

Rapid Lesson Sharing

Event Type: Motor Vehicle Accident

Date: July 16, 2025

Location: Washington State

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Without knowing it, fatigue and stress can manifest in many ways, unrecognizable to oneself.

The Story and Lessons from this Motor Vehicle Accident

The Incident Management Team (IMT) for the Hope Fire in Washington state was ordered on July 9, 2025. Resource orders were promptly made to IMT members, bags were packed, family affairs taken care of, logistics planned, and National Emergency Response Vehicle (NERV) rental reservations were made.

This IMT has members that travel from Washington, Oregon or other parts of the country, with perhaps multiple days of travel.

An IMT member—referred to as “Dawn” in this RLS—had a busy, stressful and fatigued week when she received her resource order on Monday July 14, with no rest between.

On Monday she made her NERV vehicle reservation with a pickup time at 1600 that evening. Picking up the vehicle involved an 87-mile drive from Newport to Eugene, Oregon. Therefore, Dawn delayed vehicle pick up until the next morning to enable a fresh start to Kettle Falls, Washington.

After Assessing Herself for Fatigue, Dawn Felt Okay to Start Her Travels

Dawn's first day of travel was limited to The Dalles, Oregon to rest. The next day, Dawn delayed her morning trip by a couple hours to provide extra rest. After assessing herself for fatigue she felt okay to start her travels.

Along the way, she pulled over and took a 10 to 15-minute nap, then continued her drive until a stop in Spokane, Washington. After this driving break in Spokane, Dawn once again assessed her fatigue level and made the decision to continue on her trip to Kettle Falls. The next thing that she remembers is looking at a guard rail from the driver's seat and realizing that she had been in an accident caused by falling asleep.

Dawn was uninjured and rested in Spokane overnight. The vehicle was totaled and a replacement vehicle was obtained. The next day, Thursday July 17, she continued her trip to the Hope Fire to be with her Incident Management Team.

Lessons

As Dawn looks back on this event, she self-reflects on the mindset that not only her, but many others face when traveling to an assignment. “*I didn't listen to myself,*” she explains, “*and justified that I wasn't tired.*”

There are various reasons why IMT members may feel pressures to get to their assignment as soon as possible. Dawn said that she felt an “*obligation to the team.*” Other pressures may include: loyalty and love for the team; relieving a demobilized team; not wanting to disappoint anyone; or living up to certain expectations.

These expectations may be self-conceptualized or due to cultural pressure. On many people, they can weigh heavily on their resultant decisions that are made.

Other Stressors

There are other stressors that may have been factors in causing this mishap.

Our wildland fire agencies' cultures are known for their employees to take on a high level of stress and pressure—but still *“staying in the trenches and keep going, not recognizing overload.”* In retrospect to this driving incident, Dawn now recognizes the potential perils of this reality.

In addition, there are compounding stressors from: personal lives; the agency down-size and reorganization; and being short staffed. Without knowing it, fatigue and stress can manifest in many ways, unrecognizable to oneself.

What Went Well

Team Care and Cohesion

1. The follow-up with this team member after the accident to ensure her wellbeing.
2. The NERV contract covers government employees well.

Lessons Learned

1. Reach out to coworkers, employees, and team members often to see how they are doing, personally and professionally.
2. IMT leadership should continue to emphasize taking the time and rest needed prior to traveling to an assignment.
3. Allow employees to acquire a NERV vehicle one day prior to traveling and park the vehicle overnight at their residence.
4. As Dawn commented, employees should realize that *“We are not superhuman”* and to *“listen to oneself”* for fatigue. Take the rest needed—even if it's overnight.
5. Management should be cognizant of actions taken that may appear as a domino punishment for speaking up. For example, restricting others from going on fires due to MVA risks during travel.

This RLS was submitted by:
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