



## Monday, May 4

- ❖ All the remaining COVID test results determined. All 25 zone fire personnel are COVID negative.
- ❖ ServPro cleaned COVID-positive firefighter's vehicle, fire bays, fire annex building and space available to be used. Two engine modules brought into work and staffed due to negative COVID tests after cleaning was completed.
- ❖ All Zone resources are available and out of quarantine (except for COVID-positive employee).

## II Successes

### 1. Focused Wildfire COVID-19 Pre-Planning across both Fire Zones on the Huron-Manistee National Forest.

- ❖ This was our fourth COVID exposure incident. The previous three were potential exposures to folks with symptoms, not positive cases. Therefore, the quarantine was successfully implemented in these previous incidents.
- ❖ The "Huron-Manistee National Forest COVID-19 Wildfire Response Plan"—that was completed at the beginning of April.
- ❖ The "Huron Zone Firefighter Gets Sick Action Plan"—that was completed at the beginning of April.
- ❖ All of the following were determined and identified beforehand: COVID cleaning vendors, Porta Potties/sinks, lodging, open available restaurants.
- ❖ Strong and efficient on-Forest communication that provided consistent direction to our fire employees regarding COVID protection and mitigation measures.



Scratch line on the Huron Zone's River Road Fire, one of the many fires this unit experienced in April—concurrently with the COVID hazard. Photo by Christian Schuck, Senior Firefighter on E-352.

### 2. Strong relationships with county emergency managers/local VFDs/County Sheriffs/State Forestry Cooperators.

- ❖ I had already gamed-out and sought input on what to do if one of our employees tested positive. I did exactly what the County Emergency Manager recommended:
  - The specific language to use to gain access to a COVID test in the State of Michigan.
    - ✓ USFS wildland firefighters are considered "first responders" by the State of Michigan, therefore directed to get COVID testing when they have a confirmed exposure.
      - The specific phone number to call when a "first responder" has a confirmed COVID exposure for our State Health Department District of Michigan.
      - County Emergency Manager was a key conduit to State of Michigan Public Health Department, kept them informed of our situation, was ready to step in if we did not get COVID testing fast enough.
      - Alternative housing venues for employees who were sick was pre-determined, available for use if needed.
      - Enabled fast and efficient communication of potential exposure to everyone involved in our interagency fire environment.

3. A shared understanding of what a COVID exposure is and other COVID vocabulary/facts (exposure, incubation time, quarantine time, etc.) documented in our “Huron Zone Firefighter Gets Sick Action Plan”.
  4. Flexible fire workforce that was aware of and informed on the plan—and efficiently implemented it.
  5. Support from District Rangers and Fire Staff to implement the plans we laid out more than one month ago.
    - ✓ Decision space was encouraged and allowed for.
  6. Michigan COVID-19 First Responder Testing Procedures were able to accommodate most of my employees on the same day. We received test results back to us in 48-80 hours.
  7. Two firefighters per vehicle are working a lot better than one per truck.
  8. USFS engine crews and dozer crews maintaining social distancing well on initial attacks. Challenges are for Command/Overhead positions due to necessary interface with fire cooperators (VFDs, Sheriffs, public, etc.).
- 

*“Social distancing and ‘Module of One’ was difficult to follow and easily forgotten on initial attack”.*

**Andy Vanderheuel**  
**HMF E-661 Captain**

### **III Challenges**

#### **1. COVID Exposures**

- ❖ Very challenging to implement CDC distancing and face covering guidelines on interagency initial attacks, especially for Command and Operations positions.
  - ❖ Volunteer Fire Departments, County Sheriffs, State Forestry Organizations, all have different degrees of COVID mitigations/COVID awareness—usually not the same as USFS.
  - ❖ Face coverings not practical during physically demanding situations.
- 

*COVID is not the mission.  
COVID is just another hazard to be assessed  
to complete the mission.*

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#### **2. Communication**

- ✓ Fire organizations are very dependent upon face-to-face communication for team building/team maintenance. When that is removed, communication atmosphere is easily susceptible to assumptions and speculation.
  - The mitigation we use is to over-communicate with daily briefing conference calls, emails, field visits. It gets old, but we have to keep that human contact.
  - Rumor control: Need to ensure accurate information flows between Forest to Forest, Forest to Region, Region to WO—be aware of potential traps for the unintended changing of messaging (“telephone game” syndrome).

### 3. Risk vs Reward

- ❖ Fire overhead (Command and Operations) having discussion across the Forest on taking on greater risks to COVID exposure to ensure the ultimate goal of safe and efficient interagency fire response is achieved.
- ❖ USFS Fire Overhead on Forest willing to accept risk with purpose.
- ❖ COVID is not the mission. COVID is just another hazard to be assessed to complete the mission.

### 4. COVID Overload

- ❖ Too much COVID information coming from many sources; folks in field are getting overloaded and tuning out, focusing on the plans we have developed locally.

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*“Keep cleaning, keep working.”*

**Pat Hayes**  
**HMF E-361 Captain**

## IV Take Home Points

- ❖ Two people can look at the same tree and have totally different ideas of risk associated with that tree. The same goes for COVID-19. Not everyone has the same idea on the risk involved with COVID and fire operations. It is therefore key for DVs and BCs to be consistent and transparent on setting up COVID standard operating guidelines and COVID contingency plans that your staff is aware of/buys into.
- ❖ COVID testing and professional COVID cleaning removes additional stressors on the system. This allows your firefighters to focus on their fire operations job as opposed to who got a test and who didn't, what was cleaned and what was not, etc.
- ❖ Off-Forest Resources:
  - ✓ In-person in-briefings of off-Forest resources is still essential, difficult to achieve via phone/email.
    - *“Have the conversations early to gain people's comfort level on working closely...Like you and I had if we get a going fire and you take ICT3 and have me as Ops...Are you good with me being right next to you looking over a map on the hood? Having those conversations with the potential key players beforehand is critical.”* Jerry Hoffman, IHC Superintendent.
    - Plan on greater time commitments due to in-briefing each module at a time. Avoid doing more than one-two module leaders at a time due to spacing concerns.
    - Off-Forest Resources stated it was helpful that we emailed incoming resources a short in-brief for the Zone with the following attachments: PDF maps, s, project work prep sheets, project work maps, digital CTRs, digital OF-288s.
  - ✓ Digital CTRs and Digital OF-288s, have worked well, no close contact needed.
  - ✓ Off-Forest resources only coming into District yards/offices for logistical support when needed, reporting to field from hotel, briefing in field on conference call line.
  - ✓ Daily Morning Zone Fire Briefing on conference call, working well.



A Fire Boss scooper air tanker working the Heath Fire on the Huron Fire Zone in April. Photo by Christian Schuck, Senior Firefighter on E-352.

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*“Off-Forest modules that will be relying on local restaurants for food should utilize payment apps (Venmo, PayPal, etc.) for everyone to utilize. Have one person in the mod make the order and pay. They use the payment app to have everyone reimburse the individual. This drastically helped with making food ordering/pickup efficient. One of the engines did not have this as an option to begin with and it bottlenecked all of us badly one morning.”*

**Jerry Hoffman**  
**IHC Superintendent**

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- ✓ Porta Potties/hand washing stations at each District office, on a cleaning schedule, keeps folks out of fire buildings.
- ✓ Pre-built, off-Forest Resource Logistical Plan: restaurants, grocery stores, and hotels spreadsheet for both of our District offices (Mio, Oscoda).
  - Hours of operation.
  - Open for takeout or not.
  - Cooking facilities/kitchenettes or not.
  - How many bedrooms per room.
- ❖ You will feel like you are in “Costa Ricardo”\*.
  - ✓ Pre-planning is excellent as long as it is relevant to your specific area.
  - ✓ Planning can be a trap, try not to plan for every specific scenario.
  - ✓ It is coming your way, you gotta be ready . . .

\*“Costa Ricardo” is the name of a unique simulated learning environment that contractor Mission-Centered Solutions utilizes when teaching NWCG Leadership Courses (L-380, L-381, L-481). This challenging learning experience—well known for presenting abnormal conditions—provides students an opportunity to develop their skills and leadership by trying different techniques and approaches for unusual problem solving.

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**This RLS was submitted by:**  
**John Norton-Jensen**  
**Huron Zone Fire Management Officer**

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