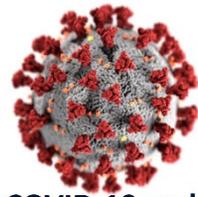




**Event Type:** COVID Mitigations  
on the Shepard Road Fire

**Date:** April 16, 2020

**Location:** Idaho



**COVID-19 and  
Fire Season 2020 Lessons**  
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## **COVID-19 Observations and Concerns Revealed on the Shepard Road Fire**

**By Greg Juvan, FMO  
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### **Background**

The Shepard Road Fire was reported in the North Idaho Dispatch Zone on April 16 at approximately 1400 hours. It was approximately 5.5 acres in size. The multiagency response included: the local sheriff's department; St. Maries (Idaho) Fire Department; East Side Fire Department (from Harrison, Idaho); the State of Idaho; and the U.S. Forest Service.

We tasked ourselves to work with nearly all responders and share COVID-19 measures and mitigations on this incident.

In preparation for this fire season, we reviewed many items concerning Risk Assessments, Guidance, Module Configurations, SOPs, and Doctrinal Policy (2019 ISFFAO/NFES 2724—or simply known as the “Red Book”) to minimize firefighters’ exposure to COVID-19 and other operational hazards.

As reflected in our Shepard Road Fire AAR (on page 2 of this RLS), this preparation, these expanded plans—that often look good on paper—undergo a brutal reality check when the dispatch call happens to ask for mutual aid.

***Our greatest concern is that this guidance is being strictly interpreted  
as mandatory, thus restricting the decision space  
of those on the ground.***

### **Overview:**

#### ***This Incident Raised More Questions than Provided Answers***

The multiagency approaches to our first wildfire of the year revealed multiple constraints that proved to be a challenge for all agencies and all firefighters/first responders on the Shepard Road Fire.

We have developed pinch-points that cause operational lapses in guidance that may very well get confused with policy and doctrine. This situation could result in injury—or even unwanted death—of our multiagency employees.

With current best management practices, adjusted work schedules, module isolation, assigned vehicle seating, and daily crewmember health monitoring, we believe we are doing everything we can to meet the intent of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the U.S. Forest Service National, Regional, and Forest guidance to mitigate exposure and spread of COVID-19.

However, our greatest concern is that this guidance is being strictly interpreted as mandatory, thus restricting the decision space of those on the ground, especially considering not having adequate cleaning supplies or vehicles to meet desired specifications. It is increasingly more alarming that such interpretations result in overarching guidance

that outweighs already established Standard Operating Procedures and results in increased risk and exposure to already known hazards, such as driving.

This incident raised more questions than provided answers in today's social climate surrounding COVID-19. Some of those questions: *What is our contingency plan for potential exposure? Are the current mitigation measures adequate? Does length of time on assignment have an application in determining standards? If a module travels outside their normal operating environment, do we revert to a 14-day self-isolation period prior to returning to work at their duty location?*

We believe that all of these questions are situational and can be best answered at the lowest possible level.

***Personnel responded in four previously assigned vehicles with seven firefighters. This increased our exposure to the hazards associated with driving.***

### **Shepard Road Fire AAR**

- ❖ When working with multiple agencies, the COVID-19 mitigation measures and messages have varied widely and are hard to enforce or maintain.
- ❖ Prior to Shepard Road Fire response, U.S. Forest Service firefighters (four members of the local Initial Attack Engine Module and three members of the Wildland Fire Module) had completed 14 days of self-isolation through maximizing telework and being located in the Avery Workstation for many weeks. Additionally, these crews have been practicing module isolation, social distancing, and are aware of today's social climate.
- ❖ Fire crews mitigated exposure on the Shepard Road Fire by wearing all fire PPE (leather gloves), washing hands, social distancing, and not touching their faces.
- ❖ Once dispatched, personnel responded in four previously assigned vehicles with seven firefighters. This increased our exposure to the hazards associated with driving, especially on Forest Highway 50 (referred locally as St. Joe River Road) where responders had multiple near misses with elk and deer in these four different vehicles. The firefighters who responded to the Shepard Road Fire transferred risk of exposure from COVID-19 to the inherent danger of a vehicle accident (driving the 200 miles per rig or 800 total miles vs normally 400 total miles in a normal two rig configuration).
- ❖ Throughout this incident, maintaining social distance standards was difficult during standard tactical suppression tasks (cutting handline, mop-up, hose lays).
- ❖ During the response to Shepherd Road Fire, fire crews refrained from common social practices such as hand shaking, programming radios, swapping pens, CTR books, signing for meals and picking them up, and sharing maps. Firefighters mitigated hazards by electronically submitting CTR forms.
- ❖ Furthermore, crews designated a "Chief of Party" to interact with non-Forest Service resources while maintaining social distancing.
- ❖ The "Chief of Party" then conducted a separate briefing to further maintain social distancing.
- ❖ It is unrealistic to keep and maintain sanitization standards throughout a short-term Initial Attack incident (examples: truck radios, hand tools, chainsaws, steering wheels, compartment doors, etc.).
- ❖ After vehicles were cleaned it was clear that the amount of current cleaning supplies is in short supply. It will be difficult to maintain supplies separate from facilities than those stored in individual vehicles. It is also unclear when re-supply orders will be available due to shortages locally and nationally. In addition, it is also unclear as to the purchasing process—either through local or required supply sources.

### **New Fire Environmental Elements**

- ❖ A traffic Jam along Highway 5 and the exposed risks—including the increased number of response vehicles on narrow roads—adds to that congestion and confusion.
- ❖ Wildland-Urban Interface fires provide increased access to firefighters from the general public, interested parties, and the media—which results in the potential for increased COVID-19 exposure to firefighters.
- ❖ Responding with four U.S. Forest Service vehicles instead of the “normal” two equal increased risks of exposure and transfers risk to our personnel. (This is increasingly difficult to understand in rural areas such as our Benewah and Shoshone counties [Idaho] that have no reported cases of COVID-19 at this time.)
- ❖ Driving to fire exposure went from normal ops of two vehicles to four. This represents a 100 percent increase of driving-related exposure which follows the Fleet Use Guidance. Operating vehicles is our agency’s primary injury and fatality pathway nationally. Considering this fact, is this new risk driving exposure tradeoff acceptable?
- ❖ Following current policy in a doctrinal approach (Red Book) vs guidance may prove to be challenging when we are identifying the “why” someone made a decision.

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**This RLS was submitted by:  
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