



COVID-19 Observations and Concerns on the Drumheller Fire

Situation

At 1330 on April 23, the Drumheller Fire was reported burning near U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) lands. The fire's initial size-up was: 5-10 acres, moderate rate of spread, multiple homes threatened, and poor access due to terrain and vehicle limitations. A helicopter and USFWS personnel were requested.

A Unified Command was established with multiple jurisdictions involved. Initial response resources included: Adams County resources (7 engines); Grant County 11 (9 engines); USFWS (DIV-802, 1 engine, 1 UTV); BLM (1 engine, BC-601); and Washington Department of Natural Resources (DNR) (Helicopter #340).

The ICP and staging area was established just west of the fire near its origin.



Map shows the fire's proximity (red line indicates perimeter) to USFWS property in green shading.

COVID-19 Response

By

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The Drumheller Fire was the first wildfire of 2020 for many of us and not your "typical response". The first fires of the season are often somewhat of a reunion as we have not seen each other for most of the winter and excited to reengage.

Typically, this would lead to extended handshakes and a quick recap of what has been going on over the winter etc. However, our current COVID-19 situation led to a more "formal" direct approach with no contact and active social distancing.

The comradery of firefighters demonstrated an immediate pause—quite strange for those who have been in the business for a while. Incoming resources were greeted with a head nod and an awkward pause followed by a social distance joke.

The high winds made communicating at a social distance difficult. I believe briefings were also shortened—they were direct and to the point. Not necessarily a bad thing. But, once again, an abnormal approach.

When the time came for logistical needs/concerns there was an additional pause: *What does this look like? Can we even get food from local vendor? Is lodging even available?*

After thoughtful consideration, we decided to separate (isolate) crews at different areas for camping and eating rations (MREs) for the evening. Logistics, located in Dispatch (Central Washington Interagency Communications Center [CWICC]), was able to locate a local facility to provide breakfast and lunches for the following shift.

There was some additional difficulty with obtaining local meals due to complications presented by Washington's COVID-19 "Stay at Home" order.

AAR Notes/ Lessons Learned

Travel/Arrival to the Incident

- ❖ The various wildland fire agencies have different PPE standards while in vehicles (DNR, BLM, FWS, and municipal departments). Some departments require full PPE (N95 masks, eye protection, gloves, etc.) while other agencies only recommend use.
- ❖ Once exiting the vehicles, it was noted that PPE was removed and employees gathered around "like normal" —not necessarily practicing social distancing. PPE is/was uncomfortable, hot, sweaty and awkward.

Mitigation Measures

- Each agency needs to continue to communicate the need for social distancing at all times, especially upon arrival to the incident.
- Continuing to use PPE when social distancing is not practical.

Briefings

- ❖ There was difficulty hearing due to the high winds and diesel chatter while trying to maintain social distancing.
- ❖ Communicating with personnel who invade personal space—the "close talkers"—was problematic.

Mitigation Measures

- Find a suitable location with minimal noise if possible.
- Clearly state Leader's Intent to those receiving the briefing: *"This is your briefing, listen up!"*
- Vocalize the need to reduce sidebar conversations during the briefing. Be direct and to the point.
- Utilize a PA system if available and necessary.

Map Sharing

- ❖ It was challenging to share maps or brief using Avenza/Collector etc.

Mitigation Measures

- Air Drop maps (if capable).
- File sharing pre-incident.
- Obtain a NIFC account for sharing maps across agencies.
- Continue training for proficiency in the use of the previously mentioned map apps.
- Utilize white boards or draw in the dirt (large enough for everyone to see).
- Print large maps of your response areas.

Fighting Fire

- ❖ It was noted that this was one of the easier elements to manage, pertaining to COVID—*for this particular fire*. Further discussions took place to discuss future fire situations. These discussions included: vehicle sharing with other agency personnel that are not part of your "module as one" to transport; use as a "trainee" platform; and the potential need for recon flights.

Mitigation Measures

- Use separate vehicles for trainee situations, when possible.
- Only share vehicles with other agency personnel when safety measures have been compromised and life/property are threatened.
- Carry your own flight helmet, if possible, and talk with your local cooperators to discuss their SOPs.

Logistics

- ❖ There was difficulty: obtaining meals with reduced staffing at local restaurants; handling meals with proper PPE (gloves, N95); lodging/camping; as well as sanitation concerns for long-duration incidents (Porta-Potty vs *no* Porta-Potty).

Mitigation Measures

- Assemble food boxes/MREs for every vehicle, capable of supporting 2-3 days and replenish post-incident. (Even though this had been pre-identified, not all personnel were adequately prepared.)
- If ordering meals is necessary, order early and have PPE for distribution.
- Use dispersed camping to eliminate cross-contamination among crews.
- Order Porta-Potty and hand washing stations when necessary—and have measures in place to maintain sanitation.

- ❖ Porta-Potty PPE and sanitation.

Mitigation Measures

- Gloves should be easily accessible and required for crews to wear while using Porta-Potty. Crew members will dispose gloves in garbage cans and wash hands immediately after exiting Porta-Potty.
- Assign logistics personnel at Porta-Potty sites that are being used by multiple crews to disinfect all commonly touched areas of Porta-Potty and hand wash stations.
- At dispersed camp site, supply Porta-Potty and hand washing station with PPE and sanitation supplies. The crew assigned to that dispersed camp site will be responsible for maintaining sanitation of their facilities.

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