



## East Canyon COVID-19 Lessons learned Rocky Mountain Blue Team 6/23/2020

The Blue Team activation on the East Canyon Fire was the first team activation in the Rocky Mountain Area in 2020. The fire provided some insight to pandemic considerations and public awareness. After a spring of a “safer at home” mentality and intense planning for how to act once a team was activated, the following are some initial observations.

**COVID-19 protocols were initiated upon arrival and the fire community is taking extraordinary measures at many levels.** While these actions are not a complete mitigation, most people feel a greater level of comfort working in an environment where people are being smart about how they protect themselves and interact with others. The level of participation is above what everyone expected for firefighters and the supporting communities alike. We will continue to work on effective and science-based decision making. But the key message is to ensure any IMT begins wearing face coverings and being smart about gatherings from day one. We allow small working units to function as family groups and, if anyone from outside these family groups enter, everyone dons a mask and practices social distancing. Some initial observations include:

- Face coverings are being worn when not with normal work groups and social distancing where possible. Many people are setting the example and making their use the norm. The IMT needs to set the example from day one.
- Crews are staying away from others, both on the line in and in camp. They still come to camp as needed, wear face coverings, get what they need, and depart. The field groups that are spiked are respecting the rules as well and have great self-containment set ups.
- Cooperators and partners are mostly compliant as well, once our intentions were explained. Having IMT-wide compliance with policies is critical for cooperators and partners to see. They know it’s not only about local safety or individual beliefs but also the longevity of all fire staff. Most acknowledge the ability to maintain a fire community (line and support) for the long run depends on us taking things seriously. *“The firefighters are here to protect your community. Please Take COVID-19 pre-cautions seriously to protect our community”*.
- The layout of both the Incident Command Post and the forward logistics operating base are also critical to plan out and get right. The layout of base camp and additional housing protocols need to be planned out in advance while accepting innovation, adaptability, and ingenuity will also be needed. For example, having the medical tent in an area that is easy to reach and where a potentially infected individual does not need to walk through camp is a sound practice.
- Interpretation of the NWCG Interagency Checklist for mobilization of resources in a COVID-19 environment seems to cause confusion. Teams need to let home units know a master checklist for the team and any assigned resources is completed at mobilization.

- Screening criteria at ICP – Further testing protocols/guidance are being developed. Additional testing of those showing COVID symptoms was conducted. This shows a commitment to everyone and removes the fear of reporting signs when present. The end result was greater trust and team transparency.
- Resource availability – Initial orders for many support positions are coming from across the nation. This is VERY alarming with minimal overall activity. The normal pool of qualified individuals are either not available, not set up in IROC to be available, not willing to go out during COVID-19 times, or not allowed to go out by their home units. *This is information we might need to send to our programs if we want a group to support a fire season.* Home units need to message support to help people be available and inform resources that aggressive actions to help protect them are in place.
- Information attached to a resource order was not being relayed past the initial expanded dispatch center. Future information will be attached to the “Special Instructions” section on the RO and a URL will be provided.

**Addressing concerns about going to an IMT camp:** Employee safety is being prioritized. Generally, we are not in confined spaces we are spread out and taking precautions. Food is issued in to-go boxes and individuals disperse with sanitation and social distancing both being addressed. We must continue allowing other team members to visit different fire camps as we can all build upon one another’s successes over time. Support for these actions has been outstanding.

**IT preparation:** Take the opportunity to load needed applications or software before the incident. Work through problem areas and try new ideas. Resolve FireNet issues and access prior to arriving at an incident. IROC account access and training needs to be done prior to the assignment, as well. NAP accounts for e-ISuite Enterprise use should be requested prior to an assignment. Technology will be utilized and all need to participate, from virtual check-in/demob and electronic general messages to fully hands-free time sheets. Load all applications and know how to use them.

**Testing if available:** Valuable lessons were learned with COVID-19 testing on the East Canyon Fire near Cortez, CO. The testing was voluntary and provided at no cost to any personnel associated with the fire or fire support functions. Pilots, crews, IMT staff, and various others participated. Testing was done in both field and camp locations with safeguards in place. The Colorado National Guard facilitated the testing and participation was strong. Of the 425 individuals offered the test, about 110 signed up. Once the testing started and the process was smooth and test itself painless, over 190 were tested. We understand testing limitations and shortcomings exist, but this service demonstrates a commitment to working as a community and taking care of both the public and fire community alike.

**A Year of Change:** *As every section is critically looking at their internal operations and thinking about how we can do things differently. We are finding great ideas on how we can improve fire management into the future. We really think the fire community should embrace this time of change as an opportunity.*

## **GENERAL COMMENTS:**

- Expectations must be clearly relayed at all levels from activation to return to home units.
- It is still recommended to have C&G on site.
- Empower resources to provide for their own COVID-19 protection.
- Home Unit Expectations Document – describe what is changing.
- Every team should create an entry protocol/distancing protocol for the ICP that clearly lays out expectation within camp. Signs need to be created to reinforce the protocols and can be laminated to help with quick deployment on future assignments. As camp is being built, ensure your team has an interim plan to allow for social distancing and managing the flow of people arriving at the incident. We created QR codes with links to URL's that provided a plethora of information within camp.
- *The following actions must be taken to keep individuals in pods and avoid contact throughout camp.*
  - Field personnel work hard at social distancing and staying away from the primary fire camp unless specific functions are needed. The hard work and planning from field resources should be supported from a FOB (forward operations base) and primary camp. Ideas for logistical support and the use of technology are also proving successful directly from the field.
  - All personnel need to have access to technology and ALL team members need to be able to log into MS Teams and access the team drives PRIOR to being dispatched. This includes having the proper security clearances and understanding the prepopulated file structures. AGAIN, make sure people do this prior to deployment.
  - The time for learning computer platforms is not on the fire! Folks did not choose a career in firefighting to learn computer apps, we get it. However, this year folks need to embrace new technology as it is keeping the fire community safer.

## **SECTION COMMENTS:**

### **Command**

- On the pre-order call with the AA's, set expectations that everyone in the in-briefing will have: 1) a face mask, 2) will be expected to social distance. We also need to convey the IMT would like help in communicating the importance of COVID-19 precautions to external cooperators with which they have pre-existing relationships.
- You need to develop a single-point information access-link for COVID-19 precautions and place this link in special instructions on the resource order.
- You will need to develop signage at ICP on COVID-19 protection and manage the flow of traffic.
- Lead by example with a mask on day one.
- Fire will pay for ALL COVID-19 symptomatic testing (protection of community).

## PIO

- Minimalize pedestrian traffic to main entrance.
- Information boards not staffed.
- Increase social media components.

## Plans

- Have someone stay behind to get the FireNet set up and prep all tech. Have a working knowledge of IROC.
- Have SCKN go around and do a “drive-thru” check-in to limit the number of people coming into ICP, or utilize sign boards outside with a QR code for check-in and phone numbers for each section.
  - Alternative is to have a remote check-in base where people can come up to a kiosk/desk to talk to a human but still check in on a device.
- Use technology to our advantage – remote check-in/demob options.
- Have each section create a Google Voice for contacts on the incident.
- Resource orders aren’t coming in with the attachments, need to put all the details in the special instructions. The single-point information link needs to be on the RO with clear instructions to follow the link to get COVID-19 related protocols.
- We used a mic for our virtual meetings because it was a better way for folks to hear (lapel mic taped to a mic stand).
- Have IT options for connectivity issues, group sizes, and different venues.
- IROC access does not include the ability to print resource orders; *this needs to be fixed at the IROC level*. A workaround was asking Dispatch to provide Dispatcher privileges which allowed access to RO.
- We will funnel people to the right section to minimize cross pod interactions by using our single point of contact URL.
- Have PDF Pro available to section heads or pertinent people; the ability to sign digitally and create form fill documents is nice.
- Radio briefings must be clear and concise (need to use base station with an additional radio or speaker for staff on-site).
- DOCL should have print/scan capability at workstation to create hard copies from e-files (used for IHF), print indexes, etc.
- Virtual DEMOB was completed through TEAMS.
- Prepopulate check-in boards.

## Operations

- Coordinate self-sufficiency of IHC and IMT Support on the first three to five days.
- Limit in-camp exposure.
- Let field find solutions to problems that directly impact them.

- Use teams meetings (or other) for tactical meetings with divisions. ***Practice before you arrive!***
- Ensure FOBS and LOGS chiefs have numbers of Operations on first shift. Running a forward logistics operating base requires more direct line communication.
- Practice module-of-one concept in the regional COVID-19 response plan. For unit to unit, each section should practice unit-of-one as best as possible to minimize contact.
- Make sure Ops and Divisions understand they need their OWN flight helmet for recons because of decontamination requirements.
- Aviation crews will remain isolated from main incident in family units.

## **Safety**

- Opportunity to change culture.
- Set standard for incident from the beginning – masks, social distancing, and module-of-one when possible.
- Importance of MEDL working with local units critical – preplan multiple scenarios for IWIs.
- Isolation areas must be available and set up in isolation where it has the least exposure to others.
- Work with health departments and local EOC's to coordinate efforts.
- Ensure everyone understands they are part of the Team. They are required to follow the same rules and guidelines as everyone else. People working in the field are required to wear face masks while at ICP. When someone outside of your pod needs to interact, masks and social distancing must be maintained. If something must pass between parties, proper sanitation protocols must also be followed.
- Have a bullet point paper of the Safety Protocols of the Rocky Mountain Regional and Rocky Mountain Incident Management Team COVID guides printed and available for incoming non-team resources.

## **Finance**

- Order/Hire a finance email manager or a DOCL who can help with emails and other remote issues.
- Think of new or innovative ways to do business.
- Electronic CTRs.
- With all forms emailed, we will need to order an additional finance person to sort through and file emails. This person will need to ensure emails go into the appropriate folder and establish a tasking protocol.
- Having the IT dialed before you leave is important for all fire staff. However, having a NAP account prior to arrival is required to use e-ISuite Enterprise.
- All staff practicing new IT prior to deployment is critical. You must practice using Enterprise as a team if it is not already your team standard.

## Logistics

- If the position can work virtual, have them work virtual.
- Hand Sanitizer and PPE are needed PRIOR to arrival. This information will be included in the single URL placed on resource orders that includes other links to descriptions of how fires are run differently this year due to COVID-19.
- Add name requests authority to the “expanded” roster.
- Teams need to travel with signage preprinted and ready to go. MASK signage must be put up as the team rolls into the area. Pre-build sign kits.
- Attach “Special Covid Instructions” to the Resource Order through a URL to provide a single point flow of communications.
- External speakers for radio brief at all FOB’s that plug into BK radios.
- Have multiple people trained in FireNet admin setup.
- Have copies of the Rocky Mountain Regional and Rocky Mountain Incident Management Team COVID guides printed and available for incoming non-team resources.
- Be sure permissions are correct in MS Teams so that multiple people can add guests to the various drives.
- Publish FireNet email addresses quickly (because we are now in a larger digital environment).
- Have all team members complete the needed computer training prior to an assignment so that, once on scene, FireNet accounts can be requested.
- Order additional PPE for team trailer and keep in stock.
- 3 LSC's (Planning, ICP, FOBS) NEEDED when going out the door.
- Minimalize pedestrian traffic to anything but the main door.
- Prepopulate check-in boards.
- TEAMS e-doc files in chronological order based on data entry, not date, numerical or alpha order. The inability to manipulate file order manually or automatically file by date, numerical or alpha order decreases the organizational effectiveness of the filing system.

## Liaison

- You need to set the tone for COVID-19 with cooperators immediately. Having the entire team and Agency Admins delivering the same message is critical.
- Developing the evacuation plan and the Management Assessment Points system will require close coordination with the local sheriff, emergency manager, and fire chief. We do not believe this can or should be done virtually in most circumstances. Weigh the risk of miscommunication and trust break down with COVID-19 risk.
- Limit the number of people who are attending Cooperators meetings.
  - We sent out an email prior to our first meeting explaining, *“The people we need in-person are those who have resources or authority directly relevant to managing the fire. In general we would appreciate attendance of utilities, those*

*that have authority or direct involvement for road closures, evacuations, structure defense, etc. For communication purposes, we would like a representative from EOC's and emergency management. If you have the ability to send one POC for your organization, we would appreciate it."* The main cooperators really understood and appreciated this message and they commented it actually helped in communication on the first several days.

- You need to over-communicate with the larger cooperators group and community at large. Coordinating communication between PIO and LOFR to ensure your team is tailoring the messaging to the different groups is critical.
- When establishing trust with the local community, a large open-ai red place where social distancing is possible will be best for the first several meetings. Once relationships are established, virtual meetings are possible. A school gymnasium or the like is ideal.

#### **SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS:**

- Attach "Special Covid Instructions" to the Resource Order which provides a URL to provide a single point flow of communications.
- Take care of your people through your team's COVID policy. Set the tone immediately upon arrival that your team's policy is important through your actions.
- Face coverings from the start. The IMT needs to set the example from day one.
- Empower employees to try new ideas and support innovation.
- Share the word – COVID precautions are a priority for IMT's.
- *Embrace the introspective look and make positive changes to the fire team community.*

Michael Haydon IC - Rocky Mountain Type 2 Blue Team

Jared Hohn DIC - Rocky Mountain Type 2 Blue Team

