



## **FFS Emergency Incident Response and How to Work Safely During the COVID-19 Pandemic**

As an emergency response agency, it is crucial that we maintain our ability to respond to emergency incidents and carry out mission critical wildland fire activities. The following are guidelines and best practices to keep our employees safe and reduce the chances of exposure to and the spreading of the Coronavirus (COVID-19) during emergency response.

The guidance in this document, while relevant to emergency response in the initial attack/first operational period, is designed for response outside of your home area and for more than a single operational period. **Section A is for strike teams, task forces, groups and single resources deploying and Sections A & B are applicable to Incident Management Teams (IMTs) deployed to manage an incident or complex.**

The information provided in this document does not consider every scenario or option for response. Overall, we need to ensure that we:

**SCREEN** = Personnel at greater risk for detrimental health effects from COVID-19 or those caring for someone at greater risk (i.e. age, underlying health problems, <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/specific-groups/people-at-higher-risk.html>) are strongly encouraged not to deploy. This screening needs to be performed at the field unit level prior to an order being filled.

**LIMIT EXPOSURE** = Separation is the key. In the event that close contact with others is necessary, make sure to use appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE) and established cleanliness procedures. Documentation is important throughout this process to include where you have been, contacts you have made, etc. This information will be crucial in the event of an exposure/infection to our staff. Also, we must consider the impacts of our actions on the communities we are responding to.

**BE PREPARED FOR THE UNEXPECTED** = Have a plan for isolation if there is a suspicion of infection/exposure. Think deliberately about worst case scenarios (i.e. internet goes down, cell service unreliable/down, crucial supplies not available, etc.). It is very important to plan out the levels of P.A.C.E. (Primary, Alternate, Contingency, Emergency) to the best of our ability.

**BRING EVERYONE HOME SAFE & ENSURE THE HOME THEY RETURN TO STAYS SAFE** = Employees should monitor their health condition and if common symptoms of COVID-19 including fever and cough are present, the employee should notify their supervisor and follow care instructions from their healthcare provider and local health department (see <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/downloads/sick-with-2019-nCoV-fact-sheet.pdf> for more information).

Things to consider when developing a resource request are:

- Is a response with this type of resource(s) (strike team, task force, IMT, etc.) the most effective choice?
- Can we effectively carry out the assignment while minimizing exposure to our personnel?
- If engine crews are required, break them up into smaller groups and only order what is needed.
- If swapping of crews/operators is necessary between operational periods, design the compliment of vehicles with social distancing in mind.

# SECTION A

## **FOR ALL MISSIONS**

For all missions, personnel must follow [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) guidance.

- Minimize going out into the general population and use social distancing (maintain a distance of approximately 6 feet) when out in public. Avoid crowds, stores, and other situations likely to attract large numbers of people.
- Wash your hands often with soap and water for at least 20 seconds. If soap and water are not available, use hand sanitizer with at least 60% alcohol content.
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose, and mouth with unwashed hands.
- Cover your nose and mouth with a tissue or flexed elbow when coughing or sneezing. If using a tissue, immediately throw away the tissue after use and wash or sanitize hands.
- Avoid contact with sick people.
- Clean areas of high-touch contact (equipment controls, phones, doorknobs/handles, keyboards, tablets, bathroom fixtures, etc.) with disinfectant (following COVID-19 sanitation and disinfection standards) at least twice daily and when swapping out equipment operators.
- FFS EMTs/Paramedics must utilize appropriate procedures for use of PPE.
- Personnel should pay attention to their health and that of their fellow employees. If they develop fever, cough, or difficulty breathing, the person should immediately self-isolate as much as possible, notify their immediate/line supervisor and be excluded from work until cleared by public health authorities.

## **BEFORE TRAVEL**

- Information in this document covering safe travel protocol should be included with orders when sent to responders. This should include a “what to bring” list depending on the location and mission (i.e. should you bring your own sanitizers, food, etc.).
- All vehicles should be disinfected for responder use.
- Plan travel timing and routes considering the following information under TRAVEL.

## **TRAVEL**

- If possible, drive individually. Plan accordingly to limit exposures.
- Bring necessary cleaning/disinfecting and PPE (as applicable) supplies with you.
- Equipment must meet all CDC protocols for cleaning/disinfecting of transportation method chosen, and individual sanitary requirements (safe hygiene practices). ENSURE DOCUMENTATION OF ALL PASSENGERS IN THE EVENT OF AN INFECTION/EXPOSURE BECOMING EVIDENT AT A LATER DATE.
- Minimize contact with public. Utilize pre-boxed meals (MRES, take-out etc.). Arrange for breaks/overnight stays if needed at controlled facilities (work centers) with prevention measures already in place.
- You will likely find rest areas and public restrooms closed along the way so plan your stops/breaks accordingly and bring toilet paper with you.

- You will likely find some restaurants are closed for business and you may experience long waits for those vendors open for take-out. Plan accordingly and bring food with you.
- If staying in a hotel, ensure they are taking proper actions. In addition, you should clean/sanitize the commonly contacted surfaces in your room initially upon occupancy.

### **WHILE ASSIGNED TO THE INCIDENT**

- **Always follow practices outlined in the “For All Missions” section of this document.**
- Eat meals away from others using disposable/single-use service items to the extent possible.

### **BEFORE HEADING HOME**

- Personnel exhibiting any symptoms of COVID-19 infection (flu-like symptoms) should self-isolate, notify their assigned supervisor (e.g. Strike Team Leader, Task Force Leader, Group Supervisor) and seek medical evaluation/care prior to traveling home (see <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/downloads/sick-with-2019-nCoV-fact-sheet.pdf> for more information).

# SECTION B

## LARGE/COMPLEX INCIDENTS WITH AN IMT

Our focus in planning and operations needs to be on the following:

- Preventing the transmission of the virus among incident personnel
- Protecting incident personnel who are at higher risk for adverse health complications
- Maintaining incident operations, and
- Minimizing adverse effects on other impacted entities

Remote/Virtual work should be the first priority whenever possible. Depending on the incident type, what is acceptable for the particular mission must be determined. **Remote** means having responded to the incident but not on scene of a traditional Incident Command Post (ICP). Resources would be staged in different locations but same general area of response to limit exposure to one another. This will allow for onsite response, if needed, provided the proper PPE is available and protocols in place at the time can be followed. **Virtual** means working from home or office to assist in the incident. There are a variety of levels that could be assigned to both. There are too many variables to consider for discussion here without knowing more information about the exact assignment. The following are some guidelines to consider:

**ICP** - Should be spread out to allow for social distancing. Think of using facilities currently closed and identify established points of entry and different locations for different areas. Outside of each operational room there would be a secure point for drop off and pick up of items with disinfecting items available. Consider using closed educational campuses for ICPs. An advantage of utilizing this type of facility is typically they have in house communications, minor medical facilities, etc.

**Information Sharing** - Online information-sharing and tools are going to be key to success. We should strongly consider the use of available electronic technologies for briefings, meetings, reporting, etc. This will require that we have the sources identified to include where we can order additional devices from and even possibly ramp up on the number of these on a pre-order. An additional consideration is ramping up on Information Technology Specialist(s) when teams do get ordered/assigned.

**Operations** - This will be very dependent on the type of tasks the team is asked to do. If it is a hands-on mission, virtual will be hard but through the use of online tracking and other tools, social distancing may still be possible. Meetings, briefings, etc. can be done virtually through a variety of tools and the section chief may be able to conduct some of the operations remotely. Consider the use of forward operating bases for those required to be on scene to help limit exposure to other members of the team.

**Planning** – The majority of planning functions could be done in a virtual environment. Members required to come to an incident should be able to check in online. Database and information entry forms could be developed to deliver plans electronically to and from planning staff. Electronic methods for incident personnel to access the Incident Action Plan (IAP), maps and other applicable forms need to be put in place. Meetings and briefings could be held online or delivered electronically. Printers/plotters should be accessed and printed on through the network.

**Logistics** - This is one area that would, once again, depend on the assignment to determine who could work virtual/remote.

## **Service Branch**

Communications - This will be key and additional personnel may be necessary. Remote and possibly virtual work should be assessed/considered. For those working remote, consider setting up a service call system to deal with issues when least exposure is possible. With a movement to carry on meetings, briefings, etc. virtually/remotely consider calling in a technical specialist in this field (maybe even utilize a contractor).

Medical – This is, once again, very dependent on the type of assignment. Some could work virtual for the purposes of staying up to date with and interpreting information from a variety of medical sources, coordinating screening efforts and developing emerging protocol. Consider establishing an on-site team (limited number) assigned directly to the IMT for screening incoming and outgoing responders and dealing with any onsite incidents. An evaluation of the level of medical assistance available in the area of response must also be considered. Consider utilizing National Guard/military, local government cooperators and/or contractors to establish a medical unit.

Food Unit - Preparation would be established off-site with meals being prepared and packaged individually under strict standards. Meals should be delivered to common drop off points where incident personnel can pick up. All serving items should be single use disposable and extra emphasis placed on including sanitizing wipes with each meal as well as a protocol established for hygiene while eating. Could also develop individual food supply boxes and let folks handle their own meals.

## **Support Branch**

Supply Unit - Very dependent on type of assignment. Analysis should be done ahead of time on validity of work location options. Suggest utilizing other supply options if other camps already in place and available. Much of the work could be done virtually with requests being processed online and a remote depot set up. Consider the use of secure drop off points to deliver supplies with protocol established for handling/disinfectant procedures.

Facilities Unit – This could be done virtually to a point. With some hotels being closed, you would need some local contacts to deal with developing situations in a timely manner and provide for insurance that protocols are being followed with local hotels that are open. Depending on the security of our sites, use local or contract law enforcement as needed in conjunction with the Office of Agricultural Law Enforcement (OALE), as available.

Ground Support Unit - Ground support should create a self-inspection form on vehicles that can be completed electronically and backed up with pictures. For actual mechanical work, establish with local vendors if available or contract mechanic in locally remote location. The use of some local “runners” to support parts deliveries between remotely located posts could also be considered.

**Finance/Administration** – The majority of these operations could be done virtually. It could be as simple as developing an electronic crew time reports (CTRs) or doing traditional and sending pictures/scans. Others would need to set up a site and processes for handling products electronically. Consider identifying a local individual who could respond to comp/claims if needed.

## Command and General Staff

Liaison officers = Could be both virtual or locally remote. If dealing with a response outside our standard operations, they should have a good understanding of the emergency support functions as outlined in the national response plan. Consider ordering a local field unit employee to cover this function.

Safety officers = Could be both virtual or locally remote with the ability to respond to situations in a timely manner as needed. Consider ordering additional personnel to staff this position to ensure cleanliness standards are being strictly adhered to.

PIO = Many aspects of this function could be handled virtually. Providing information to the media can be done using social media platforms, email and possibly shared drives. Press conferences and internal meetings/briefings can be handled using a virtual solution. Public meetings can also be conducted virtually. Media tours of the incident could be handled on-site with a single PIO along with a media pool photographer and videographer. This would limit the number of personnel on the tour while enhancing the ability to practice proper social distancing. PPE provided to media representatives would need to be cleaned/sanitized properly after each use to prevent possible virus transmission. Traplines can be established as necessary and updated by a single individual or several individuals riding in separate vehicles. For additional information, see the *Florida Forest Service PIO/COVID-19 Suggested Protocol for Wildfire Season* document.

### Other Things to Consider:

- PPE - Identify what is the appropriate level of PPE needed for different stages and levels of interaction. Develop standards and stockpile.
- Isolation after encounter - Ensure protocols are in place regarding how to handle isolation if a responder encounters someone with the virus. This would include dealing with immediate decontamination.
- Consider establishing simple screening procedures at points of entry to interaction points (i.e. where more than a single staff member will be working).
- Ensure a system is in place for reporting incidents of exposure.