



# Rogue River-Siskiyou Motor Vehicle Accident Fatality Learning Review

---

## Complex Narrative

August 2023

## Call 911!

“*YOU!*” Captain 31 yelled at the passerby standing near the wreckage. “*Call 911!*”

Ben, unconscious and bleeding, was trapped inside the truck. He needed help now! The passerby could not get a cell signal, so Captain 31 dialed 911 on his own phone, urgently requesting an air ambulance. From the other end of the line, he heard that a ground ambulance was enroute and the paramedics would order the helicopter once they were on scene. He did not have time to waste, and he was incredibly frustrated that he could not confirm that an air ambulance was on the way. He threw his phone on the seat of the truck while still connected to 911 and used the radio to call Wildland Fire Dispatch to request an air ambulance through them.

“*Did you call 911?*” was the response to his request.

The wildland fire dispatcher prompted Captain 31 for more information because he had not yet received any reports about an accident. There was no 8-line medical incident report, but Captain 31 was insisting he needed an air ambulance. Now!

There were no emergency medical technicians (EMT) on Crew 31, which was made up of one crew boss and four first-year firefighters. They were doing their best to get Ben out of the truck. If only they could get him out ... maybe they could help him. There was a metal bar in their way, and they did not have tools to cut it.

When a paramedic arrived on scene, he “saw what we all didn’t; Ben was already gone.” What had seemed like minutes to some, actually turned out to be closer to two hours.

## A Simple Mission Ends in Tragedy

On August 4, 2023, a vehicle carrying three members of Crew 31 from the Gold Beach Ranger District on the Rogue River-Siskiyou National Forest was involved in a roll-over accident while backhauling equipment from the Flat Fire. First-year firefighter Ben Sapper died of injuries sustained in the accident. The driver suffered a slight concussion and a quarter-sized burn on his arm from the airbag. The other passenger was uninjured.

The simple mission of backhauling equipment from the Flat Fire had ended in tragedy. How did this happen? And how do we reduce the probability of this kind of accident from happening again? A learning review team was convened to examine the events leading up to and after this tragic accident, with the intent to identify organizational learning opportunities to share with others. Details from the accident are taken directly from law enforcement reports.



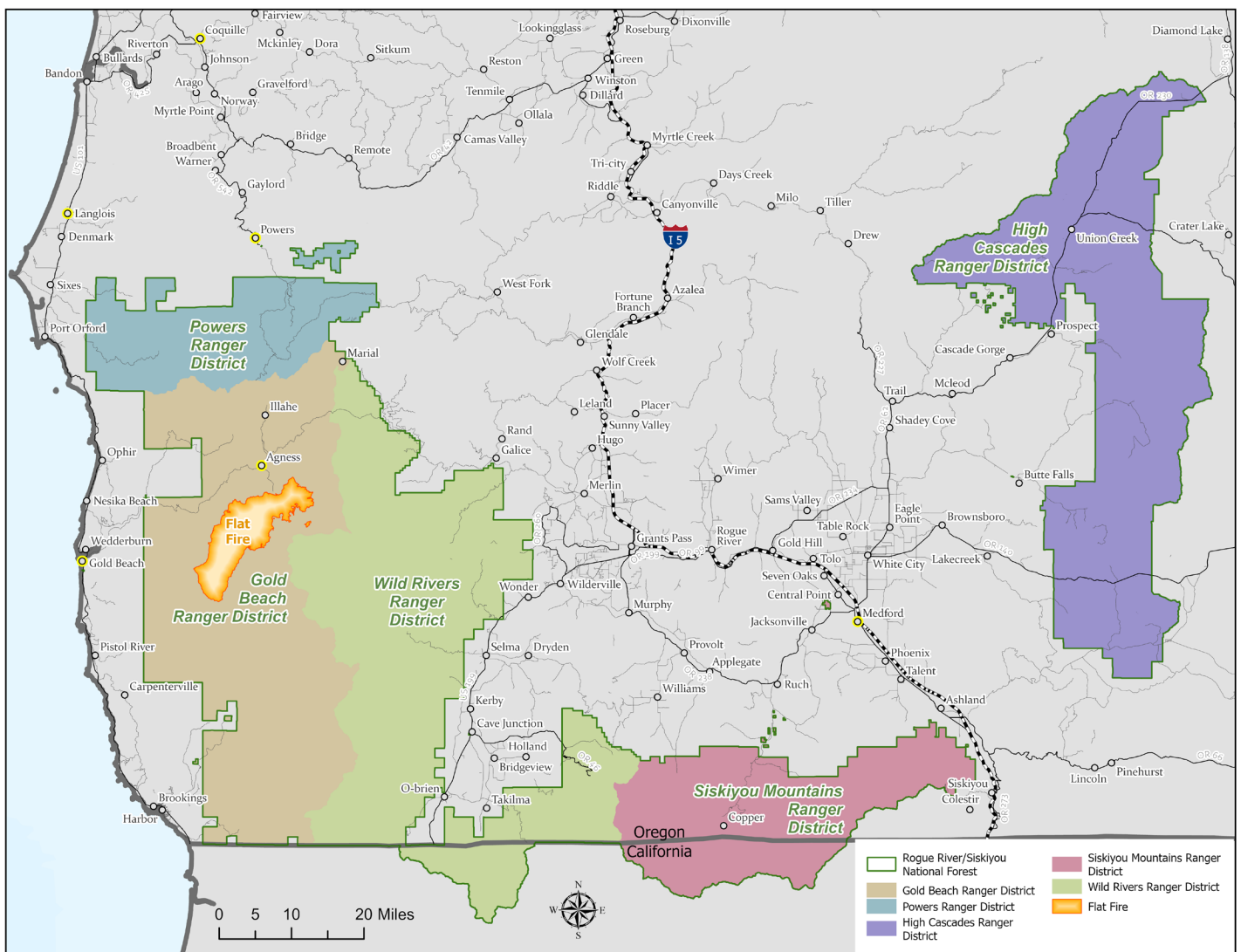
**Figure 1.**—Benjamin Charles Sapper joined the Forest Service to serve his community. Credit: The Sapper family.

Benjamin Charles Sapper was 21 years old. He joined the Forest Service because he had a desire to serve the community and be a part of a remarkable team. He had a passion for baseball, chess, skiing, and engaging in deep discussions on topics ranging from philosophy to mathematics. Ben’s zest for life was truly inspiring. He left a lasting impact on everyone he encountered.

## Gold Beach Ranger District

The Rogue River-Siskiyou National Forest is in the beautiful area of southern Oregon and northern California where lush green mountains overlook the Pacific Ocean. The Gold Beach Ranger District is in the heart of this picturesque landscape and is an attractive place to live. Snow is common in the mountains and rainfall across the area averages 80 inches per year.

Thus, even though it is a beautiful place to live, historic weather and fuel conditions have not typically supported active and large fire growth on the forest on a regular basis. Recently this pattern has changed and large fires are occurring much more often. Contrary to this recent change, the reputation of a place with limited fire activity is still present, making it difficult to recruit early career firefighters wishing to develop firefighting skills and experience. Historically fires on the district are either on the small side—say, one-tenth of an acre—or they are larger, project-sized fires, necessitating coordination by an incident management team.



**Figure 2.**—Gold Beach and Powers ranger districts, which form the Rogue River-Siskiyou National Forest’s “Coast Zone,” and the perimeter of the Flat Fire.

The forest covers nearly 1.8 million acres across seven counties and two states, Oregon, and California. Previously, the Rogue River and the Siskiyou were separate national forests, but they were administratively combined in 2004. In 2007, the nine ranger districts were consolidated to form five ranger districts. These are known today as the High Cascades, Siskiyou Mountains, Wild Rivers, Powers, and Gold Beach ranger districts.

The consolidation of national forests and ranger districts means longer distances between administrative areas. For example, the drive time from the supervisor's office in Medford to the Gold Beach Ranger District office averages four hours on winding mountainous roads.

In addition, staffing shortages on the forest over the years have resulted in increased "zoning," where employees responsible for their respective resource (e.g., soils, wildlife, and recreation) on their home ranger district are also responsible for managing their respective resource on neighboring districts. The Gold Beach Ranger District is zoned with the Powers Ranger District and has one fire management officer (FMO) to oversee the fire employees in the "Coast Zone." Spending several hours driving long distances through mountainous terrain has become a common practice on the Rogue River-Siskiyou National Forest.

The Gold Beach Ranger District's location on the Pacific Coast also situates it in an area with a high cost of living and limited housing options, especially for early career employees. Some other state and federal agencies offer much higher pay, making it hard to retain lower graded employees. The combination of these challenges tends to result in a chronic gap in middle leadership.

Early career firefighters typically remain for one to three years before moving to other, more affordable work locations. Meanwhile, higher levels of leadership remain because they can afford the cost of living in the area, and they enjoy the beautiful location, the ranger district's family atmosphere, and the level of openness in sharing resources across administrative and resource areas.

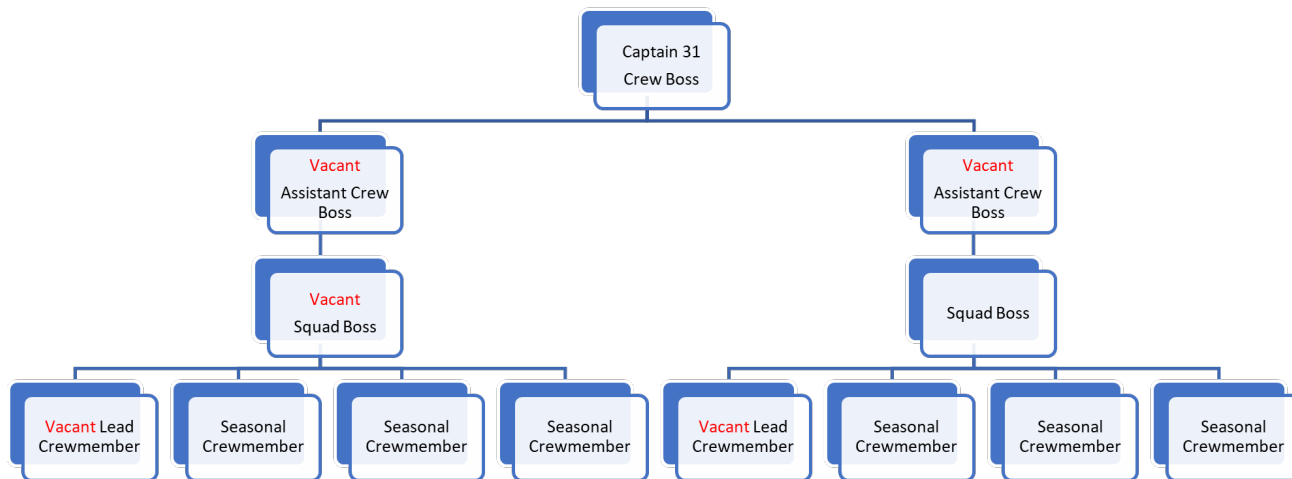
## **Crew 31**

Crew 31 is a 13-person firefighting crew stationed on the Gold Beach Ranger District. When fully staffed, the roster includes a crew boss, two assistant crew bosses, two squad bosses, two lead crew members and six seasonal firefighters.

However, the Coast Zone of the fire program on this forest always tends to be short staffed, and during the 2023 fire season, both assistant crew boss positions were vacant and one squad boss from Crew 31 had resigned citing stress and other personal reasons. The remaining squad boss was bonding with his newborn child and therefore less inclined to work extra shifts. The two lead crew positions had not been filled in the last round of hiring due to lack of applicants. These newly developed staffing challenges resulted in Captain 31 frequently being the only permanent employee on the crew when they worked extra shifts.

Compounding these challenges at the middle leader level of the fire program, the 2023 fire year proved to be especially challenging with respect to temporary hiring. The year began with multiple rounds of hiring. Many entry-level firefighters selected during the first rounds of hiring had immediately resigned. Thus, the district went through an additional round of hiring replacements while the fire season was already underway.

“No one wants to come and work here,” said one Gold Beach Ranger District employee, because there are “no incentives, low GS-pay wages for the cost of living, not enough to survive on.”



**Figure 3.**—Organizational chart for Crew 31 showing vacancies.

Ben Sapper was hired as one of the replacements for Crew 31. Because he was hired so late in the season and had to complete several mandatory trainings as a new firefighter and federal employee, there was not enough time for him to squeeze in the federal driver’s license training. Bringing on a new employee is a significant workload. Getting Linc Passes issued, setting up travel profiles, and putting on required training takes a lot of effort. When a United States Department of Agriculture, Forest Service (Forest Service) unit is experiencing staffing shortages, it is even more challenging to try to get all this work done.

---

*Vehicles have been an issue for the crew since Alpha 1.*

Crew 31 employee

---

Agency vehicles often break down due to the wear and tear of driving across the forest. This was the case for Crew 31 who had one of their vehicles break down early in the season. “Vehicles have been an issue for the crew since Alpha 1,” said one employee. Alpha 2—the first truck the crew borrowed—did not meet Crew 31’s needs. They borrowed a second truck

to replace their broken down “Alpha” vehicle, but its mobile radio did not work. This meant they had to resort to using a handheld radio for communications.

The combination of limited crew members qualified as drivers, the practice of driving long distances across the forest, and ongoing challenges with vehicle maintenance created a challenging work and operational environment for Crew 31.

## The Flat Fire

The new Gold Beach district ranger had been in place for about two weeks when the Flat Fire ignited on July 15. An acting forest supervisor had recently arrived, and regional office leadership in Portland was in a time of transition. To top it all off, the new district ranger was also closing on a house.

Crew 31 was dispatched to the Flat Fire as part of a type 2 IA crew on July 16. This allowed Captain 31 to step into the incident commander role (IC) for the Flat Fire, working a 30-hour shift as IC before leaving on the first summer vacation he had scheduled in 16 years.

To provide agency administrator oversight of the Flat Fire, the new acting forest supervisor worked out of the Gold Beach Ranger District office. He joined the new district ranger, public affairs officer, forest fire staff officer, fire management officer (FMO) and assistant fire management officer (AFMO) in the situation room that had been set up in the fire office.

Crew 31 did a full 14-day rotation on the Flat Fire followed by three days of rest and recuperation (R&R). When they came back from R&R on August 3, they met up with Captain 31 and planned the sorting and backhauling of equipment borrowed from three local fire caches while initial attacking the Flat Fire. They returned the equipment taken from fire caches in Gold Beach and Agness by the end of their shift and planned to return the remainder of the equipment borrowed from the Powers fire cache the following day.

The fire cache situation for the 2023 season was also heavily impacted with staffing shortages in multiple locations. Fire leadership within the region had a pre-season meeting where the cache challenges for the upcoming season were daylighted. The regional fire cache in Redmond had limited staffing. Historically the regional fire cache was pretty much in operation 24/7 during fire season. They anticipated that, this year, orders arriving later in the evening may not be processed until the following day. Weekend orders may not get processed until the following Monday.

In response, Rogue River-Siskiyou National Forest fire leadership bolstered their local cache in Medford and devised a plan to use smaller fire caches in Agness, Gold Beach, and Powers to lessen the impact of the regional cache challenges. The Medford cache did not have a cache manager in place so there would be times when forest duty officers, dispatch leadership, and/or anyone else who was available needed to run the forklift or build and receive cache orders.

## The Accident

After their physical training (PT) on the morning of August 4, Captain 31 and five first-year seasonals loaded the Powers Ranger District's fire cache supplies into their three trucks and headed to the town of Powers, which is a two- or three-hour drive from Gold Beach. They took Jerry's Flat Road so they could stop and measure a sign at Agness along the route. They looked forward to hotdogs for lunch in Langlois on their return via Highway 101. This was Crew 31's regularly scheduled day off, so the one squad boss on the crew was not working.

There is a well-known spring about an hour from Powers known for its great-tasting water. After the crew completed their mission at Agness, they stopped to fill their water bottles at the spring and take a quick stretch break before completing the last hour of the trip. Captain 31 was alone in the lead truck. Alpha truck was second in the convoy with a driver and two passengers. Bravo truck brought up the rear with a driver and one passenger. It was not uncommon to lose sight of other vehicles along the narrow winding road flanked by dense vegetation.

As Captain 31 approached the outskirts of Powers, a deer jumped out in front of his truck. When he slowed to avoid it, he noticed Bravo truck (the third vehicle) catching up to him. As he was wondering where Alpha truck (the second vehicle) was he received a radio call from Alpha truck crew members reporting that they had gone off the road and needed help. The radio call was delayed because the handheld radio had been ejected from the truck, and the

driver had to search the area near the wreck to find it. They were just outside of the national forest boundary, and just a few minutes away from the town of Powers.

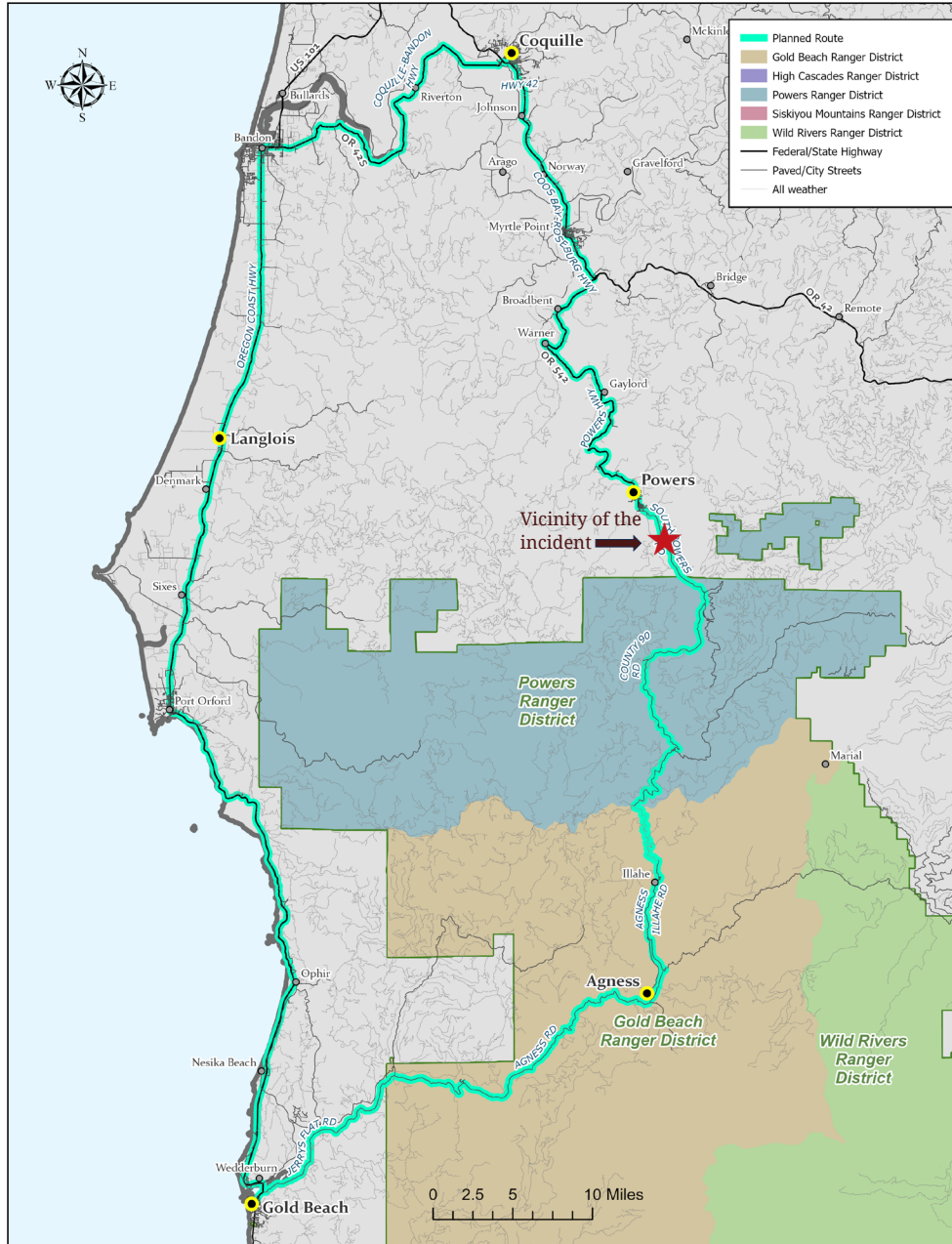


Figure 4.—Map showing the planned route taken from Gold Beach and the vicinity of the accident.

Captain 31 (in the lead truck) and Bravo truck turned around and backtracked down the road. They found Alpha truck down a steep embankment, rolled on its side, and wedged against some trees (see photo on pg. 9). Bravo truck parked at a pullout while Captain 31 tried to block traffic with his vehicle. The firefighters in Bravo truck were already running across the road to help when a private citizen arrived, and Captain 31 pointed at him and yelled “You, call 911!”

Captain 31’s mind flashed back to his First Aid/CPR training, and he marveled at how closely this scene matched the scenario in the training video. Although Crew 31 did not have any EMTs, they did their best to help Ben, who was trapped in the back seat of Alpha truck.



**Figure 5.**—Alpha truck where it came to a stop after leaving the road. Credit: Law enforcement report.

Multiple events were happening at the same time:

- Wildland fire dispatch made the call to 911 and learned an air ambulance would not be dispatched until a paramedic from the Coquille department was on scene.
- The forest duty officer ordered a National Guard helicopter to report to Powers.
- A fire engine from the Powers Ranger District and another severity contract engine responded to the accident site.
- The Powers Fire Department ambulance arrived on scene and tried to use their equipment to extricate Ben.
- The AFMO who was acting as district duty officer for the day, received a call about the accident on his cell phone while on his PT run.
- The district ranger and acting forest supervisor overheard the radio traffic about the accident while they were driving to a public meeting in Agness. They turned around and dropped the acting forest supervisor off at Gold Beach. The district ranger and others then continued to Agness but turned around again upon learning that the employees involved in the accident were from the Gold Beach Ranger District.

## Worst Fears Confirmed

At dispatch, they received word that the National Guard helicopter was not needed. Nonetheless, they decided to keep the helicopter coming in case it would later prove useful. Dispatch did not know at this point that Ben had passed away. After further conversation they began to understand the severity of the incident as the captain of the Powers District Engine, who had arrived and became the IC of the accident scene, canceled the National Guard helicopter a second time.

Dispatch was also grappling with which emergency notification phone tree to utilize for this accident. Crew 31 had not updated their location after leaving Agness, so dispatch was unsure if Captain 31 had continued alone and come across a private vehicle accident. Dispatch did not want to say names over the radio, but they needed to figure out which phone tree to use—either the one for the Flat Fire IMT or the Rogue River-Siskiyou emergency notification procedures.

Further adding to the confusion, Crew 31 had just finished up a tour on the Flat Fire but were currently not assigned to that incident. However, their task for the day was backhauling Flat Fire supplies to the local fire cache. When Captain 31 told dispatch over the radio that they were local fire resources not attached to the Flat Fire, the dispatcher then selected the Rogue River-Siskiyou phone tree for notifications.

In the situation room, the district ranger and acting forest supervisor listened to events unfold over the radio. When they realized the severity of the accident, the acting forest supervisor called the acting regional forester to deliver the news. He then called the acting regional casualty assistance program (CAP) lead to request a care team.

The AFMO, while still in PT gear, arrived at the situation room. After receiving more details from Captain 31 over the phone, he dressed and quickly drove toward the accident site. Realizing he was driving way too fast, he pulled over to collect himself before continuing. The normally two- or three-hour drive took him 1 hour and 45 minutes. The local Gold Beach Forest Service engine was sent to the accident site to assist the AFMO.

At the time, Forest leaders only knew an accident had happened on a county road just outside the national forest boundary near Powers. They were concerned with taking care of their people and figuring out the proper notification process and accident response. *“When an incident like this happens, the machine gets going,”* said the acting forest supervisor, referring to the complexities and scale of the response. When they got confirmation of the fatality, the acting forest supervisor again called the acting regional forester to pass on that information.

The Powers Forest Service engine had already transported the two crew members from Alpha truck, and a crew member from Bravo truck who had assisted with first aid, to the hospital for evaluation by the time the AFMO arrived. He waited as the tow truck pulled the vehicle onto the road and the extrication was completed.

The AFMO remained with Ben, performing Honor Watch until the mortuary personnel arrived and draped an American flag over Ben. The AFMO then joined the 40-vehicle procession organized by the sheriff’s deputy to escort Ben to the mortuary. A member of the

Forest Service Honor Guard arrived at the mortuary and instructed the procession of people on how to properly salute a fallen firefighter.



**Figure 6.**—Example of a cordon of honor during the Dignified Transfer of Remains.  
Credit: Forest Service Honor Guard website.

A Forest Service law enforcement officer (LEO) on assignment to the Forest was notified by the acting patrol captain roughly one hour after the accident happened. Not knowing how urgent the situation was, he quickly made his way to the incident, driving Code 3 with his lights on the whole way. Once on-scene he found a local sheriff deputy handling the situation.

The learning review team received access to the law enforcement reports for this accident. Below are excerpts from those reports:

*The crew advised me [the investigating officer] that they were coming from the Gold Beach office and left at approximately 1000 hours. And the accident was reported at...the Coos County Dispatch Center at 1236 hours. [The driver] did advise me that **he believes he may have dozed off for a moment** and that he didn't fully remember the accident happening (emphasis added).*

*I observed there to be tire tracks heading north leaving the roadway, there was no signs of braking or swerving and it appeared that the vehicle left the roadway naturally in a continuous straight line.*

*[The towing company] arrived on scene at approximately 1622 hours.*

*The damage to the top of the cab was extensive. The cab where Sapper was sitting had been caved in from what appeared to be a tree when the vehicle went down the embankment on its side.*

*[Driver] advised me he had a minor concussion from the accident and that was about the extent of his injuries.*

*[Driver] advised me that [the other passengers] were sleeping for most of the trip (emphasis added).*

*Speed estimated at the time of the accident was 25 to 30 miles per hour.*



**Figure 7.**—The location where Alpha Truck left the road. Credit: Law enforcement report.

When the LEO helped to gather Ben’s personal effects from the wreckage, he found a notebook in which Ben had been working on complex algebra problems for practice. Another Gold Beach Ranger District employee, who had been at the Powers Ranger District office for the day, remained at the accident site until Alpha truck was loaded on the tow truck. She then

helped the tow truck driver gather the equipment that was ejected from the vehicle during the accident.

Throughout the unfolding of these events several people, including the district ranger, forest duty officer, and dispatcher, were urgently trying to locate Ben’s emergency contact information. The forest protocol was to store emergency contact forms in a locked filing cabinet at Gold Beach and at dispatch. However, they could not find the keys at Gold Beach, and they did not have the emergency contact form at dispatch. The forest duty officer eventually located an address on Ben’s resume from earlier hiring events. All involved said finding Ben’s contact information took way longer than they were expecting.

On the day of the accident the Gold Beach FMO had scheduled annual leave for the afternoon. After working 20 straight days on the Flat Fire, he was not monitoring his phone and did not immediately receive the messages about the accident. When he eventually checked his phone, he rushed back and joined those gathered in the situation room. Feeling a strong desire to take care of his people, the FMO, in consultation with the acting forest supervisor, requested a critical incident stress management (CISM) response from a local regional team that includes members of the Coos Forest Protective Association (CFPA) which is a state organization, and the Coos Bay Fire Department.

The acting forest supervisor began grappling with how best to notify Ben’s family in Colorado of his passing. As he struggled to come up with the words to use on that incredibly difficult phone call, he learned that the Region 6 and Region 2 fire directors had been working in the background to organize an in-person notification. A forest supervisor local to the Colorado area and a local sheriff’s deputy drove to the home of Ben’s parents and delivered the news in person.

The acting forest supervisor was relieved, and agreed this was a much better option than delivering the news over the phone. The whole process of coordinating the two regions and the personnel delivering the notification took about eight hours to complete. Getting the emergency contact information was part of this time, along with waiting for Ben’s dad to arrive at home.

## Taking Care of Our People

The Coos Forest Protective Association CISM team arrived with food (which was greatly appreciated) and they were helpful but by the end of the night Crew 31 and district staff just wanted

### Additional Context

#### Critical Incident Stress Management

Critical Incident Stress Management (CISM) is a comprehensive and programmatic approach to impacts and potential impacts to employees that survive or have a significant relationship to a critical or traumatic incident. Along the spectrum of components within CISM, the most common and appropriate component needed immediately following a critical incident is Critical Incident Peer Support (CIPS). Clinical research as well as current practices by the wildland fire community, military, and other first responder agencies support CIPS as an appropriate and effective response to a critical incident. CIPS can play a vital role in affected employees’ initial intervention, such as helping with healthy coping by providing tools and techniques that may lead to a more favorable response to traumatic stress.

to go home. It was 8 pm and many of the crew members wanted to be left alone. They felt overwhelmed by the number of people at the office when they arrived. It was later reported that only four CISM responders were there, but the crew perceived a lot more people with CISM and other forest employees they had never met before mingling with fire employees at the office. Although everyone who had been at the accident site was told that engaging with CISM was optional, they felt pressure to attend peer support meetings.

On Saturday, August 5, the day after the accident, local employees from the crew and Forest Service engines performed Honor Watch for Ben. Later, some members of the CISM team spontaneously helped organize a bon fire on the beach because some of the crew members mentioned that this is something that they would like to do. The CISM team members quietly assisted in making it safe for everyone by ensuring designated drivers were present and requesting approval for the bon fire from the proper authorities. The Gold Beach community responded by closing the beach, so the public would not interrupt the crew gathering.

A visit to the bon fire from the local forest fire staff officer also made a powerful impression on the crew. The fire staff officer expressed great regret that due to his heavy workload, he was not able to meet Ben and the other new members of Crew 31 before the accident. He was angry that his schedule had not allowed him the time to make it to the readiness review earlier in the season, or to find another occasion to connect with the first year Gold Beach employees.

*“There is no down time at all anymore,”* he said, and that being specifically invited and welcomed by the members of Crew 31 during the bon fire, and the days following was *“beyond humbling.”*

## Paperwork

The day following the accident the AFMO was trying to complete the necessary paperwork to report the line of duty death (LODD) to the Forest Service’s human resources office (HR). He was not sure what forms to use, or how properly to complete them. It did not help that the HR representative on the other end of the phone was in training, and that the two of them needed to learn the process together.

Eventually, an experienced HR team was assigned to the incident and helped the AFMO through the rest of the process. Afterwards, he felt overwhelmed from the accident, which was compounded by the subsequent paperwork exercise. He expressed the need to be with family for support and an assignment near family and friends was quickly arranged. The AFMO was just recently hired into his position in April and he felt a need to return to familiar surroundings for support after the accident.

The expectations of what leadership needs to do during a fatality incident is murky. The acting forest supervisor and district ranger expressed a desire for a one-page sheet that simply listed the five or six important steps a line officer should take after an incident, including what to do and what to expect during a fatality incident. For example, an SF-52 is required to report the death immediately, CA-1’s for the employees, but also a report for the damaged vehicle is needed so that it can be replaced in a timely fashion.

## Problems with Acronyms

Four days after the accident, the acting forest supervisor received a text message through the deputy regional forester from the WO asking for a “CRP”-related product. It was the first time he had heard the acronym.

*“It wasn’t triggering in my head that anyone else was using it,” he said.*

He and the district ranger did not know what the acronym stood for. They tried searching online but could not find the answer. They were both new in their positions and had not been to any training in critical incident response, therefore they did not know that the Coordinated Response Protocol (CRP) is the Forest Service’s method for responding to serious incidents.

### Additional Context

#### The Coordinated Response Protocol

The Coordinated Response Protocol (CRP) is a tool to ensure that we learn everything possible from serious incidents to reduce the chances of recurrence while lessening accidents’ painful effects on others.

The CRP uses Incident Command System principles to organize the way the U.S. Forest Service executes post-accident responses, including logistics, information transfer, and ordering additional specialists. It is designed to lessen the incident’s impact on survivors by minimizing the number of interviews to which personnel are exposed.

The CRP synchronizes all groups involved in post-accident response, including the Learning Review Team, Peer Support/Critical Incident Stress Management, Law Enforcement and Investigations, union, communication, and Human Resource Management. It also makes every effort to coordinate external investigations, such as those required by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration, National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, Office of Inspector General, state, and local law enforcement, coroner’s offices, and other cooperators and partners.

## Taking Care of the Family

The Wildland Firefighter Foundation flew Ben’s family to Medford where the two forest deputy fire staff officers were waiting to drive them to Gold Beach. By this time, more Honor Guard members had arrived at Gold Beach and, upon the family’s arrival, they took over caring for them. The family met with several local leaders on the forest who briefed them about what was planned for their visit.

The family requested to meet with the crew, so a conference room and picnic table were set up to facilitate that. In addition, the family was provided an opportunity to go through Ben’s belongings at the district bunkhouse. One of the deputy fire staff officers on the forest shared memories with the family about how impressed he was with Ben being the first to volunteer at the sand table during the readiness reviews and how he noticed Ben had a craving for

reading heady books on brainy topics such as philosophy. The deputy was impressed when he noticed the book Ben was reading during lunch at the readiness review and spoke to Ben about his interests while they were together. A fire captain who had previously filled in for the crew remained with the family during their stay at Gold Beach because he had been close with some of the crew members.



**Figure 8.**—Ben at the sand table during the readiness review.  
Credit: Kyle Sullivan, BLM.

## Gauging the Right Level of Support

The evening of the accident, Crew 31 reported returning to the Gold Beach Ranger District office and sat through what they perceived to be a peer support session. Then the following day, on August 5, they attended additional what they termed “CISM and peer support sessions.”

### Additional Context

In addition, a former Crew 31 captain who was working on the Flat Fire and was CISM qualified was the third source of CISM to be ordered (1: The national Care Team CISM folks (still en-route), 2: the CFPA CISM team, and 3: the former Crew 31 captain). It was arranged for the former Crew 31 captain and the CFPA CISM folks to wait at the Gold Beach office. When the Powers engine crew delivered Crew 31 back to the office at about 8:00 pm that evening there were several regular forest employees in the office along with the CISM folks.

The following day they were informed that the “actually assigned CISM team” arrived, so they went through yet another session that was considered the “official” CISM session. This occurred on August 8, and this was the only official CISM session the national CISM team coordinated. It was not a CISM debrief, it was just a timeline reconstruction.

In all, some crew members reported attending roughly seven CISM and other peer support sessions in seven days. It was a lot. *“Too many strangers too soon and it made it very overwhelming, especially when there were seven interviews all in one week. It felt like our wounds were being opened all over again,”* said one crew member. Although they were thankful for the concern and noted

that CISM was very professional, they found that *“in some ways it felt like CISM was ineffective because we were still in the trauma and trying to process it at the same time.”*

Realizing the crew needed solitude, the district ranger designated some barracks on the compound a “safety zone” where no one else was allowed to bother them. Even days after the incident everyone was still in the throes of the traumatic situation, as well as carrying a lot of anxiety surrounding how best to host Ben’s family, which was scheduled to visit Gold Beach soon.

A lot of people were trying to help the crew in a way they did not want or need. The AFMO later described how “the CISM response was overwhelming. Not everyone needs it.”

At the same time, Captain 31 advised employees to *“be honest with people, tell [the CISM team] how you are doing,”* worrying that some employees may not accept needed support.

*“We just have a general idea of what CISM is until we need it,”* said the acting forest supervisor.

Throughout the course of events, several people across the community came to help, many had worked on the district before and know the area well. An Honor Guard member assisted with several tasks including advising Gold Beach Ranger District leadership in the art of planning a memorial for a fallen firefighter.

Former employees also arrived to help. *“Some really great local ADs [administratively determined employees also known as emergency firefighters]”* were brought in to assist with planning, said one employee. Memorial planning is not considered “emergency” work, so it fell outside of the AD pay plan and resulted in payment complications. They decided to stay on even if it meant volunteering because *“they’re such great people,”* said the district ranger.

When another serious accident occurred on the neighbor forest, the Honor Guard member and relief agency administrator helping with the Flat Fire suddenly had to leave. The departure of these two pivotal people made an enormous impact.

*“Cracks in the foundation started to show when everyone left,”* said the district ranger. People were asking her *“what do you need?”* She was not quite sure, but she knew she wanted a neighboring forest supervisor and close friend there for support. Instead, she was offered a list of other people who were available. *“I had to take a very strong stance to get who I wanted,”* she said. *“Having the right kind of support fills an intangible role connecting the dots and providing support.”*

The district ranger did not want people she did not know around. *“I needed someone who could read my mind,”* she said. The regional office in Portland was intent on getting the requested support for the ranger, but they were also very aware that the individual being requested had her own individual and forest challenges happening at that time. After a productive discussion between the forest and the region, the person who had been requested was sent to help.

## Honoring Ben in Gold Beach

On Wednesday, August 9, a flag raising ceremony, a final radio call, and barbecue were held at the Gold Beach Ranger District office. One engine captain said *“I was very impressed with the amount of support and help from the community, emergency services, and the fire staff officer”* during this time.



**Figure 9.**—Members of the Honor Guard performing the flag raising ceremony on August 9, 2023. Credit: Kyle Sullivan, BLM.



**Figure 10.**—Honor Guard raising the flag during the memorial ceremony on August 9, 2023. Credit: Kyle Sullivan, BLM.

This event in Gold Beach was the first memorial the fire staff officer had taken part in planning. He found it very helpful when a trusted member of the Honor Guard presented “a menu of options” to choose from. He did not expect to be so highly involved in the planning.

The fire staff officer said that he saw a new side of people he had known for a long time, a side that he never imagined existed. He was extremely impressed with their dedication and willingness to dig deep to make this event a success. Despite being exhausted, he felt duty-bound to stay engaged and make sure things went well. *“It took a team on top of a team to pull this off,”* he said, but added that *“help is only help until it is no longer help.”*

He recognized that his fatigue level was so high that he would find himself getting angry over small things. He felt like he was “the shield” for his people, which he described as going into “Dad Mode.” He feels most people in the fire community want *“quiet and silence initially, then they want to grieve. Then they want help.”* But he recognizes that there are exceptions, and some people want help earlier.



**Figure 11.**—Employees gathered for the ceremony honoring Ben. Credit: Kyle Sullivan, BLM.



**Figure 12.**—Regional office and Rogue River-Siskiyou National Forest leadership in the cordon of honor. Credit: Kyle Sullivan, BLM.

He was working very hard to ensure the memorial was about showing respect. As a fire staff officer, he wanted to project that he was there because IT was important, not because HE was important. He wanted to project to Ben’s family that *“this isn’t about [us], but we are here to respect you.”* In his mind, that is a very fine line, and he wanted to ensure the Forest Service was walking it.

In addition to the flag raising ceremony and barbecue in Gold Beach, the town organized a cordon of honor where emergency vehicles and community members lined the road as Ben’s family was escorted through the town in a small procession of vehicles. It was an incredibly powerful moment that had an emotional impact on all who were involved. Regional and forest leadership took part in the cordon of honor and knew they had hit the tone of the memorial right when Ben’s mom blew them a kiss on her way north to see her son.

After the memorial in Gold Beach, the Forest Service and the Wildland Firefighter Foundation provided the means for the seasonal firefighters not from the local area to go home to be with their families. This was very much appreciated by the firefighters and their families.

## Accident Site Visit

On Thursday, August 10, Ben’s family and the remaining Crew 31 members planned to visit the accident site together. Several people suggested to ranger district leadership that having the crew and family visit the site together for the first time since the accident might not be a good idea. In response, the clinician embedded with the care team aided in designing a successful site visit.

The clinician organized a pre-visit briefing before they left for the accident site. Maps were given to the family so they could have a better understanding of the accident location and as a means of mentally preparing them for the visit. The Forest Service LEO talked them through a mental simulation of the accident scene they could visualize in their mind as a means of psychological preparation of what they were going to experience.

According to the district ranger, the LEO was “wonderful” and provided a description of the accident in a slow, calm, and compassionate tone. Everyone, including Ben’s family and Crew 31, were impressed and thankful for the briefing. During the accident site visit, first responders including ambulance drivers, EMTs, and sheriff deputies blocked the road to provide the family time at the site without interruptions.

The clinician also suggested it may be better if the crew and family did not witness each other’s first reactions at the accident site, so the crew was sent to the site two hours earlier than the family. Once the family was near, the crew waited out of sight a short distance away. They returned at the family’s request, and they all walked around the site together. Afterward, the family requested a group photo with the crew.

By all accounts, the group accident site visit was an incredibly positive experience. *“It was very beautiful, and the family was really amazing, and they made it a point of communicating that they didn’t blame anyone for the accident,”* said the district ranger.

## Memorial in Boulder, Colorado

In preparation for a memorial in Ben’s home state of Colorado, there was much discussion about how to transport Ben’s remains. The discussion centered around transportation via commercial airline flight or by agency aircraft. Some people who felt that “we should not put our fallen in with people’s baggage and cargo” were frustrated with discussions about job codes and pay codes, instead of “doing the right thing,” which some believed should be transporting Ben’s remains via agency aircraft<sup>1</sup>.

The memorial for Ben was held in his hometown of Boulder. The family liaison was engaged with Ben’s family throughout the planning of the memorial, and the family’s desires were

---

1 Travel by agency aircraft is not ideal for families accompanying their loved ones remains. Agency aircraft often lack comfortable seating, restrooms, and climate control. Commercial airlines provide these comforts for the family and are practiced in transporting fallen soldiers while honoring the fallen and their families. Cultural needs are also considered.

front and center in the planning efforts. Ranger district staff described how grateful they were to be able to send 11 Gold Beach employees to Colorado for the memorial. They also mentioned the amazing number of Region 2 employees who arrived in uniform.

It was helpful to Ben's family to see Crew 31 and other familiar faces in this sea of uniforms. Captain 31 was able to do the bell ringing ceremony, which was meaningful and had a strong impact on him. At the memorial the Chief of the Forest Service made it a point to be available to the family and the affected firefighters. This personal touch from the Chief was greatly appreciated by everyone involved, including Ben's family.

While there was some internal disagreement about mode of transportation for Ben's remains, all who attended the memorial agreed that it was very well done. The venue was beautiful, and there was a 60-foot American flag suspended by ladder trucks. Everyone who attended felt the people involved in planning the memorial did an outstanding job. It was obvious how much work the Region 2 employees and the incident management team assigned to planning this put into this event. Every detail was meticulously planned and implemented.

While the employees from the Gold Beach Ranger District were in Boulder, Ben's dad invited them to his favorite brewery and later to his home. All the Gold Beach employees appreciated interacting with the family in a non-formal setting and the crew gave the family crew t-shirts as a meaningful token of their appreciation.



**Figure 13.**—American flag suspended from ladder trucks. Credit: Forest Service Honor Guard website.

## **A lot of loss in a short period of time**

The following week a former Gold Beach employee passed away in a non-line of duty death (non-LODD), which added to the loss employees were feeling. Following both losses, the driver of Alpha truck decided to resign. Upon learning he planned to travel alone many hours through multiple states in his personal vehicle, local leaders decided to send a chase truck with him to ensure he made it home safely. Some local leaders advocated that he be able to drive by himself if that is what he desired, while others felt that it was the national forest's responsibility to ensure he made it safely to his family.

Ultimately, two employees followed him in another vehicle. Eventually one of them joined him in his vehicle, keeping him company until they met up with his family at the halfway point, where they could escort him the rest of the way home.

## Closure

The fire crew and fire leadership jointly decided to provide opportunities for out-of-region fire assignments to help people reset emotionally. Crew members were asking to be sent out of region with the local hotshot crew, or the engine. This allowed Captain 31 to spend some time with his family, while not worrying how his absence might deprive crewmembers of opportunities to continue to work on fire assignments.

*“We wanted them to be able to do what they signed up to do.”* said one employee.

Crew 31 received permission from the landowner to place a memorial at the accident site. On the last day of the temporary employees’ season, Friday, October 20, Crew 31 placed the memorial in a small ceremony. The employees said they were glad to take part in this event, as it provided more closure, and it was a good way to end the season.



**Figure 14.**—Memorial placed at the accident site on October 20, 2023.

Fire and ranger district leaders wonder if any of the first-year firefighters on Crew 31 will return next year, and how they and other employees will fare when the season ends and support systems currently in place become less available to them. *“How do we continue to take care of these first-year firefighters after they are laid off?”*

## **Learning Review Team**

Stephaney Kerley, Team Leader

Joe Harris, Lead Facilitator

David Flores, Lead Facilitator Shadow

Andrew Coriell, Law Enforcement Liaison

Tina Howard, NFFE Union Representative

Timothy Wagner, Subject Matter Expert

Pete Gomben, Writer-editor

The learning review team sincerely thanks all the participants in this review for their openness in sharing their experience and their commitment to learning.

## Appendix A: Timeline of Events (some are approximated)

Date	Time	Event
01/12/2023		Region 6 job announcement for temporary firefighter positions opens.
01/19/2023		Region 6 job announcement for temporary firefighter positions closes.
02/28/2023		Certificate of eligible applicants issued to the Rogue River-Siskiyou National Forest.
06/18/2023		Benjamin Sapper first day of work as a new firefighter at Gold Beach.
07/03/2023		New Gold Beach district ranger first day.
07/10/2023		Acting forest supervisor first day.
07/15/2023		Flat Fire ignites.
07/16/2023		Crew 31 dispatched to Flat Fire.
07/16/2023	0843	Captain 31 assumes role of IC for the Flat Fire.
07/17/2023	0600	Another incident management team assumes command of the Flat Fire and Captain 31 leaves for vacation.
07/30-08/02		Crew 31 R&R days.
08/03/2023		Crew 31 returns from R&R, backhauls gear to Gold Beach and Agness fire caches.
08/04/2023	0800	Crew arrives to work and starts physical training.
	1000	Crew 31 leaves Gold Beach en route to Powers via Jerry's Flat Road.
	1236	Coos County Dispatch receives 911 call for an air ambulance. A ground ambulance and sheriff's deputy are dispatched.
	1254	Wildland Fire Dispatch receives radio call from Captain 31 requesting an air ambulance.
	1255	Captain 31 notifies Wildland Fire Dispatch the Powers ambulance on scene is only basic life support and enquires about the air ambulance.
	1312	Wildland Fire Dispatch log shows that all notifications have been made.
	1314	Coos County deputy arrives on scene.
	~1321-1331	Myrtle Point (Coquille) Ambulance arrives and calls the death on scene.

<b>Date</b>	<b>Time</b>	<b>Event</b>
	1331	Powers engine captain notifies dispatch he has assumed command of the accident site and cancels National Guard helicopter.
	1422	Powers engine transports Crew 31 to hospital.
	1622	Towing company arrives at accident site.
	1743	AFMO notifies Wildland Fire Dispatch he will be escorting fallen firefighter to the mortuary.
	~2000	Crew 31 arrives back at Gold Beach.
08/05/2023		AFMO reports employee line of duty death to Human Resources in Albuquerque, NM.
08/05/2023		CISM organizes a bon fire at the beach for Crew 31.
08/08/2023		Sapper family arrives in Gold Beach.
08/09/2023		Ben is honored with flag raising ceremony, last call, and a barbeque.
08/10/2023		Crew 31 accident site visit with the Sapper family.
08/27/2023		Memorial in Boulder, Colorado.
After the Boulder, CO memorial		Driver of Alpha Truck resigns and drives home.
10/20/2023		Crew 31 places memorial at the accident site.
10/20/2023		Crew 31 temporary employees last day.

## Appendix B: Acronym Index

AA – Agency Administrator, who is the individual responsible for administering policy on an area of public, private or tribal land and having full authority for making decisions and providing direction to the incident management organization. Also referred to by the wildland fire qualification WFA1, WFA2 or WFA3.

AD – Administratively Determined, also called Emergency Hire or Casual Hire. Individuals may be hired on a temporary basis in order to cope with a sudden and unexpected emergency caused by a fire, or extreme fire potential, flood, storm, or any other all-hazard emergency that threatens damage to federally protected property, has the potential to cause loss of life, serious injury, public health risk, or damage to natural or cultural resources unless brought under immediate control.

AFMO – Assistant Fire Management Officer.

AgLearn – United States Department of Agriculture on-line learning portal.

CA-1 – Standard form used to report a work-related injury.

CAP – Casualty Assistance Program.

CFPA – Coos Forest Protective Association.

CIPS – Critical Incident Peer Support. CIPS is about peers, or “people of mutual respect,” helping each other, i.e., firefighters helping firefighters. The shared experiences of peers foster the initial trust and credibility necessary for developing relationships in which individuals are willing to open up and discuss their reactions and concerns after a critical incident.

CISM – Critical Incident Stress Management, which is a comprehensive and programmatic approach to impacts and potential impacts to employees that survive or have a significant relationship to a critical or traumatic incident.

CPR – Cardiopulmonary resuscitation.

CRP – Coordinated Response Protocol. The CRP uses Incident Command System principles to organize the way the United States Forest Service executes post-accident responses, including logistics, information transfer, and ordering additional specialists. It is designed to lessen the incident’s impact on survivors by minimizing the number of interviews to which personnel are exposed.

EMT – Emergency Medical Technician.

FMO – Fire Management Officer.

HR – Human Resources Management located at the Albuquerque Service Center in New Mexico.

IA – Initial Attack.

IC – Incident Commander, who is the individual responsible for direct management of all incident operations; the leader of an incident command team.

LEO – Law Enforcement Officer.

Linc Pass – United States Government Identification Card (credential).

LODD – Line of Duty Death.

Non-LODD – Non-Line of Duty Death.

PT – Physical Training.

R2 – USDA Forest Service Region 2 – Rocky Mountain Region (includes Colorado).

R6 – USDA Forest Service Region 6 – Pacific Northwest Region (includes Oregon).

R&R – Rest and Recuperation. United States Forest Service employees are granted three compensated days off upon returning from a full tour (typically 14 days) on a wildland fire assignment.

RD – USDA Forest Service Ranger District.

RO – USDA Forest Service Regional Office.

SF-52 – Standard Form # 52, used to initiate personnel action.

WO – USDA Forest Service Washington Office.