



Region 5 IHC COVID-19 Cluster Lessons Learned



May 24, 2021

Background

- An Interagency Hotshot Crew (IHC) reported to work on May 9, 2021. Pre-arrival, the IHC Superintendent met virtually with all employees to explain COVID precautions and encourage crewmembers to self-isolate prior to reporting.
- On May 13th, one individual from a crew of 20 tested positive for COVID-19 and immediately went into isolation, under guidance from public health.
- The IHC Superintendent and Forest took immediate action to identify close contacts; 19 employees were identified. Of the 19, 7 were fully vaccinated (and returned to work immediately) and 12 were placed into quarantine (some at home and some in hotels).
- All of the unvaccinated employees followed local health department guidance and chose to get tested. Four more (unvaccinated) employees later tested positive (5 cases total).

Lessons Learned

- Reaching out to employees prior to onboarding to explain COVID precautions improved awareness and provided an open atmosphere to share symptoms with the supervisor.
- Resources reporting from many other areas may increase risk of COVID when they first arrive at work. In 2020 Region 5 recommended resources who travelled from a high-risk area be put into self-quarantine for their first two weeks of work but there is no longer any guidance (state or federal) that requires a quarantine.
- Changes in “module as one” were not communicated to the IHC supervisor and crew; this led to the crew operating under 2020 protocols including outdated mask requirements. Guidance from MPHAT (4/27/2021) indicates masks should be worn within a module but that guidance came out as an email with limited distribution.
- Vaccines:
 - Vaccinated employees will not miss work when exposed to someone who is COVID positive; vaccinated employees were able to continue to work and did not get sick. There continues to be dynamic tension regarding COVID vaccinations and there may be vaccine hesitancy as well as religious, medical, and other considerations for not being vaccinated-- there is also frustration with co-workers not being vaccinated.
 - Vaccine availability may vary between rural and urban areas; in this situation (rural) there was limited access to vaccines until approximately 3 weeks before the outbreak (i.e., vaccines became more available late-April 2021).
 - Vaccination availability should be better communicated; working with 6 county public health departments made it difficult to track when vaccines were available and who was prioritized for vaccination.
 - At one station, there was an engine co-located with another forest. The vaccine was offered to the engine from the other unit based on the location of the Supervisor’s Office (different county), but not to resources from this forest—which caused confusion and impacted morale.

- Personnel often work in a different county than where they live; employees resided in 6 counties and were contacted by their public health departments regarding isolation and quarantine guidelines. Differences in how each county responded were difficult to track.
- Caring for Employees:
 - Well-informed supervisors and forest resources assisted in response; the IHC Superintendent was familiar with and followed the Region 5 Response Action Process quickly and effectively in consultation with the forest IMO IC.
 - Exposed employees often worry about bringing the virus home to immunocompromised family members; the Forest Service process with Region 5 CERT team support procured hotel rooms for concerned employees. The process of procuring rooms using the ordering tool was efficient and worked well.
- Transitions often present a challenge in daily operations and may slow response to an outbreak; the unit had an acting District Ranger (started one week prior to the incident), an acting Forest COVID IC, and the Forest safety manager position is vacant.

Insights and Recommendations

- Information on websites needs to be updated as a priority and urgently following policy changes.
 - ACTIONS: Region 5 needs to streamline the e-binder to current guidance immediately. If there is too much information that cannot be regularly reviewed then the e-binder needs to be pared to what can be effectively maintained.
- Employees need to know who has the authority to set guidance.
 - ACTIONS: Clarity on State vs. Federal guidance (regarding masks for vaccinated people) was provided this week from USDA and needs to be communicated more clearly and consistently. All resources need to know if MPHAT guidance (e.g., on "module as one") is direction or a suggestion; if it is direction it needs to be directly shared with all fire resources.
- The impact of being vaccinated needs to be emphasized related to availability of fire resources and vaccine opportunities need to be more equitable.
 - ACTIONS: Encourage units to use Vaccine Finder tools such as [vaccines.gov](https://www.vaccines.gov) or myturn.ca.gov to assist with finding vaccination locations. Lessons learned, such as this one, need to be shared openly.
- Ensure when there are new personnel filling leadership positions that support is readily available to avoid gaps in the implementation of COVID protocols.
 - ACTIONS: Line Officers can work with the Region 5 CERT to help get new employees up-to-speed quickly when transitions are needed. All personnel knowing where resources are available serves as a strong back-up when needed.
- Reinforce the importance of continued collaboration with the local public health department where the infection occurred.
 - ACTIONS: Local units need to make connection with public health following any confirmed case for planning and to determine if a lead county is needed.

"We are through with COVID but COVID isn't through with us."

--Forest Supervisor