

Lessons Learned

Is Your Communication Adequate?

It is 1600 hours and you hear a lookout report a smoke. As the local Battalion Chief you know the fire is located in an area which is relatively flat and located in an old burn scar.

CHECK ON WX FOR THE DAY!

Temperatures are hot, Relative Humidity is low, the lookout reports winds are gusting to 30 mph.

There was little winter precipitation and the area is in its fourth year of drought. Fuels are ready to burn.

Fuels in the area typically contribute to rapid fire growth, and are made up of grass, sagebrush and down timber.

You and 2 Type 3 engines are dispatched to the fire. Even though you have the smoke in sight and are familiar with the area, the flat terrain and a confusing system of roads and skid trails makes accessing the fire difficult.

An update on smoke conditions from the lookout indicates the fire has tripled in size.

As the Forest Duty Officer you are not surprised when you are notified of the new incident. The Forest has received hundreds of lightning strikes over the past few days and you had been expecting a few "holdover" fires.

Familiar with the location of the fire and the potential for it to become a large incident, you walk down the hall to the dispatch center to listen to the report on conditions.

Hearing the lookout report the smoke had tripled in size makes you a little anxious, and you hope the BC will be ordering more resources soon. After what seems like an extremely long time you finally hear the BC trying to make contact with Dispatch. As his report on conditions is being given, the transmission is broken and very low volume. Dispatchers try several times on different tones, but are not able to establish any better communications.

As the situation continues to unfold you become increasingly frustrated over the lack of updates and resources being ordered for the incident. Finally you ask the Dispatcher to have the IC get to better radio location and to give a report on conditions.

After a few attempts to drive to the fire's location, you decide to leave your vehicle and hike into the fire. Once on scene you determine the fire is 5-10 acres, burning in light to moderate flashy fuels, with moderate to high fire behavior.

Using your handheld radio, you attempt to make contact with dispatch. It takes several tries on different tones, but you are finally able to relay a report on conditions and resource needs to the dispatch center.

When the dispatcher calls and recommends you return to your vehicle and use the mobile radio, you realize communications may be a problem and start hiking back.

Once you get back to your vehicle and can use the mobile radio, you are able to give dispatch a report on conditions and ask

Critical information, thought to have been relayed, was not being received by the dispatchers.

Poor radio coverage is making it difficult for incoming resources to gain information on best access and incident command structure.

about the resources you ordered. Soon you are getting the resources you need and progress is being made toward containment. After a few more hours, the fire is contained and you are able to release resources to be available the next day.

LESSONS LEARNED:

- **Assure pertinent incident information is both asked for and communicated up. Good two way communications allows for proper planning, resource assignments and upward reporting**
- **Command structure of incidents should be communicated to on-scene and incoming resources, by Dispatch and IC**
- **When updates and resource ordering are communicated in a clear manner, it instills confidence in those responding to and monitoring the incident**
- **Resource ordering should be done by ICS type, kind and number needed**