

# Southeast Arizona/Southwestern New Mexico Zone

## Border Fire Response Protocol

**PURPOSE:** The Southeast Arizona/Southwestern New Mexico Zone, hereinafter referred to as the Zone, is dedicated to safe and efficient initial attack on wildfires that require suppression. An intricate element in this efficiency is the Zone's mission to dispatch the closest available resources. Critical to the safety of the firefighters in initial attack on border fires, is the sharing of intelligence and having a standard set of protocols that may be implemented to reduce risk. The following *Border Fire Response Protocol* attempts to collect and distribute current information and procedures, in an effort to enhance firefighter safety and situational awareness in and around the fire environment near the international border. This set of protocols is intended as guidance for fires reported in the "Elevated Risk Area" as indicated on the Zone *International Border Watchouts* pocket card (Available upon request). However, discretion in their application may be exercised by any member of the Zone's fire management programs or Line Officers.

These protocols may be considered in the planning and implementation of wildfire suppression efforts as well as prescribed fire anywhere in the Zone, if they have potential application.

### PROTOCOL RESPONSIBILITIES:

#### Fire Management Program

- Ensure all firefighters, locals and guests, have in their possession, the Zone *International Border Watchouts* pocket card.
- Local (**Agency or District specific**) fire management should seek periodic updates on law enforcement activity, concerns, and special emphasis projects. Special effort should be made in the late spring of each year for a preseason update from agencies' LE&I and U.S. Customs and Border Patrol. Local Fire management is encouraged to meet with local U.S. Customs and Border Patrol officials in the spring of every year to discuss the upcoming fire season and security issues.
- Daily fire season briefings should include updates as acquired, periodic review of the *International Border Watchouts* card, and this Border Fire Response Protocol.
- This protocol should be shared with all firefighters in the Zone, including resources or individuals on detail, severity resources, and resources otherwise assigned to Zone agencies. Ensure any local-specific policies or protocols that are not covered here, are made known-- for example, if an agency has differing suppression policies and protocol for sending firefighters across the international border.
- All Zone Fire Management Officers and Line Officers should be familiar with this response protocol as well as the annual *Emergency Mutual Assistance Operating Plan* with Mexico. Further, Zone Fire Management Officers and Line Officers should ensure all incident commanders, including visiting or detailed ICs assigned to an incident on their unit, are familiar with the two aforementioned documents.

- For campaign fires or incidents requiring complex or outside management, the Zone and/or local overhead will assist in gaining US Customs & Border Protection (CBP) cooperation in incident management, preferably through a CBP liaison available to the management organization.

#### Tucson Dispatch Center (TDC)

- Follow established and normal procedures for collecting initial information and dispatching resources to a reported fire.
- As requested, place an order for a minimum of one Law Enforcement Officer (LEO) to be assigned to the fire as a security resource for fire fighters; providing deflection and relieving the IC from the distractions associated with border activity. Utilize cooperating agency LEOs when necessary due to unavailability of Zone Service LE. If the order cannot be filled immediately, the IC, FMO, and/or Line Officer has discretion in the decision to delay the commitment of resources to the incident. This security LEO order is the priority over an order for a Fire Investigator. Utilizing the same officer in both roles is at the discretion of the IC and the first LEO on scene.
- Initiate “Ground Deconfliction” procedures on all fires in the “Elevated Risk Area”, and in any other areas where intelligence leads dispatch to think there may be increased risk. This entails contacting US Customs & Border Protection Tucson Sector Office—Intelligence Officer and/or local agency Patrol Captains or Special Agents to notify them of the fire’s location and seek information from them regarding any law enforcement or known illegal activity of concern in the area.
- Report intelligence gathered from “Ground Deconfliction” to Incident Commander or first resource on scene, as well as the reporting Law Enforcement Officer. Follow-up with the IC and others is vital if not all positions are assigned or on scene when “Ground Deconfliction” is accomplished.
- Dispatchers will be familiar with the *Emergency Mutual Assistance Operating Plan* with Mexico. The plan and all contact names and numbers will be readily available in the dispatch office and distributed to or otherwise made available to Zone Fire Management Officials. As requested by the IC or Line Officers, the TDC will immediately make the appropriate contacts and obtain the appropriate permissions according to the operating plan and agreement.
- If aircraft are assigned to the fire, ensure pilots are notified to attempt to contact other aircraft that may be in the area of the incident. Utilize the rotor-wing deconfliction air-to-air frequency, 123.025.
- If night operations exist or if personnel rest over night (RON) on the fire scene, ensure the dispatch office is staffed accordingly. Prompt the IC for this information/decision if necessary. Ask if LE is requested to be on site during the overnight hours.
- If TDC is notified of any incident of field personnel encountering a deceased individual or human remains (not associated with incident activity or fire employee accident--there is other protocol in these cases), TDC will contact the local agency law enforcement and the local county sheriff’s office.

## Incident Resources and Local Fire Management Operations

- Local overhead in conjunction with the IC should determine the appropriate level of suppression response. Initial dispatch of resources will be based on an assessment by the IC and local fire management, keeping in mind the values at risk, the resources available, and the level of security needed and/or risk in the fire area. The availability of LE security should also be factored into the decision to commit resources.
- Dispatched/assigned resources should implement “Ground Following” procedures. Such procedures are an enhancement of current normal communication procedures:
  - √ Ensure acknowledgement of dispatch to the incident by the assigned resource.
  - √ While en route to the incident, keep TDC informed of your current location and direction of travel as noted by landmarks and/or major intersections with the local road system. This will also help to establish the best route into the scene for other resources.
  - √ Ensure each resource checks in with the IC and/or notifies TDC of being “on-scene.”
  - √ IC should maintain regular and periodic contact with TDC, reporting status updates for the duration of the incident.
  - √ Ensure each resource and/or the IC, notifies TDC as resources leave the scene.
  - √ Ensure all resources checkout with TDC, no sooner than they are parked back at the duty station. At the end of the operational period, ALL resources WILL BE accounted for and their location made known to TDC.
- Make any/all reasonable attempts to scout the area for any persons who might be unaware of the fire or might be in harm’s way. Example: an attempt should be made to determine if any person is within the boundaries of an area being considered for a burn-out operation.
- If a helicopter is dispatched to the incident, the helitack supervisor on board may consider using the aircraft to do a thorough reconnaissance of the area to increase the situational awareness for potential risk or suspicious activity. Care should be taken to keep this recon flight at a normal altitude expected over a fire so as not to be mistaken as having any other mission. Any suspicious activity or persons observed by this recon should be reported immediately. The helitack supervisor on board has complete discretion and authority to not engage the fire if there is any concern or until the situation can be mitigated.
- All personnel on scene share the responsibility with pilots to keep a watch for other low flying aircraft in the vicinity of the fire. Ensure pilots are monitoring any necessary air-to-air frequencies and ground personnel have the “Air Guard” frequency programmed into all radios.
- Consider sweeping an area or utilizing an aircraft to recon an area prior to any large firing operations.
- Look for opportunities to post an additional security lookout on scene, in addition to any needed fire lookout. This suggestion is in addition to the LEO assigned and this individual should stay in proximity of the rest of the firefighters. Aircraft over the fire for extended periods of time may be utilized to augment the need for monitoring the area surrounding the fire, so long as this effort does not interfere with the pilot’s attention to the current mission.

- Work in pairs whenever possible, including travel to and from border fires and on-scene tasks.
- Make all possible attempts to ensure that LE personnel are not mistaken as firefighters, and also ensure that no firefighter and/or fire vehicle can be mistaken as an LE vehicle. If the LEO's location on scene requires nomex PPE, LE will make attempts to utilize nomex other than the traditional yellow. The Coronado has acquired and made available, beige nomex shirts with "POLICE" marked on the back and FS LE Shields on the shoulder.
- If an LEO is required and/or requested for security (deflection) on a fire incident, the policy within the Interagency Fire & Aviation Operations Guide (Red Book) governing unescorted visits to the fire line will be applied. The officer must meet the standards to be on the line unescorted; basic fire training, annual refresher, PPE, radio equipment, and the 'WCT light walk test' (or LE&I equivalent physical test).
- Have alternative communications tools available on scene such as cellular and satellite phones or a human repeater. Maintain a positive communications link at all times. Be aware that there are several steps involved in securing proper permissions from the Mexican foresters and completing thorough airspace deconfliction. These tasks are not immediate.
- Nighttime operations or RON on scene of a border fire requires some additional mitigation and review of options.
  - √ Consider leaving the scene and returning home for the night, if the IC is comfortable with containment and the fire perimeter is secure.
  - √ Consider leaving the scene ONLY if fatigue is not a factor. The IC and if possible, the Line Officer should consider border security concerns in conjunction with the impact of fatigue caused by traveling home. Rely on risk management strategies to balance fatigue, travel, fire containment, and border security.
  - √ If taking action across the international border, make all possible attempts in strategy to return to the U.S. side of the border before dark.
  - √ If the need to RON on scene is determined, keep all personnel in one group and in one location. Ensure that the LEO security position has been filled and/or adequate LEO relief is on scene if personnel are going to RON on scene. Give ample notice and ensure that overnight dispatch operations are in place when no other form of communication is available or when suppression efforts and/or work is to be performed over night.
  - √ All attempts should be made to move any assigned rotor-winged aircraft into secure airports or facilities overnight.
- If a person(s) in distress is encountered, personnel should use discretion in offering critical first aid or other assistance. However, diligence and good situational awareness should be ahead of any decision to offer assistance to an unknown party. Ensure your own safety and scan your surroundings before stopping your vehicle or approaching an unknown party. Regardless if aid was offered to or accepted by the party in distress, the location and other information must be relayed to the appropriate law enforcement agency through TDC immediately.
- Notify TDC immediately, if personnel encounter a deceased person or any human remains.

- Watch for “copy cat” vehicles. Illegal activity along the border has involved vehicles painted to look like Forest Service or other agency or commercial vehicles. Take note of anything out of the ordinary, including any drivers you do not recognize. Pay special attention to the small details on vehicle paint schemes, door shields, license plates, uniforms, and unit numbering. Maintain safety in all actions and observations. Expect to be stopped by other Law Enforcement, have ID, agency uniform, or fire PPE components. Be polite and cooperative if you find yourself stopped by one of our fellow LE agencies.
- All drivers and passengers in motor vehicles should maintain constant alertness and drive defensively. Vehicles traveling at excessive speeds are a common occurrence associated with illegal activity, law enforcement pursuits, or irresponsible public land visitors.
- Incident Management Teams hosted in the Zone should refer to these protocols as guidance for managing large complex incidents along the international border. Similar mitigations should be put in place for deflection and firefighter security as well as following the reporting and information exchange protocols contained within this document.
- These protocols are dynamic and should be adjusted or updated as needed. Look for opportunities to improve or adjust these protocols through lessons learned and feedback from the field.