Northern Rockies Coordinating Group

Federal, State, and Local Government Agencies Working Together in Emergency Response Management

Monthly Conference Call – Meeting Notes

Tuesday, March 17, 2026 – 10:00 AM MST

Participants

Coordinating Group Members:

X	BIA – Great Plains	Heath Estey	X	Idaho Department of Lands	Josh Harvey
X	BIA – Rocky Mountain	Bryce Rogers		North Dakota Forest Service	~~Ryan Melin~~
X	BIA – Northwest Region	Brad Donahue	X	Montana DNRC	Matt Hall
X	BLM – Montana/Dakotas	Aaron Thompson		Montana County Fire Wardens	~~Patrick Lonergan~~
	BLM – Idaho	~~Dennis Strange~~	X	Montana DES	Brett Lloyd
	NPS – Intermountain Region	~~Paul Cerda~~		Montana Sheriff's & Peace Officers	~~Steve Holton~~
X	USFS – Region 1	Craig Glazier	X	Montana Fire Chiefs Association	Rich Cowger
X	U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service	Tate Fischer	X	Facilitator	Karly DeMars

Deputies and Others: Aitor Bidaburu (NMAC), Corey Buhl (NR Ops), Kate Holsapple (NRCC), Willie Knudsen (NPS), Melissa Swain (USFS), Adriane Beck (MT County Fire Wardens), Marty Adell (BLM-Idaho), Hunter Noor (NDFS), Brian Nickolay (MT Fire Chiefs Association), Cory Calnan (MT-DNRC), Jeni Jeresek (USFS), Alicia Schiltz (USFS), Craig Howells (NRCG Ops Committee, BLM), Morganne Lehr (USFS, Facilitator)

Opening Remarks: Chair Bryce Rogers opened the meeting by congratulating Aaron Thompson on his selection as the DOI U.S. Wildland Fire – Northern Rockies Fire Chief.

Standing Reports

- **NWCG/NMAC Update:** Aitor Bidaburu provided an NWCG/NMAC update, noting that both groups are currently operating with a single DOI representative, with Eric Fransted selected for NWCG and a NMAC selection forthcoming. Activity levels have increased slightly, though IHC availability remains low. Several recent memos were highlighted, including FMB guidance on updated fire strategy terminology—developed by the national federal fire chiefs—which will require NWCG vetting and is expected to be reflected in upcoming IMSR updates (e.g., "direct extinguishment" and "indirect confinement"). FMB will review related recommendations this week. Additional guidance included the WildCAD-e resource integration memo aligned with executive order objectives. NMAC coordination areas have also been adjusted, with Aitor supporting NR and GB, NASF covering NW and SA, the Forest Service maintaining SW and EA, and DOI taking AK, CA, and RM. Significant organizational changes continue, including DOI GS-13/14 job announcements and workforce transitions.
- **CGAC Report Out**: Dennis Strange had nothing to report
- **NRCC Operations:** Corey Buhl reminded districts and forests to stay engaged on staff calls and maintain close coordination with field units in support of national efforts. With fire season approaching quickly in the Northern Rockies and continued dry conditions in the southwest corner of the state, he emphasized the importance of retaining sufficient resources locally before committing them nationally.
- **NRCC Update**: Kate Holsapple provided an NRCC update, highlighting ongoing IT challenges at local dispatch centers, with issues elevated to the FS CIO and a subcommittee established to improve communication, track problems, and implement solutions such as open WiFi, phone upgrades, and automatic failover systems, pending funding and staffing. She noted improved responsiveness from NICC/NMAC on resource integration efforts and announced an upcoming Center Manager meeting next month. The IQCS 2.0 transition continues to be challenging, impacting resource ordering and many

responders. Staffing updates include Liz Bauer starting as Assistant Aircraft Coordinator next week, Beau Richardson selected as Deputy Center Manager, and recruitment underway to backfill Beau's position, with applications due Thursday; Montana also reported ongoing IQCS-related issues.

- **NRCG Committee Updates:**
    - **Prevention/Education Committee:** Matt Hall reported that the Prevention/Education Committee will meet April 1–2, with a focus on reviewing and refining the restrictions and closures process, including clarifying zone contacts and existing guidance. The committee is also advancing a combined outreach campaign for gas station TV and May Wildfire Awareness Month. Ongoing discussions include concerns from western Montana about aligning restriction boundaries more closely with county lines rather than geographic area boundaries; however, changes to those boundaries are not currently supported. Distinctions between restriction and closure zones remain outlined in existing guidance and will continue to be emphasized.
    - **IC Subcommittee:** Morganne Lehr reported that the committee is meeting this week and continues to participate on the IMT Capacity Tasking and are in discussions on developing framework for IMT health.

Unfinished Business

- **NRCG Financial Agreement** – Jeni Jeresek introduced Alicia Schiltz and provided background on the NRCG Financial Agreement, which supports shared workload across the coordination center, training, and IMT functions. The agreement outlines fair share cost percentages (reflected in line 22 of the spreadsheet) and includes an exchange of funds, with DNRC contributing $92,400. The current DOI agency cost split will remain in place for 2026, with adjustments anticipated in 2027. The agreement received support from FWS and DNRC, with IDL also engaged in the discussion.
    - **DECISION:** All financial agencies were in support of the proposed 2026 NRCG financial agreement (BIA, BLM, FWS, IDL, MT DNRC, NDFS *(responded via email),* NPS, USFS). Jeni and Alicia will move forward to finalize the agreement. Once finalized, agencies can work privately to exchange funds as agreed upon.

- **Buying Teams / USFS Stance on 2026 Season Procurement Update:** Melissa Swain provided an update on Buying Teams and the USFS stance for the 2026 season, referencing NMAC correspondence (M2026-03) on the joint FS/DOI Procurement Surge Model. Current guidance largely aligns with the memo, including that personnel from any agency may apply to participate on Surge/Buying Teams. Questions remain regarding how these teams will support state incidents. Ongoing discussions, including coordination with the IBS group this week in Coeur d'Alene, are focused on defining the role of buying teams, strengthening local support, and aligning implementation at the Northern Rockies level.

New Business

- **Operations Committee Tasking Update:** Craig Howells provided an update on the Operations Committee tasking effort, noting a core group (Cory Calnan, Mike Behrens, C. Howells, Corey Buhl, Bryce Barth, Scott Schuster, Billy Phillips) has been meeting regularly to advance three key priorities: (1) developing an initial Type 3 IMT by spring 2027, (2) adding an additional CIMT in the Northern Rockies by 2029, and (3) identifying a process to replace CIMTs over time. For Task 1, the group is exploring early identification of a pool of Type 3 ICs, including a potential standalone announcement outside the normal recruitment cycle, with a selected IC and deputy beginning roster development ahead of broader hiring. For Task 2, they propose a questionnaire for recent IMT applicants to better understand participation drivers and workforce intent. The group is seeking NRCG guidance on team sponsorship, support for developing and distributing the survey (potentially introduced at an IMT meeting), and direction on timing for spring IC nominations.
    - NRCG supports conducting ICT3 recruitment outside of the normal recruitment cycle and will coordinate with the IMT Coordinator to implement.
    - NRCG also affirmed its intent to support any new IMTs developed through this process; specific agency sponsorship has not yet been determined, but the group is committed to identifying future sponsors.

- **U.S. Wildland Fire Service Transition:** Aaron Thompson provided an update on the U.S. Wildland Fire Service transition, noting changes at NMAC, which has shifted from four DOI representatives to a single Fire Service representative, prompting discussion on impacts to coordinating groups. NRCG discussed using the April in-person meeting as the final convening of the current structure to recognize the group's work, with a transition in May to a single WFS representative, likely Aaron in the interim. Key considerations include chair roles, committee liaisons, team sponsorship, future leadership (including next chair, Eastern Montana Zone, Ops Committee and IC Subcommittee representation), and development of the 2027 financial plan. State partners emphasized the importance of early engagement and maintaining flexibility and communication. If no major gaps are identified, NRCG plans to move forward with the transition in May, with additional focus on committee structure, charters, and ensuring continued support moving forward.

- **Transition of Montana County Fire Wardens Representative:** Adriane Beck provided an update on the Montana County Fire Wardens representative transition, noting that Adriane Beck will serve as the primary representative starting in April 2026, with Patrick Lonergan as the deputy.

- **DISCUSSION | NRCG Leaders Intent to IMT Memo/Message:** NRCG discussed leaders' intent for an IMT memo/message, aligned with the Ops/IC Committee tasking and upcoming survey efforts. The group emphasized maintaining consistency through change, with flexibility on message sequencing relative to other leaders. The message should be brief (20–30 minutes or less) and include a welcoming tone, acknowledgment of change and fatigue, appreciation for IMT members, and an overview of key taskings and direction. Additional elements may include introductions from coordinating group members and forward-looking messaging tied to end-of-day recognition or awards. IDL highlighted the importance of reinforcing strong coordination and communication across all partners, with a unifying theme focused on collaboration and minimizing impacts to personnel on the ground.

- **UPDATE | April NRCG Spring Meeting**: The upcoming meeting will take place Tuesday, April 7 and Wednesday, April 8 from 0800-1200 hours each day at the Holiday Inn Downtown. The group discussed agenda topics and meeting intent. The GMAC exercise will take place on Wednesday morning. The agenda will be out in the next week.

Next Meeting: April 7-8, 2026 in Missoula, MT/virtual – specifics TBD.