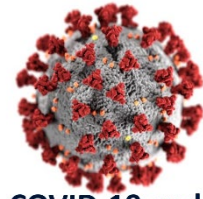




**Event Type:** Responding to Potential COVID-19 Exposure

**Date:** May 2020

**Location:** Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest



**COVID-19 and  
Fire Season 2020 Lessons**  
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## **The Story—and Lessons—of How a Fire Crew and Its Forest Responded When One of Its Members Became Exposed to COVID-19**

### **Background**

#### **The Events that Led to Potential COVID-19 Exposure**

A single member of a Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest fire crew had a roommate who tested positive for COVID-19. This positive test became known on May 16, nearly seven days after the last direct encounter between these two individuals. During the interim, beginning May 11, the crew member was engaged in training exercises with the rest of his team at a single location.

When the positive test results became known, proper notification to supervisors and the entire crew was immediate. The supervisor contacted various county public health agencies (based on residency of the entire crew) to secure testing for all. Testing was scheduled for May 18. The crew remained in quarantine between the time they were notified (May 16) and the time they received test results (that trickled in through May 22).

*Crew members were given enough information to make an informed decision about testing. None declined, although peer pressure may have influenced some who otherwise would have skipped the test.*

#### **How did the crew get tested? What public health agencies supported this effort?**

The crew obtained tests based on their county of residence. Their status as first responders (essential personnel) facilitated obtaining these tests as all crew members were asymptomatic at the time. Three different county entities provided assistance (one of them a quad-county consortium).

#### **Who paid for tests? Why were they free?**

Tests were provided free of charge. It is noteworthy to point out that in mid-May, testing would not have been made available to non-essential personnel that were asymptomatic in any of the three counties. Testing is more available now in more locations throughout the State of Nevada.

#### **Who transported crew members to the testing facility? Did these vehicles get cleaned after transport?**

Each individual drove themselves in their POV to the testing facility. Government vehicles used during the training exercises before the crew knew they were “presumptive positive” (May 11-15) were thoroughly disinfected once this new information surfaced.

**Were crew members given a choice to get tested? Why not?**

Crew members were given enough information to make an informed decision about testing. None declined, although peer pressure may have influenced some who otherwise would have skipped the test.

**Were any fire assignments missed due to their self-quarantine status while awaiting test results?**

No fire assignments were missed as a result of the testing schedule or the self-quarantine timeframe. A fire preparedness review scheduled for May 21 was postponed while awaiting test results. Crews can't be ordered until this type of review is complete.

**Where did the self-quarantine take place for all 22 members of the crew? Were there living expenses accrued by the agency during this time (hotel and per diem)?**

Crew members self-quarantined in Government-provided barracks or their personal residences. No additional lodging or housing expenses were accrued to the Government during this time. In addition to the self-quarantine of personnel, two facilities used by the crew between "potential exposure" and the time they were tested were put into an "off-limits" status until results from the test were received. In addition to these 22 fire crew members, one additional District employee—who had been in close association with them—was also tested, for a total of 23 tests being given. All test results received came back negative.

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*Contact tracing is the hardest part of the equation, especially considering the size of the crew and the timeframe in question.*

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**What contact with other personnel/public may have occurred between the time the crew was potentially exposed and then informed of the positive test?**

Potential exposure began May 11 when crew exercises/training began. The training was held at a single location. Crew leaders returned to the District office complex to make copies and perform routine office functions. Incidental contact between these crew members and others present in the office was made, but was of short duration and did not violate social distance protocols. The principal office that crew members used is cleaned on a daily basis. The janitorial staff was not informed once the positive test became known. Crew member(s) are married to spouses who are part of other fire crews and these connections were "assumed" to be alerted to the positive test. One staff member made repeated visits to the training location during the week before the reported positive test and therefore made the decision to get tested as soon as he learned of the occurrence. (This is the District employee referred to above.)

**Could any potential exposures have been missed? Were county public health officials asked to assist during this tracing effort?**

Yes, contact tracing is the hardest part of the equation, especially considering the size of the crew and the timeframe in question. County health officials were notified of the initial crew member whose roommate tested positive. They assisted with his contact tracing and recommended that he self-quarantine until May 23. The other crew members likely had contacts with other fire crew members over the course of the week before self-quarantining. These potential exposures likely fell through the cracks. A crew supervisor was keeping track of contacts outside the crew since the crew came together since May 11.

**What lessons did the crew learn from this experience?**

Contact tracing is a complex web and can be easily underestimated. The extent of contacts made over a length of time when an individual is not aware that a potential problem is brewing can be overwhelming when looking back on it. All crew members were sensitive to the possibility that if the test results came back positive, their contacts could have been accidentally exposed. This is not taken lightly. Making early contact with individual counties will help expedite testing when it becomes necessary.

### **What did the Forest learn that can help the next time?**

Testing for essential employees (first responders) is more readily available than for the workforce at large, although testing availability in Nevada has markedly improved over the last few weeks. The availability of testing is a critical element in evaluating risk/exposure as the Forest reintegrates its workforce back into office environments. Certain counties are much better prepared to assist with COVID-related matters than others. County decisions regarding quarantine may trump any decision the Forest may make during an individual incident. A wide range of resources may or may not be available, including testing capabilities, housing for the quarantine/isolation of patients, overall medical care, etc. Assigning dedicated personnel to assist with COVID-related instances (symptomatic or positive tested individual) on the Forest is highly recommended. Proper follow-up is a full-time job when done correctly!

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**This RLS was submitted by:**

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