

560 Fire. What we learned.



APRIL 25, 2020

U.S. Forest Service, South Platte RD.
Jay Karle, BC 11 USFS.



USFS-CO-PSICC-South Platte Ranger Dist. Jefferson, County, CO.

This is intended to be a short shared learning report so that we may continue to collectively improve our fire response during future pandemics. This brief is *not* intended to be a critique of the fire response nor is it a treatise on fire conditions and strategy.

The 560 fire was ignited by suspected target shooting on the afternoon of 4/25/2020 on the northwest portion of the 137,000 acre burn scar from the 2002 Hayman fire. The fire was the jurisdiction of the U.S. Forest Service and burned wholly on USFS lands administered by the PSICC, South Platte Ranger District, it was a full suppression fire. Final size was 80 acres and it was called out on May 5th.

Observations:

- 9 different agencies responded to the fire, appx 60 personnel at peak.
- Extremely cramped parking area/ICP at heel of the fire.
- Multiple people gathered around vehicle hoods with no masks and no social distancing.
- Command post densely populated with LE and Fire Personnel.
- Very few people observed wearing a mask or making an effort to use social distancing.
- 3-4 personnel observed riding in some responding engines.
- Trying to talk on radio while wearing mask made for unintelligible/muffled comms.
- Access to fire hindered by large numbers of Forest users egressing in opposite direction of responding engines.
- Radio/mic sharing.
- No air resources available.
- Resources building hand line were well dispersed.
- Recurring congestion/population density at ICP once all resources came off the line.
- Having self-sufficient (meals) resources proved a smart move vs involving more personnel/logistics to get meals on-site.

-
- Dozer usage at head of fire proved extremely useful and efficient.

Tips, guidance and recommendations for future incidents:

- Use force multipliers that allow you to have a maximum effect on containment with minimal personnel involvement. Default to heavy equipment and air resources. Order these assets at the outset of the incident and start planning to prioritize placement. Identify and train personnel to talk to aircraft and clear drop areas. A shortage of qualified heavy equipment bosses (HEQB's) is a limiting factor in dozer usage. Work with your leadership to start training in order to build HEQB capacity (this will take time). Provide minimal boots on the ground to support heavy equipment and air resources if utilized.
- Minimize mop up time without compromising containment. Do what is necessary to secure the fire and hold it. Having a *direct* (where possible) dozer line around a fire provides a larger margin for error ipso facto the wide line itself. This can also allow for a downsizing of holding personnel earlier in the incident.
- Keep social distancing front of mind. This is a behavior contrary to years of habit and human nature but it *has* to be abided by if we want to maintain an effective firefighting force moving through the summer.
- Avoid dense staging areas/command posts. Provide for a more "metered" briefing of resources as they show up on scene. No en masse briefings.
- Assign a safety officer or "emissary" whose sole job it is to ensure social distancing and crowd control so the IC can focus on his/her task at hand with minimal distractions.
- At the end of shift, stagger resources off the line and back to their rigs to avoid a crowd. Brief them on tomorrow's plan via radio and have them depart asap so as to avoid congestion.
- Work quickly to identify surplus or unused resources and demob them as soon as practicable i.e. if hose is not being laid or used, get rid of the tenders.
- Wearing a mask on the fire line is not very feasible due to muffled radio transmissions and the need to constantly touch/adjust the mask.
- Get resources briefed and out on the line asap. Once dispersed on the fire line they are ostensibly closer to a safety zone and able to achieve social distancing.

-
- Be mindful that some agencies on scene may also provide patient care as part of their municipal duties. Recognize that these people may pose a greater exposure risk to others.
 - Consider immediately releasing resources that disregard exercising due care for social distancing as they compromise the rest of the operation and future response capability.
 - Utilize LE to quickly provide traffic control even if on road that is perceived to be seldom traveled.
 - Be apprehensive to commit *all* of your resources to any given incident no matter the temptation. Consider leaving a contingent behind in order to provide separation and ensure unexposed continuity of operations.

I hope this provided at least a few pieces of useful information. Together we can continue to build a body of knowledge with each passing incident so that tangible improvements can be accomplished. Combatting this outbreak has many parallels to firefighting, the way you stop the spread is by starving it of fuel and, in this case, the fuel is us. Social distancing is our fuel break.