

## ***10. Managing Incident Information***

*Fire Information, Local Contact Person, Internal  
Communication, Key Contacts*



# 10. Managing Incident Information

## A. Incident Information

Keeping internal and external contacts informed is an important aspect of managing a fire or other incident. Getting the facts out to people in a timely manner is the primary objective of a fire information strategy.

In an initial attack situation, the dispatcher(s) essentially function as a fire information officer. Once the public or media are aware of an incident, they will be demanding information. If this situation begins to interfere with performance of dispatching duties, it is appropriate to request the assistance of a local public affairs officer (PAO) or a trained incident information officer (IIO). Until that person arrives, phone calls should be logged (name, affiliation, phone number), and personnel should simply tell the public and media someone will call them back as soon as possible.

Once a PAO/IIO is on the scene, he/she should be briefed and given a workspace. Designating a person at least one line for phone traffic and a second line for a PC for fire information will establish a central source and relieve the dispatcher and other incident personnel from the responsibility of responding to requests from the public or media. The IIO will then organize basic information (facts and a map), assess the situation, and determine if there is a need for additional help. He/she may recommend ordering one or more people.

Many news media monitor agency radios and often are en route to incidents as soon as they are aware of them. An IIO should be sent to the incident scene to deal with media and serve as a direct contact for the IIO handling phone inquiries.

Fire staff/agency administrators should work with PAOs and IIOs to evaluate the level of public and media interest in an incident and develop an appropriate information strategy. The steps to designing a strategy include:

- Identify goals and objectives.
- Identify key audiences.
- Determine which issues are important to communicate.
- Determine key audiences' expectations.
- Identify appropriate communication tools.
- Identify the timeframes involved.
- Identify people with roles/responsibilities.
- Determine any followup needed.

An IIO is an integral member of an incident management team. In addition to the tasks described above, the IIO can provide information to incident personnel, Zone or Southwest Area Intelligence Section, local agency personnel and cooperators; local, county, state, and Federal elected officials; track down and dispel rumors/misinformation; be alert to sensitive social/political/environmental issues and inform the management team; use the incident to communicate other messages; establish and maintain relationships with individuals/communities affected by an incident; and assist with special situations such as airplane crashes, vehicle accidents, evacuations and other events that may occur during an incident. Above all, an IIO can keep incident information in an active, rather than reactive mode.

## **B. Local Contact**

Assigning a local contact person to the IIO will greatly facilitate the information process. A local person can quickly provide information about the local media, community concerns, key contacts, social and political issues, incident history, local geography and place names, road access and other valuable details about the area.

## **C. Internal Communication**

Due to the pressure of dealing with the information needs of the public, news media, and elected officials, we sometimes forget the importance of our internal audiences. These include incident personnel, local agency personnel, and cooperating agencies who may be left out of the loop if the focus is on external contacts. An IIO and the local contact should ensure that a variety of communication methods (e-mail, fax, individual calls, bulletin boards, etc.) are utilized to keep people apprised of information as it becomes available. Among other things, this fosters morale and promotes support for incident management.

## **D. Critical Information Module**

In the event of a fatality or other critical incident, the Southwest Coordination Center will dispatch a Critical Information Module if requested by an incident management team on an incident with a need for critical information handling. The Critical Information Module will work for the Incident Commander and be attached to the Team Information Officer. This 7-person module will include 6 information officers and a technical (computer) specialist.

## **E. Key Contacts**

Maintaining a list of key contacts can be useful to both the local unit and the IMT when they arrive. These contacts may include key political figures in the area, cooperators, landowners of in-holdings that may affect, or be affected by, suppression activities or the fire itself, and news media sources.

# Key Contacts

<u>Name</u>	<u>Affiliation</u>	<u>Phone Number</u>
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## **Southwest Area Coordination Group**

### **Southwest Area Agency Administrator/Incident Management Team Internal Implementation Guidelines for Working with News Media**

May 21, 2004

#### **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

The Media plays an important role in the development of an informed public. It is the best interest of resource and incident managers to provide as much access to the Media as the situation allows (i.e. safety, or legal considerations). The media is guaranteed certain rights under the First Amendment to the Constitution. Members of the media are not entitled to unrestricted access to all aspects of incident operations, but denial of access will be the exception and not the rule. This guide will help the agency administrator/line officer (responsible official) determine what level of access can be allowed.

Denial of access is the exception, not the rule. Media access may be limited when:

- Safety is a significant concern. (i.e. Poor escape routes; travel to and from the site; narrow roads, etc; put others at risk; poor communications; extreme/erratic fire behavior).
- Interferes with or compromises incident operations. (i.e. vehicles or aircraft blocking access for firefighters; strategy/debriefing meetings).
- Compromises integrity of an investigation or investigation scene.
- Limits or violates security or personal privacy of emergency workers/firefighters.
- Not approved by non-public or tribal entity.

Your responsibility is to allow access to the maximum extent possible and convey these expectations to the Incident Commander. These guidelines will assist you in preparing for media operations in three areas: The Delegation of Authority, Information Operations, and Command Considerations.

#### **PURPOSE**

This document provides guidelines for consideration by Agency Administrators and Incident Managers to work effectively and SAFELY with the news media during incidents. Incidents create situations where resources are limited in a dynamic and hazardous environment with compressed timeframes. The intent of these guidelines is to enable the people served by the agencies represented here to receive information through the news media that is accurate, thorough and up to date.

These guidelines are presented in a format consistent with the chronology of a management team assuming responsibility for an incident. The responsible official needs to develop a local unit media policy prior to the arrival of an Incident Management Team.

#### **A. Agency Administrator/Line Officer/Responsible Official Considerations**

1. Prior to fire season develop a communication plan to identify key audiences, key messages, and protocol for release of information.
- 2. Delegation of Authority**
  - a. All jurisdictions and agencies agree on the roles and responsibilities that will be retained and those that will be delegated to the Incident Management Team. (e.g. Threatened & Endangered, and other sensitive issues questions and releases will be not delegated to the Incident Management Team)
  - b. Define jurisdictional protocols (e.g. Local law enforcement has jurisdiction over evacuations, security of evacuated area, media access into closed communities and access to burned homes/structures on private land – delegate to Incident Management Team or identify key contact).
  - c. Responsible official (s) determine if there will be a Joint Information Center (JIC) for all media information, or if each agency/jurisdiction provide their own information (refer media to individual agencies).
  - d. Determine how you want the team to interact with either the JIC or individual agency.
  - e. Identify key public affairs contacts from each jurisdictional agency.
  - f. Define expectations for dissemination of information (e.g. public meetings, consistent coordinated messages – spokesperson(s))
  - g. Provide “accurate and timely dissemination of incident information” as an Incident Objective, with definition and timeline for accomplishment.
  - h. Determine whether or not to honor Memorandum of Understandings or other agreements (Agreement must be presented to the Agency Administrator) from other jurisdictional areas outside the host agency.

See Attachment 1, Examples of wording for Delegation.

**B. Agency Administrator Briefing**

Interagency Standards for Fire and Fire Aviation Operations 2004, Chapter 11, Appendix 11-4, page 11-25, Agency Administrators Briefing to Incident Management Team (Attachment 2), add the following addendum to section Transition that apply in the Southwest Geographic Area:

- Key Public Affairs Contacts for each jurisdiction with incident responsibilities.
- Identify whether to honor a formal/informal agreement with media from outside your local authority (i.e. Forest Service Memorandum of Understanding with Hot Shot crew and newspaper reporter.)
- Identify key messages you expect the Incident Management Team to convey to the public.
- Identify whether to use a Joint Information Center or send referrals to individual agency Public Affairs Officer’s.
- Provide documentation of any closures or restrictions in effect.

**C. Incident Management Team Information Considerations**

This section defines tactical considerations for the Information function of the Incident Management Team:

1. On incidents with an intense media interest, develop a media protocol to address “ground rules” while covering the incident. This document provides all media representatives with clear and consistent direction. This protocol should include the following:
  - a. Whether areas are closed to the media and a short explanation of why
  - b. Safety message
  - c. Where and who to contact
  - d. Place and time of media briefing/press conference
  - e. What areas are immediately available for photographs, video, and live shots
  - f. What is required for escorted tours into closed or hazardous areas
2. Media representatives must be aware of what to expect during the incident, including specific safety concerns, and access options. Provide consistent direction.
3. When qualified escorts in the information group are limited, or access into the area is restricted, consider the use of “joint shared coverage” (preference is not to use the term “pool”). Ask the media to design the make-up of the joint shared coverage group, limiting to a set size.
4. Document reasons for access restrictions, i.e. current fire behavior or other safety hazards, closures imposed by other jurisdictions, etc.
5. Treat all media consistently and fairly, with consideration of formal agreements and/or prior training or certifications.
6. Emphasize Agency key messages as they relate to this incident (safety, fire behavior, National Fire Plan implementation, forest health issues, Local Government Cooperation, and Local Agency Administration messages).
7. Include cooperating agencies and partners in all public and media contacts.
8. Facilitate briefings with subject matter experts (e.g. Deputy IC, Unit Manager/Representative, local government officials, etc.)
9. Databases and electronic records containing fire incident and administrative records are generally open to the public. When feasible, fire progression maps and other data released on paper shall also be released at the same time or sooner in electronic form, such as disk, e-mail or FTP site download.

#### D. Command Considerations

This section defines general considerations for the Commander and their General Staff:

1. Where Unified Command, or Area Command, is not in place, local jurisdictions must be involved in making decisions concerning where media access will be allowed or restricted. When the local authority has jurisdiction or are providing law enforcement support to agency closures Incident Management Teams must recognize and respect their authority.
2. Include the information function in discussion or decisions regarding access into evacuated areas and areas where homes/structures are lost.
3. Should consider having or assigning a team liaison officer to assist with local coordination.
4. Determine early in the incident what access to ICP will be allowed to media representatives through the Incident Communication Plan. Consider long-term implications of where media are staged and/or access is authorized. (e.g. future threats to ICP, evacuation scenarios).
5. Evaluate during each operational period what areas of the incident will not be accessible to the media.
6. Assess what special messages or information may need to be emphasized in discussions with the media based on local issues and politics.



These guidelines are intended to be a framework for partnering with the media. It is important to remember that each incident is different and therefore must be addressed in a flexible manner.

## REFERENCES

1. Interagency Standards for Fire and Fire Aviation Operations 2004.
2. Line Officer's Guide to Wildland Fire Decision Making, USDA Forest Service, Southwestern Region (Section 9 Delegation of Authority, page 3 Components to be included in Delegation of Authority – guidelines for media relations and incident information management)
3. "National Media Guide for Emergency and Disaster Incidents- A report by the National Press Photographers Association"
4. "United States Code of Federal Regulations"
5. "Arizona Revised Statutes"
6. "New Mexico Statutes Annotated"
7. "Fireline Handbook"

## ATTACHMENT 1

Examples of Delegation language:

- Example 1: A Joint Interagency Information Center is established and reports to the host agency. The primary purpose at this point in time is to continue to manage the long-term information needs of the agency for current activities, develop and begin to implement a long-term communication and strategy plan and initiate a transition of Joint Information Center responsibilities and activities to appropriate agency staff. These activities will be coordinated with the Agency Administrator. A communication plan has been developed to identify key audiences, key messages, and protocol for release of information. The Incident Management Team will, in cooperation with the Joint Information Center (JIC) provide daily information to personnel at the JIC for their use in designing information campaigns to keep the public informed on key activities. Information activities can be coordinated with the Agency through PAO \_\_\_\_\_ (name) \_\_\_\_\_ (phone number).(List all responsible agencies). The Information Center phone number is \_\_\_\_\_.
- Example 2: A Joint Interagency Information Center has been established and reports to \_\_\_\_\_. The purpose is to handle the long-term information needs of the agencies for current activities and into the future as we transition into

rehabilitation actions. Some items this group will do is; gather information and respond to inquires from political and public interests, work with media (print, radio, TV), share information amongst all the agencies' employees, take advantage of teachable moments (National Fire Plan, learn about fire effects, homeowner fire prevention, current activities on the fire, wilderness fire management, local fire restrictions, ...), and continue to meet community information needs. \_\_\_\_\_ (Area Command, Incident Management Team) will, in cooperation with the Fire Information Center, prepare, coordinate and monitor an effective fire information plan and center operating guidelines. In addition to serving the needs of the media, the information plan should address: providing information to the media and to communities within the area, recreation sites, travelers and employees. Information sharing should include scheduling, organizing and facilitating public meeting as needed through the Incident Management Team's. Information should include good maps that show daily progress of the fire, trigger points for potential evacuation notices, and the boundaries of the fire with good reference points listed. Additionally, information pertaining to the previous day's accomplishments, resources on board, and general operations being planned and implemented would be quite informative and valuable to our publics and employees. Potential problems such as hazardous areas, wind events, etc. should also be shared. News releases with local media should also be made frequently. This information should be formatted so that it can be added to web pages. Information activities should include coordination with congressional and local officials. All public information should be coordinated with the Fire Information Center as well as agency PAOs. You may coordinate information activities, with the agency PAO \_\_\_\_\_ (name), \_\_\_\_\_ (phone number). (List all responsible agencies). The Information Center phone number is \_\_\_\_\_.

ATTACHMENT 2

Interagency Standards for Fire and Fire Aviation Operations 2004, Chapter 11, Appendix 11-4, page 11-25, Agency Administrators Briefing to Incident Management Team.

**Incident Information**

IIO Organization Reports To:

Incident Commander:  
Local Public Affairs:

Agency Administrator:  
Other:

Provide Incident Information Updates:

Unit FMO:  
Local Public Affairs:

Expanded Dispatch:  
Other: