

# **Safety Assistance Teams (SATEams)**

## **Purpose and Function**

This paper outlines the Leader's Intent for the use of Safety Assistance Teams, suggested objectives, team makeup, and principles of their operation. SATEams are not a standardized NWCG structure but are a means for a GMAC group to promote fireline safety during busy fire seasons.

### SATEam Goal

The key word in Safety Assistance Team is "Assistance". Team visits are not inspections, but emphasize mentally engaging individual firefighters, assisting managers and administrators grasp potential issues, and keeping all committed to firefighting safety fundamentals.

### Description

- Safety Assistance Teams (SATEams) assist fire management and operations with site visits to firefighters, fire managers, and program leaders.
- SATEams are intended to be service oriented, assisting the local units.
- In one sense SATEams are "Lookouts", skilled in recognizing potentially hazardous conditions. They provide early warning where accident prone circumstances exist.
- By achieving dialog at all organizational levels, team members listen carefully to concerns and observations. Through respectful inquiry, following clues, indicators, and intuitive alarms, the intent is to identify and intercept the negative series of events usually preceding accidents.
- As appropriate, they provide intervention through:
  - program or geographic area attention
  - consultation with line officers
  - discussion with fire overhead
  - direct action with employees
- Direct intervention, circumventing normal chain of command or interpersonal tact, is authorized when necessary; however, the overall objective is to create a work environment where the normal operating procedures are responsible for safe practices.
- A collateral purpose is to give intense exposure and education to an administrator or other individual who will benefit from this type of participation.

### Safety Assistance Team Members and Participants

- Team members are selected based on a combination of technical experience and personality. The personalities and interpersonal skills of the team members can be the largest factor in team success.
  - Technical expertise in the past has included:
    - Organization

- Suppression
  - Fire behavior
  - Structure fire
  - Training
  - Aviation safety, etc.
- Personality traits include:
  - Credibility and experience
  - Listening skills
  - Insightfulness
  - Dynamic interaction (the ability to relate to field firefighters and line officers)
  - The ability to choose an appropriate course of action for each concern
- Considerations for the SATeam leaders and participants include:
  - A mix of regional and out of region personnel
  - Retirees with excellent skills and reputation may be summoned to carry out the safety mission.
  - Involve representatives from most inter-agency partners so field personnel have someone they can relate to.
- Several strategies are available for team composition.
  - One successful format includes a senior individual with an extensive professional network at the administrative level. One or two seasoned “fire dogs” take advantage of the inroads gained by the senior administrator.
  - An individual or pair of credible experienced firefighters with safety experience may work from the bottom up, visiting with crews, station managers, dispatchers, and fireline supervisors.
  - In addition, individuals who are peripheral to fire management, who would benefit from an intense initiation into fireline safety may be selected to accompany more experienced SATeam members. Examples include Structure fire officials, Forest Supervisors, Deputy Regional Forester, agency Occupational Safety and Health professionals, and others with good common sense, relationship, and observational skills. Prior experience with this type of team member has proven to be an important educational opportunity that should not be missed.
  - To help with documentation, a scribe may be assigned. Or, a scribe may meet with the team and transcribe notes into an electronic format.

## Process

- Each team or individual is briefed by the designated safety coordinator, and a general agenda is determined based on the expertise of members, and the current situation.
- Topics have included:
  - Preparedness for multiple large incidents
  - Triggers for establishing shadow positions (at the forest, district and FMO levels)
  - Predicted fire behavior and / or weather
  - Severity resources
  - Coordination with cooperating agencies
  - Geographic and national initiatives
  - Suppression safety fundamentals
  - Work / rest
  - Hazard trees
  - Driving, etc.
  - Additional topics may be assigned as the situation, unique capabilities, or opportunities emerge.
- Scope of the mission will be identified and may range from a specific facility to a broad mix of agencies and sites. SATeams are given general geographic objectives, maps, local contacts, and a Geographic Area Mobilization Plan (which includes interagency organizational information). With a combination of personal contacts and contacts provided by the designated coordinator, SATeams are generally given broad latitude to follow the leads provided by local managers and firefighters. Communicating openly with local officials is always the rule.
- SATeams will generally check in and brief the coordinator or other designated point of contact daily. They will maintain cell phone or other means of contact. Significant findings or trends that are appearing during the trip should be reported to the MAC group as an early heads up as deemed appropriate by the team leader.
- Whenever possible, SATeams will 'close the loop', meaning they will follow up by seeing corrective actions have indeed been accomplished. This also should be accomplished with a service oriented 'How can we help?' approach.
- SATeams may encounter complex interpersonal or employee performance situations. They are to focus on the specific safety related facts, and avoid venturing beyond their training and skill. While these situations should not be ignored, they are often identified and referred to an appropriate official.
- As this is not an inspection or investigation, arriving unannounced should be avoided. A rigid itinerary is not necessary, but targeted sites should be contacted ahead of time. Calling several days in advanced to determine the best times and days is useful, and then a courtesy call as arrival is nearer. Likewise, the MAC group should announce through agency and interagency channels that the SATeams will be coming to field locations, what their purpose is, and that they are sanctioned by the MAC.
- Each mission will have a written report that includes an itinerary, and findings. Not all observations warrant documentation; however significant situations, items

requiring later or off-season follow-up, and anything identified as a trend should be included.

- Team members should either be requested to bring their own laptop computers (preferably with wireless or broadband internet capabilities) or be issued agency computers for use during the review trips. Agencies may need to provide IT support to ensure the team has access to the internet through their networks as the team travels.

### Areas of focus

Since Type 1 and 2 Incident Management Teams have a safety program, emphasis is placed at field stations and on Type 5, 4, and 3 fires, where initial attack forces have less access to safety services. However, when the level of fire activity requires that incident management teams be brought in from outside the area, Type 1 & 2 fires may be given equal billing with Type 3, 4, and 5 resources. Fact finding missions may also be assigned in relation to a specific unit's issues.

### GMAC Safety Specialist Role

When multiple teams and individuals are assigned, they shall be managed by a designated coordinator. This coordinator is a single point contact for SATeams, and other Geographic Area safety issues.

The Geographic Area Coordinating Group will determine if the level of activity warrants a dedicated fireline safety specialist working for the MAC group as part of the MAC support function who is devoted to geographic area fire safety program direction or if agency safety and operations personnel can fill this function. When the tempo of fire activity is lower, such as when the fire season is ramping up, this person may make field visits personally or as part of a Safety Assistance Team. As the fire season escalates it may be necessary to keep one person at the Coordination Center to manage additional Safety Assistance Teams, areas of emphasis, and fire safety messages.

### Team Documentation

SATeam accomplishments and findings should be documented in writing, preferably as the team travels. The purpose for this documentation is threefold:

- An issue at one site is most likely occurring at other locations. Anyone reading the reports will be able to identify situations in their own realm.
- Trends and situations requiring further attention are captured before they are lost to the memory of team members.
- Team involvement and issue identification is documented in the event a situation becomes more complicated.

### Measures of Success

- Absence of accidents is always an indication of careful management.

- Coherent written documentation shares knowledge and ensures that insights and issues do not become lost.
- After a successful season, feedback to the GMAC often includes comments that the SATeam was a welcomed visitor; and that the team members were sincerely motivated by positive assistance to the local unit.
- As the SATeam leaves the local unit, comments such as “We’re glad you came”, and “Come back anytime” are the norm.
- Over the years, suspicion has been replaced with gratitude. Many issues identified by SATeams in the past are not recurring; meaning success has been achieved in both identifying and eliminating safety liabilities.

### Emphasis Topics from the Geographic Area MAC Group

The GMAC may develop one or more safety emphasis topics based on national or geographic area situation or recent occurrences, emerging issues, incidents from past seasons. These key safety topics can be highlighted by the MAC in interagency messages, announced at the IC’s conference call, and reinforced through other contacts. These topics can become emphasis topics for traveling Safety Assistance Teams and individuals. In the past some SATeams have found it useful to use the safety emphasis topics, perhaps including a standard presentation, as a way to break the ice and develop a dialog with the fire personnel at the location they are visiting. From there discussions may lead to a variety of other topics.

- Examples of MAC safety emphasis topics and GMAC mailings
  - Preparing for a siege, or long fire season, and responsibly monitoring and managing employee’s well-being.
  - Lightning ignitions that do not show for several days, and when they do emerge, they often took off with a vengeance. The concern is that a firefighter committed to an initial attack fire, or a division of a large fire, may be sharing a canyon with an undetected ignition. Direction is to add monitoring the entire landscape to a lookout’s responsibilities.
  - Asking each supervisor to not only direct firefighters to establish lookouts , escape routes, and safety zones, but also to personally confirm that they are actually in place, that they are adequate, and that they are understood by all.
  - See attached example ‘CONSIDER EACH STEP’ which was initiated in response to ankle and knee injuries, slips, trips and falls, and the predictable increase of this type of injuries during the late season.
  - Driving safety, remembering previous tragic motor vehicle accidents- August 31, ‘Demobilization Driving Safety’ is designed to mentally engage the workforce in the task of driving home, as wells as reiterating the company policy. Mitch Decoteau pondered onto the issue of convoy driving possibly having safety issues.
  - Tree falling injuries and close calls, plus the ongoing exposure of suppression, mop-up, rehab, and BAER workers prompted a tree hazard alert.

Example 1 (ON GEOGRAPHIC AREA MAC GROUP LETTERHEAD)

Late Fire Season Safety Emphasis

**“Consider Each Step”**

Literally

A deliberate response to difficult terrain  
and an extended fire season

**Background:**

- Teams and stations are to be applauded for their safety efforts. We have a good program managed by good people. The flow of weather and fire behavior information has been exceptional. Northern Rockies MAC has avoided long and daily litanies of safety alerts; and instead has stressed providing a safety service, chosen pertinent themes and asked for your focus.

**Issue:**

- From previous years we have learned that slips, trips and falls, hazard trees and other terrain accident rates take a dramatic increase during a waning fire season. These risks may seem less dramatic than huge fire runs and entrapment avoidance, but seemingly mundane joint injuries may turn into lifetime problems for the employee. We do not want to detract from the entrapment avoidance, wind events, tree hazards, driving, and topics you have managed so well.

**Solution:**

- For the duration of the season, employ the theme “**Consider Each Step**”
- Mitigate the cumulative effects of work on difficult terrain
- Look for other ways over and around obstacles
- Break up long downhill hikes
- Consider the terrain a crew is accustomed to
- Heed that inner-voice that so often anticipates accidents
- Ask folks to consider the consequences if they were to fall

**Conclusion:**

- This is not a prescriptive initiative. The best successes have been when the workforce becomes mentally engaged in the problem, and creates local solutions. We suggest 6 minute type tailgate sessions (let them go 12, or 18+ minutes) using the theme “**CONSIDER EACH STEP**”.

Example 2 (ON GEOGRAPHIC AREA MAC GROUP LETTERHEAD)

To: Agency Administrators  
Area Commands  
Incident Management Teams

In the last week there has been a series of minor to tragic vehicle accidents. We are asking each Incident Management Team and home station to turn your attention to driving safety.

Please take this opportunity to stress the following basics with all employees:

- Driving Safety is the 2003 NWCG Emphasis Topic. Go to [www.nifc.gov](http://www.nifc.gov), click on **Safety**.
- Cumulative fatigue will hamper vehicle and equipment operators' alertness and reaction time.
- Driving hours and duty day limitations must be monitored; however, these regulations define the maximum, and more conservative interpretations may be appropriate.
- Released resources must have trip planning that eliminates conflicts with fatigue management.
- We have received reports that seasoned bus drivers are returning to school bus duties, and replacements may not be as skilled on mountain roads.
- Individuals, and particularly crew leadership, are obligated to monitor the driving practices and skill level of all drivers, and intervene if necessary.
- We are approaching Labor Day weekend and the public will be on the roads in higher numbers than usual.

Firefighter and public safety remain our number one priority and that includes transportation to and from fires, as well as on the line and in camp.

/s/ Geographic Area MAC Chair

Example 3 (ON GEOGRAPHIC AREA MAC GROUP LETTERHEAD)

Date: August 31, 2003

Subject: Demobilization Driving Safety

To: Safety Officers and Demobilization Personnel

Please thank all demobilizing suppression and support people for their productive and safe contributions through this historic 2003 Northern Rockies fire season.

Remind them also that the job is not done until they are home safe with their families.

The attached documents are to be reproduced, and handed to each resource driving home.

- The first page is a reminder of the NWCG incident driving policy.
- The second page is intended as food for thought. We have no evidence that convoy driving is a factor in any of the accidents this season. The author, however; in an honest attempt to prevent further tragedy, has shared thoughtful comments in an attempt to generate discussion. We are confident that smart people who read and discuss these ideas, will successfully mitigate the risks identified.
- Please visit the Scratchline Special Edition of Driving Responsibilities at <http://www.wildfirelessons.net/Scratchline/specialLL.pdf>

It would be valuable to post these papers on bulletin boards at fire camps, dispatch offices and demobilization/staging areas.

Our sincere thanks, and our sincere concern for their safe journey home may be enough to help folks stay focused, and make appropriate choices on the highway.

/s/ Geographic Area MAC Chair

Enclosures

**VEHICLE ACCIDENTS KILL MORE FIREFIGHTERS THAN ANY OTHER CAUSE**

- DRIVERS WILL DRIVE ONLY IF THEY HAVE HAD 8 CONSECUTIVE HOURS OFF DUTY BEFORE BEGINNING A SHIFT.
- NO DRIVER WILL DRIVE MORE THAN 10 HRS BEHIND THE WHEEL.
- MULTIPLE DRIVERS IN A SINGLE VEHICLE MAY NOT DRIVE MORE THAN A TOTAL DRIVING TIME OF 16 HOURS (DUTY DAY).
- DURING MOBILIZATION OR DEMOBILIZATION TRAVEL ONLY BETWEEN 0500 AND 2200 HOURS.
- DRIVE NO MORE THAN 2 HOURS WITHOUT A REST BREAK. OPERATORS OF VEHICLES CARRYING 16 OR MORE PASSENGERS WILL STOP FOR 10 MINUTES EVERY HOUR.
- DRIVE DEFENSIVELY WITH SEAT BELTS AND LIGHTS ON AT ALL TIMES.

***Drivers are responsible to follow these policies!  
Supervisors are responsible to monitor adherence!***

***TRAGICALLY, 8 FIREFIGHTERS DIED IN A RECENT ACCIDENT—ONE DEATH IS TOO MANY—DON'T BECOME A STATISTIC.***