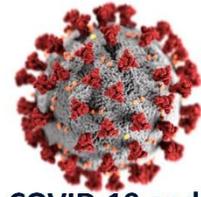


# Rapid Lesson Sharing

**Event Type:** Fire Crew Members  
Test Positive for COVID-19

**Date:** June-July 2020

**Location:** Bush Fire, Arizona



**COVID-19 and  
Fire Season 2020 Lessons**  
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[CDC.gov/COVID19](https://www.cdc.gov/COVID19)



## Unanticipated Complications on the Bush Fire COVID-19 Incident

This story will focus on the coordination that was/is necessary to help ensure the BLM OR/WA fire crew will be cared for at the highest standards.

The process of horizontal and vertical reporting and coordination between two USFS Regions, two BLM State Offices, the host Forest, the home BLM District, county health departments, the National Guard and local businesses has been a heavy lift.

### Background

On June 13, 2020, a BLM OR/WA fire crew was dispatched to Region 3 Fire Support and initially assigned to Silver City, NM. The crew stopped for the night of June 14 in Kingman, Ariz. On June 15, they were reassigned to the Bush Fire on the Tonto National Forest in Arizona, and worked their first shift on June 16.

On June 21, one member of the crew began experiencing symptoms including a cough and headache. The firefighter reported symptoms to the supervisor on June 23. The following day (June 24), all members of the crew received Reverse Transcription Polymerase Chain Reaction (RT-PCR) testing administered by the National Guard, utilizing a mobile testing facility.

*Prior to departure, temperature checks were made and all were average. The crew maintained a "Module as One" concept while in travel status and while working on the fireline. Five firefighters were assigned to each vehicle while en-route and face coverings were worn any time they left the rigs.*

Results were received on June 26 and included seven positive results for COVID-19, with six firefighters presenting as asymptomatic. The Mesa and Maricopa County, Arizona Health Departments were notified of the test results. Follow-up testing occurred on July 1. (On July 6, as this RLS was being finalized, these test results were announced, indicating four additional positive COVID-19 cases. As a result, the quarantine clock was reset.)

When the June 26 test results came in, a decision was made by the sending unit to isolate all crew members at a local hotel, rather than return to the home unit, in order to avoid any potential spread en-route. In order to coordinate the logistics of lodging and care for the crew, an Agency Liaison with a purchase card was initially assigned by the Tonto National Forest.

The Bureau of Land Management assigned an Interagency Resource Representative (IARR) as a liaison to provide administrative support, purchasing, etc. A Family Liaison was assigned by the home unit to assist the families of the crew members.

The crew stated that they strictly followed CDC guidelines for COVID-19 mitigations. Prior to departure, temperature checks were made and all were average. The crew maintained a “Module as One” concept while in travel status and while working on the fireline. Five firefighters were assigned to each vehicle while en-route and face coverings were worn any time they left the rigs. While RON, the crew were quartered with two individuals to each room.

### **The Theme: Coordination**

This story will focus on the coordination that was/is necessary to help ensure the BLM OR/WA fire crew will be cared for at the highest standards.

The process of horizontal and vertical reporting and coordination between two USFS Regions, two BLM State Offices, the host Forest, the home BLM District, county health departments, the National Guard and local businesses has been a heavy lift.

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*A conference call was planned and conducted on Saturday, June, 27, bringing most of the relevant supervisors, managers, IC, Medical Officer, State, Regional and National players into the discussion. A common operating picture was presented and a plan for long-term, continued care for the crew was initiated.*

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The Bush Fire is located in Gila County, Arizona near Mesa (Maricopa County) and was under the command of the Southwest Area IMT1, hosted by the Gila National Forest, (USFS, Region 3 jurisdiction). At the time the crew was tested (June 24), the Southwest Area IMT1 was in the process of transitioning the fire back to the host unit to a local IMT3, and the BLM OR/WA fire crew was on the demob list. By the time test results were received, the IMT that had been in place had demobilized.

The crew’s home unit was initially notified by the Crew Representative (CREP) on June 23. The home unit began their process of notification and reporting. The BLM State Office/R6 Regional Office (SORO) Duty Officer was notified and passed information upward to the State Fire Management Officer, Regional Fire Director, State Director and Regional Forester. The OR/WA State Fire Management Officer (SFMO) contacted the Arizona SFMO for awareness, and R3 Fire Director and Deputy were on initial conference call. Notifications were made to the National Offices for BLM and USFS.

A conference call was planned and conducted on Saturday, June, 27, bringing most of the relevant supervisors, managers, IC, Medical Officer, State, Regional and National players into the discussion. A common operating picture was presented and a plan for long-term, continued care for the crew was initiated.

### **COVID-19 Exposure Support Plan Presented in an IAP Format**

A COVID-19 Exposure Support Plan in an Incident Action Plan (IAP) format was completed for the period of June 29-July 13. The IAP has been developed to provide guidance for the continued logistical support of the crew until they are able to safely return to their home unit.

This IAP includes an organization assignment list, contact information, crew operations, logistical support, communications, testing and a medical plan. The objectives of the IAP include providing for the logistical needs and safety of the crew, public safety, communicating with Agency Administrators and the crew’s families, contact tracing and testing/retesting strategy.

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From the IAP:

# COVID-19 EXPOSURE SUPPORT PLAN

## 5. General Objectives

- Provide for the safety of the crew and the public by ensuring all crew members have individual rooms where they can be isolated/quarantined from each other and the public at large for 14 days from the date separately housed.
- Inform and educate incident personnel and Agency Administrators on the changes in recommended actions based on testing outcomes, symptoms and other key factors to allow for flexibility in adapting to new information, changes in clinical presentation and symptom severity.
- Conduct contact tracing to identify any other contacts that may have occurred. Provide for language interpreter, if needed, to ensure clear and accurate communication.
- Ensure crew members have daily logistical needs (meals, cleaning supplies, water and Gatorade) provided for in a manner that allows for continued isolation/quarantine of affected individuals.
- Establish a Point Of Contact at the home unit for family members to ask questions or request additional assistance if needed.
- Facilitate communication with the host forest and home unit to keep them apprised of changes in health status of any crew members, additional medical needs, or overall status update of the situation.

## 6. Operational Objectives

- Facilitate daily wellness checks with crew members to monitor development of any COVID symptoms and overall wellbeing.
- Coordinate communication with Agency Line Officer/Agency Administrators (host and home unit) to keep leadership apprised of the situation and any changes in health status of crew members.

## 7. General Safety Message

- Follow CDC guidelines for physical distancing and personal hygiene.
- Wear nose and mouth covering masks any time interacting with other people and when in public places.
- Communicate with Crew Boss, Crew Boss (T), or Crew Representative if develop any symptoms associated with COVID-19 or feeling mentally stressed due to isolation.

## The Exposure Matrix from the IAP

Date Test Results Received	Test Results	Crew Member	DATE														1st day of separation	
	Positive	1	Isolation	Isolation	Isolation	Isolation	Isolation	Isolation	Isolation	Isolation	Isolation	Isolation	Isolation	Isolation	Isolation	Isolation	Isolation	If no symptoms - travel home
	Positive	2	Isolation	Isolation	Isolation	Isolation	Isolation	Isolation	Isolation	Isolation	Isolation	Isolation	Isolation	Isolation	Isolation	Isolation	Isolation	
	Positive	3	Isolation	Isolation	Isolation	Isolation	Isolation	Isolation	Isolation	Isolation	Isolation	Isolation	Isolation	Isolation	Isolation	Isolation	Isolation	
	Positive	4	Isolation	Isolation	Isolation	Isolation	Isolation	Isolation	Isolation	Isolation	Isolation	Isolation	Isolation	Isolation	Isolation	Isolation	Isolation	
	Positive	5	Isolation	Isolation	Isolation	Isolation	Isolation	Isolation	Isolation	Isolation	Isolation	Isolation	Isolation	Isolation	Isolation	Isolation	Isolation	
	Positive	6	Isolation	Isolation	Isolation	Isolation	Isolation	Isolation	Isolation	Isolation	Isolation	Isolation	Isolation	Isolation	Isolation	Isolation	Isolation	
	Positive	7	Isolation	Isolation	Isolation	Isolation	Isolation	Isolation	Isolation	Isolation	Isolation	Isolation	Isolation	Isolation	Isolation	Isolation	Isolation	
	Negative	8	Quarantine	Quarantine	Retest	Quarantine	Quarantine	Quarantine	Reassess*									
	Negative	9	Quarantine	Quarantine	Retest	Quarantine	Quarantine	Quarantine	Reassess*									
	Negative	10	Quarantine	Quarantine	Retest	Quarantine	Quarantine	Quarantine	Reassess*									
	Negative	11	Quarantine	Quarantine	Retest	Quarantine	Quarantine	Quarantine	Reassess*									
	Negative	12	Quarantine	Quarantine	Retest	Quarantine	Quarantine	Quarantine	Reassess*									
	Negative	13	Quarantine	Quarantine	Retest	Quarantine	Quarantine	Quarantine	Reassess*									
	Negative	14	Quarantine	Quarantine	Retest	Quarantine	Quarantine	Quarantine	Reassess*									
	Negative	15	Quarantine	Quarantine	Retest	Quarantine	Quarantine	Quarantine	Reassess*									
	Negative	16	Quarantine	Quarantine	Retest	Quarantine	Quarantine	Quarantine	Reassess*									
	Negative	17	Quarantine	Quarantine	Retest	Quarantine	Quarantine	Quarantine	Reassess*									
	Pending	18			Retest													
	Pending	19			Retest													
	Pending	20			Retest													
	Pending	21			Retest													
			* If 2nd test is negative - crew member will remain in quarantine for remainder of 14 days from first day of separation due to exposure to known positive case. Decision will be made whether to transport back to home unit or stay in place.															
			* If 2nd test is positive - crew member will remain isolated. If no symptoms develop, cleared to travel home after 14 days from first day of separation.															
			* If 2nd test is positive - crew member will remain isolated. If symptoms develop, crew member must stay in isolation for 10 days from symptom onset or until they are afebrile for 72 hours without fever reducing drugs and symptoms improve.															

This incident continues to evolve as crew members wait for additional testing. As of this writing, the symptomatic firefighter's condition has remained stable and is recovering normally. All remaining crew members continue to present with no symptoms and are feeling well.

### **Challenges**

1. Possibly the largest COVID-19 exposure to firefighters, so far this year.
2. IMT transition and crew demob schedule created gray area.
3. Ensuring that any Spanish-speaking crew member is properly supported by a bilingual crew member for operational and logistical messages. Additionally, ensure that health agencies or other personnel who must communicate sensitive information to the crew member can provide bilingual services.
4. Coordination included two USFS Regions, two BLM State Offices and two county health departments.
5. RT-PCR testing results are limited by 48-72 hour turn-around time. Incubation period for COVID-19 (4.5-5.8 days) creates a waiting window for retesting opportunity.
6. Securing lodging for the isolated crew. Several hotels refused to accommodate the ill crew.
7. Initial test results were not provided to crew members by the National Guard. This was due to the transition of the IMT and demobbing of crew, resulting in the loss of a Point of Contact (POC).
8. Request for initial and follow-up testing through FEMA takes time for response.
9. Protecting HIPAA integrity for crew members. Identifying crew/home unit may reveal identities in a local community.

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***Over-communicating regarding reporting and coordination between all parties has been essential to the maintenance of this incident.***

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### **Successes**

1. Adherence to Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) mitigation guidelines by the BLM OR/WA fire crew may have prevented additional crew members or other firefighters on the Bush Fire from becoming ill.
2. Initial testing provided by National Guard was readily available. RT-PCR testing is considered the most accurate test currently available.
3. Decision to hold crew in place rather than travel home reduced the risk of spreading the virus during return travel.
4. Crew Liaisons with purchase card assigned as logistical support to crew allowed for crew self-sufficiency.
5. Over-communicating regarding reporting and coordination between all parties has been essential to the maintenance of this incident.
6. IAP format allows flexibility in planning for a multi-day period.

### **Learnings**

1. Ensure the crew and the families of crew members receive timely communication and feel cared for.
2. Ensure notification of crew members of their test results. This avoids adding stress if firefighters test negative and allows for those who test positive to be attune to their health/vitals.
3. Host units should set-up agreements early for lodging/facilities to house isolated firefighters, preferably with the capacity to provide individual rooms or isolated spaces for each crew member. Capacity in smaller communities may require other solutions: B&B, yurts, modular trailers, adjacent military installations etc. Patients may need to be isolated for 14 days or more. Remaining in place provides the means for firefighters to isolate themselves away from their family as staff may not have that ability at own home unit.
4. Arrange to provide non-contact food delivery for isolated firefighters.

5. IMTs and local units need to plan for an incident which may extend past transition.
6. Ensure there is an “IC” or Coordinator of this incident, as home and host units still have their respective fire season on which to focus.

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***Consider establishing a “COVID Care” Representative at each home unit. Continue to reinforce the need for local units to coordinate with the local medical and public health communities to ensure common understanding of the process.***

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7. Strongly consider utilizing appropriate person to serve as “COVID Coordinator” position for each IMT. Nexus with county health departments is imperative.
8. Consider establishing a “COVID Care” Representative at each home unit. Continue to reinforce the need for local units to coordinate with the local medical and public health communities to ensure common understanding of the process.
9. Communication via conference call/meeting with sufficient capacity with all relevant participants as early as possible is critical to establishing a common operating picture and initiating a plan.
10. Identified lead Public Affairs Officer (PAO) that is not from the host unit to avoid signaling the identity of the home unit. Ensure Joint Information Center (JIC) concept so the release of information is approved by all home and host units, State Public Health, etc.
11. Work with respective state Department of Public Health representative on next steps/guidance related to retesting strategy, appropriate quarantine duration and release protocols.

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