

Lessons in Large Fire Strategy: Trust, Alignment, and Uncertainty

From the Six Rivers Lightning Complex and Happy Camp Complex - 2023

Facilitated Learning Analysis



The Facilitated Learning Analysis Team produced a summary video of the events on the Six Rivers Lightning Complex and Happy Camp Complex, with a grounding in the Incident Strategic Alignment Process. This video will give needed context and background for all readers.

[**Seeking Alignment: Six Rivers Lightning Complex and Happy Camp Complex 2023**](#)

A Message from the FLA Team

2023? What took so long? If that's what you're thinking – that's a good question. Most Facilitated Learning Analyses (FLAs) take place in the days and weeks after a tragic outcome, but this one has taken a little longer. Fortunately, this FLA is not about a tragedy. Still, just about everyone involved on the 2023 Six Rivers Lightning Complex and the Happy Camp Complex knew there were many important lessons to be shared related to trust, alignment, and uncertainty. Sharing them would just require a different vessel than a traditional FLA. It's not too late to learn. If you are reading this, we hope you'll agree.

This FLA begins with a rough overview of the Six Rivers and Happy Camp Complexes, followed with an explanation of how the FLA effort was conducted in response. We then introduce some important trust concepts before diving into the heart of the FLA: scenarios and discussion questions tailored to Agency Administrators, Incident Commanders, and firefighters. We hope this helps you, in whichever role you fill, think about some of the challenges of trust, alignment (i.e. looking at the same situation from conflicting points of view), and uncertainty you might encounter during future incidents and the strategies to navigate them. Throughout this FLA (and at the end) we have included additional content and links to resources you might find useful to support your learning.

Before we begin, we should make explicit how this FLA differs from most you've read in the past. Many FLAs investigate and recount specific events that led to a negative outcome, often by providing a minute-by-minute account of the operational shift on a fire leading to a fatality, injury or notable close call. The idea is to create artificial "slides" from other's experiences that a reader can use to help keep themselves and those under their command safe.

This FLA adopts an alternative strategy. Rather than recount specific events and choices to help readers avoid a tragedy, the structure and lessons of this FLA are intended to spark and facilitate dialogues about: 1) navigating uncertainties and conflicting points of view that are common in fire management, and 2) how we can begin to build trust and shared understanding across Agency Administrators (AAs), Incident Management Teams (IMTs), firefighters, local communities, and other interested and affected entities in spite of those conflicts.

Instead of learning the specific choices of others, the objective throughout this FLA is for you, the reader, to grapple with the types of questions and challenges folks on the Six Rivers and Happy Camp Complexes faced. You will be presented fewer details about the Six Rivers and Happy Camp Complexes than you might expect in a typical FLA. Know that this is intentional. This FLA is intended to help you think about how you might build trust and alignment before and during complicated incidents regardless of context, amidst uncertainty, and how you might be able to prepare for and address those issues before a fire ignites.

We encourage you to discuss the scenarios within this FLA with your subordinates, peers, and leadership. Explore how you might handle and resolve situations that produce alignment issues. Find the points of similarity and probe the points of disagreement between yourself and those you work with. We encourage you to challenge yourself and those around you to look at these scenarios both from where you stand and from a point of view that feels unfamiliar.

The Story of the Six Rivers Lightning and Happy Camp Complexes

On August 14 through 16, 2023, the Six Rivers and Klamath National Forests received approximately 980 lightning strikes, resulting in numerous fires that extended beyond initial attack (IA). Within 72 hours, the Klamath experienced civilian casualties and structure loss for the second time in two years. Both forests experienced firefighter [injuries](#), accidents and near misses.

In the following days, the Happy Camp and Six Rivers Lightning Complexes were established within each forest's administrative boundary. Complex IMTs were ordered to aid fire management efforts and AA's in decision-making. There was recognition early on that fires on both the Klamath and Six Rivers could cross jurisdictional boundaries and impact each Forest – and the communities with them. Therefore, forest managers quickly realized that close coordination would be needed between the IMTs and AAs on both complexes to successfully navigate the situation.

As IMTs arrived on both forests, AAs, fire managers, and local community leaders worked through the recently adopted Incident Strategic Alignment Process (ISAP). The ISAP is a cooperative and structured process to build alignment and guide fire management decision-making. It is focused on four pillars:

- 1) Identifying and Prioritizing Critical Values at Risk (CVAR)
- 2) Developing Strategic Actions to Protect CVAR
- 3) Considering the likely Risks to Responders
- 4) Evaluating the overall Probability of Success of a Strategy

We recommend you visit the [ISAP Storymap](#) to access a full outline of the ISAP and how to operationalize the four pillars if these concepts are unfamiliar to you. It offers additional references information to help interested individuals learn and improve their understanding of the process.

Both Forest's Supervisors, fire management staffs, and District Rangers were well versed in the ISAP framework and had well-established relationships within their local communities. Input and participation from impacted cooperating agencies, elected officials, tribal partners, local community leaders, and other stake holders aided AAs in determining the courses of action on both complexes. Ultimately, the Six Rivers and Klamath National Forests took very different strategic approaches to suppress the fires after a significant

early September rain event. While the Klamath National Forest prioritized using direct tactics to aggressively suppress the fires following the rain, the Six Rivers National Forest decided to reintroduce culturally significant fire and use it as a suppression tool – an action advocated by the local Karuk Tribe for years. Importantly, both Forests viewed what they were doing as the prudent and safe option, but didn't necessarily see eye-to-eye with the other's approach. At first glance, this may seem surprising: two geographically proximate Forests with similar fuels, terrain, and past and predicted weather choosing starkly different strategies backed by similar rationale. In reality, these outcomes were the result of the unique social and political circumstances surrounding each Forest and their associated landscape. Over the entire course of the fires – from ignition to final control – strategic choices each Forest made in turn presented unique sets of social, political, and strategic challenges. Those challenges, and the conditions that spawned them, are the inspiration for this FLA.

A Commitment to Organizational Learning

In March of 2024 a Facilitated Learning Analysis Team was formed to identify challenges, lessons learned, and successes from the Six Rivers and Happy Camp Complexes to share with the interagency fire management community. Like we mentioned above, this FLA isn't focused on a singular event with a small number of participants. These events spanned weeks, and the FLA Team conducted group and individual interviews with dozens of participants, ranging from AAs, Fire Management Officers (FMOs) and Incident Commanders to Resource Advisors, Tribal Liaisons, and Hotshot Superintendents nearly a year after the fact. While it's often an asset to conduct FLAs while memories are fresh, in this instance participant interviews took place long after the smoke faded. This provided ample opportunity for participants to reflect on the lessons they took away from the 2023 fire season. Rather than focus on specific details, our interviews allowed participants to consider the deeper, more nebulous factors that influenced the different courses of action each Forest took, and the conflicts those choices catalyzed.

Fire management is full of uncertainty and conflicting points of view. No two fires, or decisions, are exactly alike – from lightning bust IA's all the way to million-acre conflagrations – all fires have their challenges. Two people (or land management units) may approach similar problems with different solutions. Understanding how to navigate those differences to build trust and alignment will be critically important in the years ahead. This FLA is much more focused on the future, using the perspectives from the 2023 fire season to help guide us. In that spirit, we hope you'll find this FLA useful.

Given the size and duration of the Six Rivers Lightning and Happy Camp Complexes, there are many valuable lessons we did not have the capacity to cover and regret we cannot adequately share in this FLA. For example, we touch only briefly on how the conflicting policy mandates between fire suppression agencies (such as federal/state/local agencies)

influence perspectives and complicate decision-making on incidents. However, some of the most important lessons condensed or omitted from this FLA are those tied to the relationships between federal land management agencies and local indigenous communities. These relationships are critical to developing appropriate fire management strategies that support the needs of indigenous communities and their ties to ancestral territory.

The path to reintroducing cultural fire was a critical part of the Six Rivers Lightning Complex story. However, we did not want to risk causing harm and damaging relationships by inappropriately co-opting first-person indigenous perspectives in service of this FLA. That said, we have included discussion questions on engaging indigenous groups throughout this FLA and have provided a link to a public product developed by members of the Karuk Tribe around the Six Rivers National Forest that share some firsthand perspectives of the 2023 fires.

Please note, these products are not meant to speak for all indigenous groups and peoples, nor for the totality of indigenous groups and peoples with ancestral territory within the Six Rivers Lightning and Happy Camp Complex landscape. We **strongly** encourage you to learn about the indigenous cultures where you live and work and take the time to build positive relationships with local indigenous groups and peoples so your decisions, at all levels, can better support their needs and ancestral ties.

Lessons, Vignettes, Discussion Questions

The content of this FLA is a series of lessons, vignettes, and discussion questions. We encourage you to read them all but have tried to tailor them to specific audiences.

1. [Begin with Trust](#)
2. [The Agency Administrator and Complex Decisions](#)
3. [The Incident Commander and Operational Risk](#)
4. [The Agency Administrator and Pleasing Everyone](#)
5. [The Firing Group Supervisor and Being Caught in the Middle](#)
6. [Key Final Lessons Learned and “Big Picture” Discussion Questions](#)
7. [Additional Resources](#)

Begin with Trust

The article "[Begin with Trust: The First Step to Becoming a Genuinely Empowering Leader](#)" by Frances X. Frei and Anne Morriss, published in the Harvard Business Review, emphasizes the foundational role of trust in effective leadership. For Frances Frei's TED Talk, [click here](#).

Key Concepts

Trust is built on three core ideas:

1. **Authenticity:** *Be genuine and transparent in your interactions.*

Do folks you lead see the real you? Or are they only seeing part of the picture? Often it is beneficial for a leader to hide certain aspects of their personality, but in some cases it can lead to a perception amongst the led that a leader is inauthentic. A perception that a leader is inauthentic can be disastrous. It is often said that diverse teams are the strongest. This can in fact be true, but only if certain conditions are met. First and foremost, members of a diverse team must believe that their unique perspectives are valued and respected. Non-diverse teams can perform adequately due to the cohesion similarity among individuals can produce. However, these teams often suffer from a narrow field of vision. Diverse teams, on the other hand, have the potential to gain an advantage on this front. Because of the differences of perspective or experience, these teams can see problems from new angles and develop truly innovative solutions. But this can only occur if the team feels as though they can share their authentic selves without repercussion. If a leader fails to demonstrate that that unique perspective is valued by appearing to not value even their own differences, a diverse team is likely to be highly ineffective. The information or perspectives that could supercharge a team's effectiveness will likely never emerge.

2. **Logic:** *Demonstrate competence and sound judgement and communicate your rationale effectively.*

Do folks respect your ability to assess a situation, make the right call, and act decisively? Wildland fire management is a dynamic and complex space filled with uncertain situations. Frequently, disagreements on the proper course of action arise, but regardless, decisions must eventually be made. Most individuals make decisions based on the information at their disposal, viewed through the lens of their past experience. However, different people may approach the same situation with different information and will almost certainly approach situations with different past experiences. Therefore, it is

critical for a leader to not only be sound in their decision-making, but also clear in how they communicate their decision and rationale to those they manage. When communicating your ideas, start with your primary point and then cleanly support your argument with strong, easy-to-understand evidence, rather than forcing your audience to follow you on a meandering journey to an eventual conclusion.

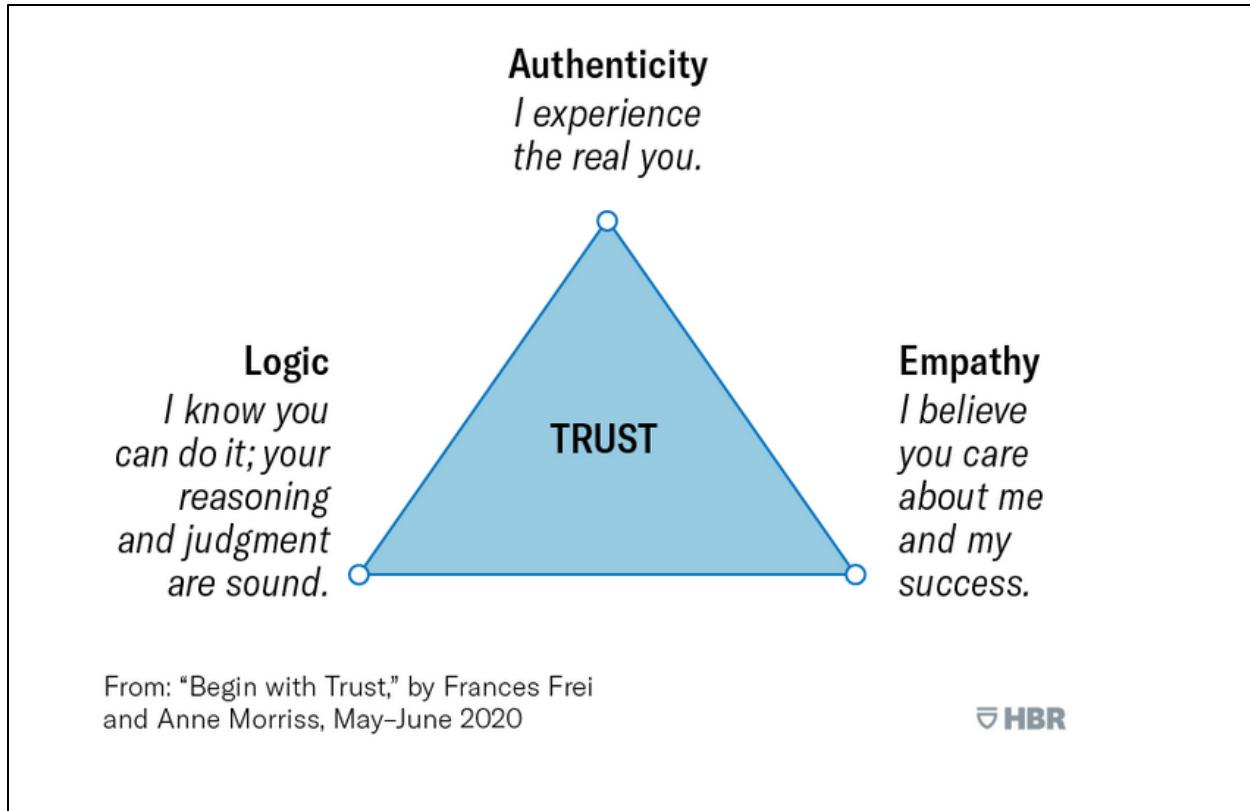
3. **Empathy:** *Show care and understanding towards others, even when your view of a situation diverges from theirs.*

Do folks believe you have their best interests at heart and will respect their differences – particularly around risk tolerances and different perceptions of safety? And, if things go awry, do folks believe that you will put their needs, or the needs of the group, above yours? Empathy is arguably the most important component of trust. If people believe that their leader cares more about their own ideas or status than the needs of those they lead, they are highly unlikely to trust that leader. Thus, it is imperative that a leader intentionally learn about and engage with those they manage – and works to meet their needs and respectfully address concerns when challenges arise.

Frei and Morrise suggest that when trust is compromised, it often stems from a breakdown, or “wobble” in one of these three areas. So, what are some concrete steps IMT leadership, AAs, and other firefighting leaders can take to address their own “wobbles”?

Practical Application

- **Engaging in self-assessment:** Leaders should reflect on which of the three trust drivers they may be lacking and take proactive steps to improve. Nobody is perfect. Everyone “wobbles” to some degree. Which of these trust drivers is the weakest for you?
- **Adjusting behaviors:** Simple actions, like eye contact, or respectful verbal acknowledgements show attentiveness and empathy, and can significantly enhance trust. What small ways can you foster greater connection with your team?
- **Leveraging culture:** Fostering an environment where a variety of perspectives are valued and authenticity is encouraged leads to stronger team performance through the team’s access to a broader range of capabilities and potential solutions. Teams with this access will also have a greater adaptability to challenging situations, and likely have a higher probability of success when encountering novel environments. How might you bring out the strengths stemming from your team’s unique differences?



Trust is built on the three core ideas of authenticity, empathy, and logic.

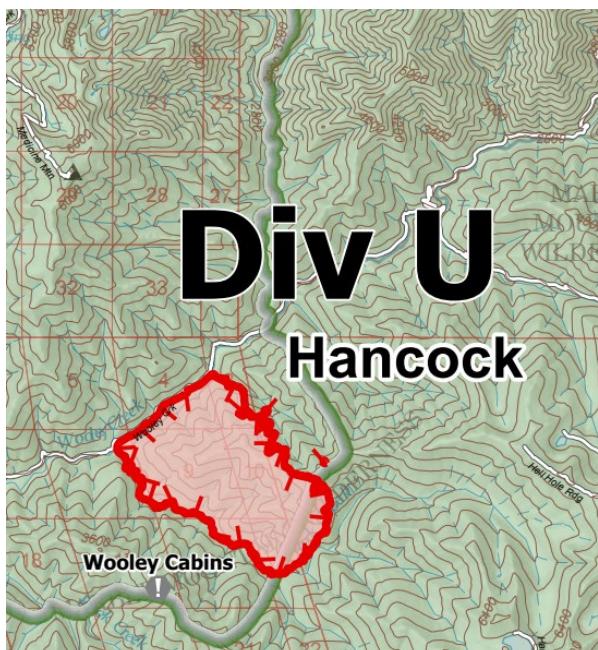
Now that we've discussed trust, let's move on to some scenarios. These will lay out situations, inspired by the Six Rivers Lightning and Happy Camp Complexes, that you may find yourself in as an AA, Incident Commander, or firefighting leader. The perspectives are directly inspired by participants on the Six Rivers Lightning and Happy Camp Complexes – but they are not meant to directly represent any participant's real-life experience or universally depict the experience of any group. We have intentionally shaped them to structure fictional, ambiguous situations to help you think about future situations you might encounter. Think about where you can start putting ideas about trust into practice as you seek to build alignment. Though not always explicitly called out in the vignettes, these themes are ever-present. Feel free to come back and reference this section as you navigate the scenarios and their associated discussion questions.

The Agency Administrator and Complex Decisions

Set Up

Being an AA managing emerging incidents fully within your unit is hard enough, but when your fire is on the border with an adjacent unit the complexity compounds and alignment can be harder to achieve. When you find yourself disagreeing with your counterpart on what the best course of action is on an incident that can impact both of your units and their surrounding communities, what do you do? Consider the two Forest Supervisors in the scenario below.

Scenario



The Hancock Fire on the boundary of the Six Rivers and Klamath NFs (thick green line).

It is late August, and you are one of two Forest Supervisors in a rugged, forested mountain area that has recently been pummeled by lightning. This has resulted in a flurry of initial attack and several ignitions going into extended attack. It's been a rough go – but in the days that have passed you're getting a handle on things on your unit. IMTs are in place on your largest incidents, but IA continues. The neighboring Forest has also been getting slammed with new starts and getting IMTs established on larger incidents. It's been a long week for you both. You've been talking to different folks non-stop since the lightning started, so much so that your arm is tired from holding the phone to your ear. You and your unit are at the limit. The last thing you need is another fire.

But this is where things diverge for you and your neighbor. Step into the shoes of the two different Forest Supervisors as this scenario unfolds:

Differing Perspectives

Forest Supervisor 1: Your phone rings. You hear your FMO's voice: "We have another one – just on our side of the divide". The fire is far out on your unit but near the boundary with the neighboring Forest.

Forest Supervisor 2: Your phone rings. You hear your FMO's voice: "They have another one – just over on their side of the divide". The fire isn't on your ground, but you know that country

and what to expect. There is a real possibility that this fire will become your problem if it isn't handled quickly. You have plenty on your hands already without this new fire.

Forest Supervisor 1: As you consider this new start and what to do with it, a few things come to mind: the country is rough and in the middle of nowhere. There's no way to get to it easily. You decide to order a load of smokejumpers with the hope that they can catch it small. It is pretty far out from any of your critical values and isn't likely to threaten them with the prevailing weather patterns. You can't deny it causes a pit in your stomach as you make the call. Hopefully nobody gets hurt – it wouldn't be easy to get them out.

Forest Supervisor 2: You get word that your counterpart on the neighboring unit ordered a load of smokejumpers for the new start. A feeling of slight relief washes over you and you think "Oh good...maybe we'll get lucky and cross this one off the map before it has a chance to do anything". It is a long way away from your Forest's and community's critical values – and there's a chance it will stay that way. Past experience has taught you that the weather in this part of the world seems to push everything towards your unit, and communities within your Forest.

Forest Supervisor 1: Over the next day as you monitor the radio traffic you hear that the smokejumpers have successfully deployed. All resources safely made it to the ground and have begun to engage the fire. Unfortunately, the reports from ground are not encouraging. The fire isn't doing anything crazy, but it's going to be more difficult than expected to successfully catch this one. The smokejumpers are going to need some luck to knock it down.

Forest Supervisor 2: Days pass and that fire on the divide is still doing its thing. It's not running like some of the others in the area but it's also not going away. The fire has grown to 200 acres and while it's not on your unit yet, the perimeter sits perhaps a hundred yards from the Forest boundary. Smoke is clearly visible to local communities in your area. They are worried. They've been in similar situations before and rumors spread quickly amid the uncertainty. Most in the community seem to think that the neighboring Forest isn't doing anything about that fire, and they're just "letting it burn". Even though it isn't on your ground yet, community members have been making sure you know how they feel. One question you keep hearing is "Why aren't they putting more resources on that fire?" They clearly want more to be done to protect the values that matter to them – waiting is not an acceptable option. They want concrete actions. Everyone knows that all these fires come out of the wilderness eventually, right? Even though the fire is not under your unit's jurisdiction, the pressure is building, and everybody in this community wants to know, what are you going to do?

Forest Supervisor 1: Over the past few days, it is become clear the smokejumpers didn't get the lucky breaks they needed from the weather to be able to put the fire to bed. It's a couple hundred acres, but it's not running like some of the fires in the area. Those fires that are

pushing have your focus and most of the available resources. Without a significant increase in resources, the fire on the divide will likely be there for the foreseeable future, and it very well could get up, push over the border, and run across the neighboring unit if the weather continues to be hot and dry. However, given the level of success the smokejumpers have had, it's not a given that putting the remaining available resources on the fire would have much of an impact. Additionally, there aren't critical values anywhere near the fire's location which makes you question whether the juice is worth the squeeze. Generally, there is a ton of uncertainty about what that fire is going to do, what it is going to impact, and what power you have to influence those outcomes. Plus, if someone got hurt, you're not 100% confident you could get them out. There was a fire earlier this year where, luckily, a hoist helicopter was able to get an injured firefighter out, but the divide is tricky county to fly in, and there are plenty of unpredictable reasons why air resources might not be able to fly. On top of all this, while local communities around you aren't nervous, you've been hearing through the grapevine that communities on the other side of the divide are getting anxious and increasingly restless. Uncertainty seems to be the only constant right now. Your opportunities, strategic options, and available resources are constrained... The pressure is building, what are you going to do?

If this particular fire was in the middle of a single unit, it wouldn't be as problematic. It would likely be much clearer what the appropriate course of action would be. But in this scenario, which we hope is fairly easy to imagine, it's on the border between two units, and the two decision-makers don't necessarily see eye to eye. This is the circumstance that AAs found themselves in on the Hancock Fire in 2023 on the border between the Six Rivers National Forest and the Klamath National Forest. How that played out is unique to them, in that landscape, in that year, but as an AA, it is likely that you will find yourself in a similar situation at some point in your future. Every land management unit has borders. Embrace the uncertainty and ambiguity of this scenario to discuss the hard questions.

To Review

Forest Supervisor 1's Perspective:

1. There are no Critical Values at Risk near the fire. The fire would have to travel a long way up and over the divide to burn anything of consequence.
2. The Risk to Responders is high, especially with the lack of Critical Values in the area, to feel comfortable putting people out there. Especially since it's not clear deploying additional available resources would have much of an impact.
3. There are other, arguably more important priorities – this fire isn't the only ignition being dealt with. It's burning at relatively low intensity, cleaning up an area that hasn't burned in a long time.
4. The fire may have done its thing and with the current weather forecast it is unclear whether it will grow enough to threaten values on the other side of the divide.

5. The communities around this Forest aren't worried about this fire.

Forest Supervisor 2's Perspective:

1. There aren't any immediate Critical Values at Risk near the fire, but there likely will be if this fire gets up and moves up over the divide, and that's what fires frequently do in this area.
2. The Risk to Responders is certainly high, but letting the fire grow may lead to greater overall risk to responders in the long run. If it grows significantly, it will require many more firefighters and much more time to deal with it.
3. This fire is probably still small enough that it can be handled if resources get on it right now, and it would be nice to be able to focus attention on the other fires in the area that have already grown to be major problems.
4. Yes, the current weather isn't pushing the fire, but that potentially provides a great opportunity to hammer this fire before it gets hot and dry again and makes us pay.
5. The communities around this Forest are worried about this fire and are pressing for action.

Discussion Questions

- What information do you think you would need to build a strategy with the other unit?
- How do you navigate inter-unit disagreements on strategy when fires cross (or even just approach) jurisdictional boundaries?
- How do you navigate inter-unit disagreements on strategy when fires cross (or even just approach) jurisdictional boundaries?
- How might you go about building alignment with neighboring units in the offseason?

The Incident Commander and Operational Risk

Set Up

There are always multiple levels of risk to any command structure. While the AA owns the strategic risk, the IC is responsible for a significant portion of the operational risk. Consider the following scenario from the IC's perspective and wrestle with how you might approach a similar situation.

Scenario

Your Forest Supervisor is sending you to IC a fire on the unit next door. It looks like it's going to be a tough one. It's out there in a remote section of the mountains. Miles away and a long time from help if anyone gets hurt. Smokejumpers hit the fire early, did some work, secured the heel and wrapped some cabins, and got pulled out, but they weren't able to put it to bed.



Firefighters on the Six Rivers Lightning Complex.

Now three days later, here you are. You are being asked to go in and deal with it. The fire hasn't moved much, but it isn't going away. The AA – in this case the neighboring Forest Supervisor – makes the call to insert more resources and suppress this fire rather than withholding resources. However, their strategic intent to you is clear – while they want to try and suppress this fire, they are unwilling to put fire responders in unnecessarily risky situations. Now you are asked to take the operational risk decisions by developing the tactics to carry out the mission. You are now asking people under your command to take on the immediate, real-time risk.

Should you expose a few people to higher risk now, or potentially risk many to an undetermined amount of risk later if the fire grows? There are diverging opinions about growth potential on this fire – leadership of the neighboring Forest (the one the fire is actually on) thinks the potential is low, but leadership on *your* Forest thinks the risk of

substantial growth is much higher. There are multiple fires in the area, and your Forest is concerned that if this fire were to be left unstaffed, it would grow onto their ground and impact fires in the area that are staffed. But that eventuality isn't guaranteed. The fire is so remote it would have to grow tens of thousands of acres to interact with another fire. But, if you leave this fire unstaffed, it could still move into worse ground than it's in now, and someone else will be forced to deal with it. And if we don't go in now, and it takes off, it may be necessary for a lot more people to go in later, when it's bigger, and values are at greater risk.



The 2023 Hancock Fire (which inspired this vignette) from the air. (Google Earth)

Your Forest leadership wants it handled but with the smallest risk to responders possible, but they are clear - they want it handled. But the fact remains that it isn't your Forest's fire. It is unquestionably the neighboring Forest's incident, and they are equally as clear – don't put responders in tough spots unless it is absolutely necessary to protect critical values. Consider the following options:

Same perspective, different options:

1. Accepting the assignment.

What does it take/what needs to be in place for you to accept an assignment like this? Aviation assets for medical extraction or suppression support, line EMTs and other resources are often seen as mitigations for risk. If you are in an area that often faces

persistent smoke inversions, are aviation assets a viable mitigation? In areas with significant hazard tree risk, where the difference between life, death, and permanent disability is a matter of half an inch, is an air medevac asset a real mitigation?

2. Turn the assignment down.

What do you say to your AA when you turn down the assignment? There is potential for this fire to become a much bigger problem down the line, but right now the fire is small and is in steep country far away from any critical values. Perhaps you remember a time digging line on a remote ridgeline where you wondered, “What are we doing out here?”. In areas with no significant values at risk, why isn’t it worth the risk to you and your people? Firefighting culture is filled with stories of bad outcomes in places without values at risk or far away from a fire’s perimeter. But it is important to ask: What might the AA see that you don’t?

To Review

You have been asked to IC a fire on a neighboring unit. The fire is in steep, difficult terrain away from any critical values at risk. However, critical values at risk could be threatened if the fire makes some significant runs. Uncertainty reigns.

Discussion Questions

If you are to accept the assignment:

- How do you explain to your crew and the crews you are requesting that this risk is acceptable?
- How do you balance how many and what type of resources are enough to pull this off, versus the amount of resources that are too many?
- What factors might cause you to turn down the assignment after all?

If you are to turn down the assignment:

- How can you clearly articulate to the AA why you are turning down the assignment so that the rationale is fully understood, and that risk is not transferred to less experienced resources?
- What about a situation needs to be in place for you to change your mind and accept the assignment?

The Agency Administrator and Pleasing Everyone

Set Up

Serving as an AA is a challenging role that requires you to balance relationships, emergent needs, and uncertainty. As an AA, you serve as the final decision maker for the fire. In the following scenario, consider the different tensions in play, and how you might work to navigate them as an AA on a challenging fire.

Scenario

You are the local National Forest's qualified AA, and everyone is looking to you. Word has spread about the new fire, and you're about to start a public meeting. You've served in the agency for years and poured your heart and soul into the management of public land, but no two of these meetings are the same, and conflict is always possible. As a land manager responsible for the health of much of the surrounding landscape, you are painfully aware of how necessary returning fire is to this landscape, and how much risk continuing to exclude fire accrues. As you stand gathering your thoughts in a room of interested and affected entities – local government officials, Tribal representatives, timber company employees, and community members – you feel their anxiety radiating. The low buzz of conversation fills the space. The last week has been intense with initial attack, but the fire is in steep and heavily fueled terrain with no easy way to insert resources to engage. The fire has escaped initial attack and has grown significantly, but still remains difficult to access. Though some rain is in the forecast, local communities have already been impacted. You see the long-serving county commissioner sitting front and center in the crowd, consoling constituents in between phone calls. You meet the gaze of a few local Tribal members whose trust you know your agency has failed to earn in the past. You count the members of the community before you – some familiar, but many not – who have come to hear the plan – overflowing the available seating and tightly lining the walls. You turn to the IC, the one responsible for safeguarding the hundreds of responders now assigned to your unit. The IC gives you a curt, silent nod as a signal – it is time to begin. Clearing your throat, the nervous murmurs fall silent. All of them are gathered to hear the same thing... What are you doing to protect what they care about? What is the plan?

The following perspectives are a small sampling of what you might face, and were informed by the Six Rivers Lightning and Happy Camp Complexes. They are not exhaustive. While the context of all incidents is unique, it is likely some of these perspectives may sound familiar to you. Consider these perspectives and ponder what other perspectives might have a loud voice in your community. It's important to consider fire management situations from the perspectives of those you serve. Though we don't touch on it as much as it deserves here – thoughtfully consider how you might proactively work with local indigenous groups who may have deep connections with fire and sacred cultural values across the landscape you

manage. Critically, all these conversations need to begin long before a fire ignites. The perspectives and discussion questions below can help you prepare. Read through each perspective and the associated discussion questions, and grapple with how you might handle a similar situation. These are meant to represent possible perspectives heading into a meeting such as the one described above:

Differing Perspectives

The County Commissioner:

I have a statutory mandate to suppress fires quickly to protect life and property. I understand the balance it takes to keep firefighters safe, but the Forest Service really needs to put the remaining fire out. I thought after last year we might get a reprieve from another bad fire year but it's not playing out that way. This community suffered so much last year and sat under thick smoke for weeks. I can't imagine they're going to have much patience for that again, not to mention the scare of having to burn out around part of the community last time.

I know that it's not always up to firefighters – it seems like the fires are much worse than even a few years back and I know federal agencies can't control the weather. Sometimes the fire is just too extreme and nothing firefighters attempt will make any difference. That's why I think it's important to take the opportunities we are given to protect this community.

Community Resident:

I've lived in this community for nearly 50 years and I've raised my family in this house at the foot of the drainage the fire is burning in. I am not going anywhere. I've seen more fire in the last 15 years – nearly every year now – and even though fires have come close they haven't impacted my property yet. Others have lost outbuildings and even a few cattle. I know what it feels like to be told we have to evacuate and then not be allowed back in for weeks. The Forest Service has not always been responsive to us in the past and we don't trust them to hear us now. No one can take care of my place like I can. I've listened about how fire is a natural part of this landscape. But the woods are dense- they don't look the same even from when I was a kid. This fire season, I'm scared. The valleys have been thick with smoke for a month. It's a miracle my home hasn't been threatened yet. Many other people haven't been so lucky. But what about this new fire? Is this the one?

Timber Company Representative

I've been growing trees in this region for decades, and I've seen the environment get harsher and harsher over time. It's still a place that grows biomass at an astonishing pace, but fires keep getting bigger, longer-lived, and hotter. Sometimes it seems like our federal neighbors don't quite understand the risk involved in producing timber at an industrial scale here: there's a huge investment in managing the huge amount of brush growth and keeping plantations alive for the years it takes for them to reach maturation. One windy day during fire season can eliminate decades of work and capital investment.

The IC

I've seen AA after AA speak at these meetings. They've made promises before to the public that put my team into tight spots. How's this meeting going to go? I felt pretty good about the in-brief and it seems like the AA and I are in alignment, but you never really know until they're at one of these public forums and they announce what my team is going to do. Here's hoping the plan doesn't change in front of everyone at this public meeting.

To Review

There is a new fire that is threatening your local community. However, it is not entirely clear how the fire will impact this area. Past experiences are influencing local perspectives, and folks are anxiously awaiting to learn how you are going to handle this fire. Many have strong opinions, and many may be impacted by your decisions and how you communicate them:

County Commissioner: They have a statutory mandate to suppress fires as quickly and at as small a footprint as possible, and they have a duty to advocate for the health of this community.

Community Resident: They feel the fire seasons are getting worse and worse. They're scared of what this fire will do, and they're not a huge fan of how the agency has handled previous fires. They want to know what the agency going to do to protect them this time.

Timber Company Representative: It takes years and a significant amount of money to grow trees. Fire has the potential to wipe out all that work in an afternoon. The timber interests in the area sometimes feel as if the agency just doesn't get it.

Incident Commander: It's difficult to navigate AA to IMT relationships. This one is off on the right foot, but it can go off the rails quickly. The IC wants to know how they can make sure that both they and the AA stay on the same page and the AA doesn't make promises the IMT can't keep.

Discussion Questions

Considering the County Commissioner:

You heard the Commissioner earlier when the meeting discussed community needs. You realize how much pressure there is to protect a community that continues to see fire in their backyards every year. You also know the bit of rain in the forecast has got to be foremost on their minds – they’re going to expect you to put the fire out after a dash of rain.

- How resilient are your community’s leaders? What is their level of understanding about fuels, weather, fire behavior indices, etc.?
- How will the strategy align with what the Commissioner thinks is needed? What can an IMT realistically accomplish?
- What are the needs of this community, and how do you know?
- How do your decisions today affect fire on this landscape in the future? How much risk are you comfortable taking this year to prevent potential harm in future years?

Considering the Community Resident:

There are a lot of folks at the meeting today, many that you have seen and several you haven’t. You’ve had many conversations with folks about fire and its behavior on this landscape, but there are many people here you know you probably haven’t reached.

- How do you ensure that you really hear what people are saying?
- While many in your community might have a solid understanding of fire and fire suppression, many may not. How do you reassure without making false promises?
- Do you understand the IC’s plan enough to be able to explain it if you’re asked to?
- How can you support as many of these residents as possible?
- How do you communicate your – the IMT and the agency’s – why? And how can you communicate your support/concerns for the actions in the right ways to different audiences?

Considering the Timber Representative:

The timber company representative in this area has made their preference for aggressive, direct suppression clear over the course of your relationship.

- How do you balance economic interests in your area with the duty not to expose firefighters to unnecessary risks?
- How do you work with specific representatives – timber company or otherwise – as you balance risks and values when making a decision?
- How do you communicate and include partners in your decision calculus – even if your plan puts their values at risk?

Considering the Incident Commander:

You feel you had a good in-brief with the IC, but you know that's just the first step.

- How do you confirm you have an accurate sense of the situation? How can you explain your point of view so that others understand it as well?
- How do you know when to defer to the IC to answer questions without hurting your credibility with the locals?
- What if the IC's talking points start to go off the rails and hurt relationships? How can you prevent damage?
- When you're communicating your intent to the IC, how can you articulate that intent clearly – both within and outside public meetings? (i.e. avoiding this type of messaging: "If you put it out then you missed an opportunity for good fire and you might expose firefighters to unnecessary risk, but if you don't put it out then you put communities at risk.")

Considering Tribal Representatives:

Out of respect, we have opted not to present a fictionalized indigenous perspective. However, it remains imperative to consider how to involve local indigenous groups in fire and land management decision-making processes. Indigenous groups may or may not have strong preferences for certain land management strategies. Don't assume you know! Do the leg work to build the relationships and shared understandings with the appropriate people.

- How can you work to understand the needs of your areas' local indigenous people?
- How do you approach the topic of potentially sensitive cultural information?
- How can you best meet these needs while navigating the constraints of your position?
- What kind of fire management does the tribe support on this landscape – can you and the IC find those opportunities? (Never assume. Put in the work to build the relationship and a shared understanding)
- What if things do not go according to plan and people get hurt, cultural resources are damaged, or other negative outcomes to indigenous groups occur?

The Firing Group Supervisor and Being Caught in the Middle

Set Up

Serving as operational leadership during a large, complex incident can be a challenging and rewarding experience. However, while on paper the chain of command is perfectly clear, in practice the structure can feel far from linear. Different leaders, such as Division Supervisors, Task Force Leaders and Firing Group Supervisors must supervise actions that can have cascading effects on other resources. Not only that, but the actions of these resources can have long term consequences to local groups with deep ties to the landscape. Consider the following situation and how you might navigate the complexities:

Scenario

You've been assigned as the Firing Group Supervisor on a large incident in the western U.S. The landscape is filled with steep, thickly-wooded valleys and canyons. Outside the valley bottoms and ridgelines, there are very few sure-fire locations to engage. However, the incident has recently seen a significant amount of rain which has moderated fire behavior. No major fire growth in the near future is expected. In response to these conditions and the inherent challenges presented by the landscape, Forest leadership and the IMT have adopted a strategy of landscape scale strategic firing to both contain the fires and reduce the risk to responders by keeping folks off of the steep hillsides. Between 400 and 500 people across multiple divisions will be involved in this operation, primarily stationed along the highways in the valley bottoms and Forest Service roads that trace ridgelines in the area. It sounds like an interesting assignment, and you're excited to get to work. After some days of scouting the area to be fired and interacting with operations, divisions, resources, and local tribal representatives on the ground, you realize that not everyone is in support of this operation.

It is critical to realize that people in fire management are usually analyzing situations based on solid experience and expert knowledge. The differences between these perspectives are usually differences in emphasis, not entirely different worldviews. Consider the perspectives below, representing what different individuals might tell you when you try to communicate and execute the plan.

Differing Perspectives

Hotshot Superintendent 1:

This fire is in crew country, and this fire has a lot of crews. But not every crew has the same philosophy of fire management. For example, one crew on this fire has a mentality that

looks at fire management more as emergency management, where the emergency is the fire: Put it out, move on to the next. They don't buy the argument that a few days of direct line construction is more risky than the potential of a weeks-long large-scale firing operation. They were called in to put the fire out. The weather has provided a golden opportunity to do just that by going direct. The superintendent told you specifically, "Don't ask us to 'prescribe-fire' your wildfire."



Six Rivers Lightning Complex firing operation.

Hotshot Superintendent 2:

Another crew has a different mentality. It could be described as "land management using fire." They've recently spent time in this area and in other parts of the region preparing for and conducting prescribed fires. The intent and need for this work is recognized by the crew and its leadership, and they are on board with the plan. However, while the superintendent of this crew sees value in the plan they don't totally agree with the risk management justification of this strategy – even if they agree with the end result. Though they support burning, they have trouble buying the argument that it is safer. In their words, they "can manage risk a lot more effectively for mop up than for a complex firing operation".

Division Supervisor:

Interactions between divisions (who are assigned a geographical part of the fire) and groups (who are assigned a function) have long been a source of tension in wildland fire management. Yet the qualification in the system is Division/Group Supervisor – same qual. Questions about who's in charge, who's responsible for what, who's accountable, continually come up between divisions and the firing or structure protection groups that are working in the same area. This scenario is no different. When a firing operation escapes, it's not uncommon to debate who has responsibility for it. When structures are

impacted, whose responsibility was it? Anticipating this type of outcome, the Division Supervisor on one division of the fire is asking some tough questions. Who really is responsible here?

In this scenario, the direction given to you (the firing supervisor) was that your firing group would do the work, with the individual divisions supporting you as you move around the incident. Inevitably, however, some of the crews assigned to the divisions are skeptical of the landscape-scale firing operation to begin with and given the risk and responsibility, the resources in each division must take on to support your actions, there is significant potential for conflict.

Operations Section Chief:

At one point, the Operations Section Chief says to you “There is no pressure to light, we need to get this right,” but then in another conversation with them they ask, “When are you going to start firing out?” The moderating effects of the rain on fire behavior decrease with time as the fuels dry, but it also takes time to put together a plan, communicate the plan with resources, and implement that plan on the ground. You understand the reality of this ticking clock – each day the fuels dry a little more. There is undoubtedly pressure to fire sooner rather than later even if all the lines aren’t completed, because the window to burn is now.

Indigenous Groups:

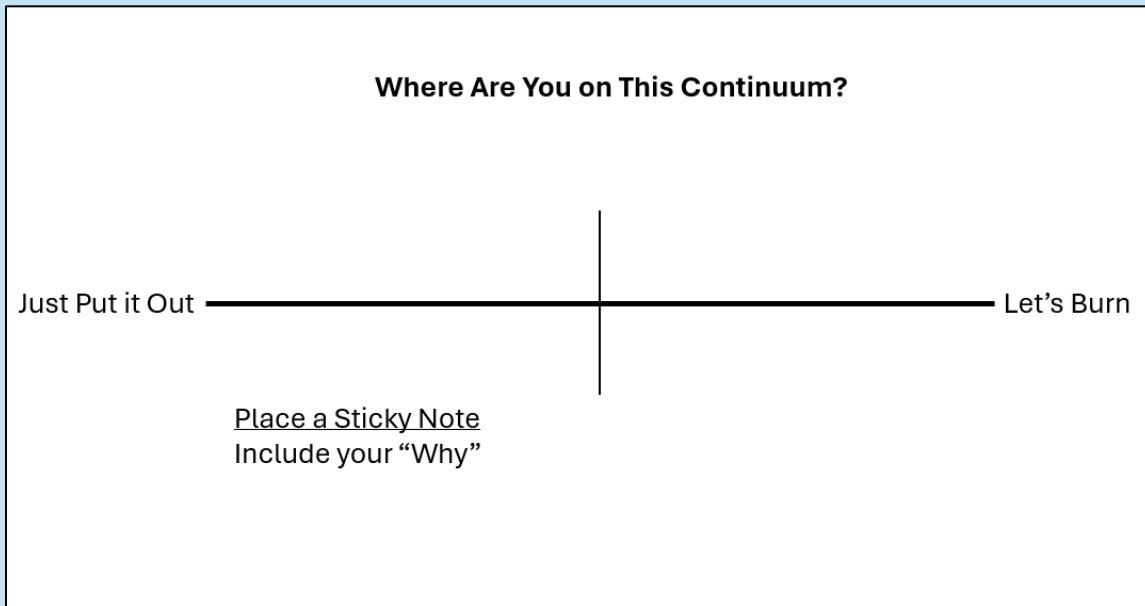
Each time there has been proposed handline construction on this fire, it has been critical to work with local tribal partners to ensure there is no unintentional damage to cultural resources. They have communicated clearly to you in this instance that hand and dozer line, tree-felling, and similar high impact fire suppression actions are a greater concern to them than moderate or low severity fire. In this instance, it has been communicated to you that low severity fire is beneficial to some cultural resources. Right now, the rain’s effect is a key factor in keeping the fire behavior and effects moderated.

Consider the following quote from a Yurok Tribal member during the Six Rivers Lightning Complex: *“The reservation boundary may not be on that piece of ground. It may be in the National Forest. But the tribe has a vested interest in it because it's Aboriginal territory. And the tribe would like to have that land managed in a specific way to meet the needs and complexities of their people.”*

Aligning Different Perspectives

You can probably see how conflict might occur in this situation. You likely have your own ideas about how to try to bring all these perspectives closer to alignment to effectively implement the plan.

This scenario is very similar to what occurred on the Six Rivers Lightning Complex. On that incident, the Firing Group Supervisor and trainee organized a meeting that brought together hotshots, tribes and forest leadership. The Forest AA, tribal leadership, and an IMT member spoke at this meeting, laying out the plan and attempting to build support. The Firing Group Supervisor then put up a poster-sized sheet of paper on the wall, showing a spectrum of support for the plan and what the meeting participants wanted.



This diagram helped the different players on the Six Rivers Lightning Complex understand where they stood in relationship to each other, and, importantly, why. When we know each other's "why", we can understand what the barriers to alignment might be and how to lower those barriers. Is this an approach you would consider?

To Review

You have been assigned as a Firing Group Supervisor to an incident where the IMT has developed a strategy of landscape scale firing to suppress the fire within a weather window. However, not everyone is in alignment:

Hotshot Superintendent 1: This individual has indicated that the plan goes against what they think is the most appropriate course of action. They have advocated for going direct while the fire is tamped down.

Hotshot Superintendent 2: This individual has indicated support for the plan. They said they see how it is an appropriate course of action. Their only qualm is with the messaging. Is this plan really the safest option?

Division Supervisor: This individual is responsible for the risk their resources are going to have to take on to support your operation. They feel responsible to lead this operation and potentially question your methods.

Operations Section Chief: This individual says they understand the need to take time to bring resources along and build alignment, but they are especially cognizant of the short window available to burn and say this operation needs to begin soon or risk missing the opportunity.

Indigenous Groups: Local tribal representatives have expressed to you that they have deep connection to this landscape, and do not necessarily trust land management agency firefighters to protect the values that are most important to them, and therefore want to be closely involved with tactical development. They've told you that values in the area would be more threatened by fire suppression actions than a strategic firing operation.

Discussion Questions

- Do you assign resources based on their buy-in with the plan? What benefits/drawbacks are there of incorporating resources that are skeptical of your plan?
- How do you incorporate a crew's professional judgement of risk into how you implement strategies? How do you clearly and effectively communicate the rationale behind a strategy, and what do you do when a crew is skeptical of the rationale provided by an IMT?
- What does accountability look like when you are working as a group supervisor on someone else's division?
- How do you balance the need to complete an operation within a specific window of time, while efficiently and effectively communicating a novel plan to potentially skeptical resources?
- What are some of the best practices for ensuring that local concerns and considerations are front and center in the implementation of strategy and tactics?
- How important is alignment of these five different perspectives in order to effectively carry out your assignment? Is that alignment possible here?
- How do you reconcile disagreements over the amount of time an operation will take?

Key Final Lessons Learned and “Big Picture” Discussion Questions

While uncertainty was a critical component of the Six Rivers Lightning and Happy Camp Complexes, there were a variety of concrete lessons we can use to improve alignment on future incidents.

Consider the following lessons, grouped into three thematic areas: “Values”, “Risk”, and “Decision-making”. These lessons provide valuable direction for risk-informed decision-making that takes into account a variety of inherently human factors, and hopefully, increases your ability to navigate uncertainty with your fire management partners. Indeed, incorporating these lessons into your leadership repertoire may serve you well as increasingly difficult fire seasons become the norm. Finally, consider the “Big Picture” Discussion Questions at the end of this section, and recognize there are no easy answers.

Values

- **Learn your partners’ values and learn how to communicate with them.** Walk through pre-season scenarios to iron out tough situations. Learning how to communicate our various values, and how we each prioritize them, can be more effective by inviting partners to talk through tough scenarios where our values will not align. Think of it as a special type of sand table exercise. These conversations are not a substitute for ISAP meetings during an actual incident, but can set a foundation for those “smoke-is-in-the air” meetings. At the very least, these pre-season scenarios can reduce the number of surprises when decisions need to be made in a timely manner.

Risk

- **Recognize and account for the human side of risk assessment.** An individual’s risk assessment is heavily influenced by their past experience. In the case of the Six Rivers Lightning Complex, the serious tree strike injury that occurred on August 16, 2023, on the [Lone Pine Fire](#) colored subsequent conversations around relative risk. Recognizing this type of human factor, empathizing, and building strategy with a keen awareness of others’ risk perceptions may be more successful in achieving alignment than only trying to argue the relative risk of the hazards present in the environment.
- **Understand what part of the constellation of risk different people in different levels of authority feel they own, compared with their actual risk decision space.** It is common for incident responders to feel they own more risk

than they can meaningfully influence with their decision-making authority. Operational resources, for example, may feel they own a significant portion of risk associated with strategic decisions made at the level of the IMT and AAs, while IMTs and AAs may feel they own real-time risk residing firmly in the realm of operational resources. It is understandable for conscientious and dedicated incident personnel, regardless of their position in the organization, to feel responsible for the operations they are involved in planning or carrying out. But it is important to recognize that the ground-level, real-time risk decisions that occur “at the tip of the spear” are owned primarily by the responders carrying out tactical operations. Similarly, while a responder may feel a strong sense of responsibility to minimize the highest-level risks (those to the land management unit, or the agency itself), their decision space is too constrained to reasonably include responsibility for outcomes at that level.

Decision-Making

- **Use the scientifically informed models available to you when communicating but recognize that models alone aren't always enough to bridge conflicting points of view.** Advanced models and analytical tools available to fire managers, including those in the [Risk Management Assistance \(RMA\) Dashboard](#), can provide a firm, science-based foundation for decision-making. These analytics do not exist in a vacuum, however, and are not always persuasive when engaging in discussions with those who have different values, risk perceptions, and past experiences. This disconnect played out on the Six Rivers Lightning Complex when the IMT attempted to communicate their strategic intent down the chain of command. Several participants expressed the belief that models can be tweaked to produce certain outputs and are therefore not totally objective – and because of this they harbored some skepticism toward the arguments the IMT made. Remember, models can be used to paint a picture, but they should always be accompanied with a clear discussion of their strengths and limitations to daylight biases the models and analytics may have.
- **Honestly and clearly communicate the intent and justification for your decisions.** Many interviewees expressed frustration due to their belief that the justification for the strategy pursued on the Six Rivers Lightning Complex was not honestly communicated to them. Very often we hear about using “the safety card” as a justification for a management decision to avoid participating in a strategy that we don’t believe is likely to succeed. Sound decisions should be able to be communicated on their merits, using real hazard assessment,

probability of success, and a rational balance of Responder Risk vs. Risk to Values.

- **All sides should work hard to maintain an open mind, listening to the merits of decisions and to arguments against them.** It isn't always the case that a well-developed plan, clearly articulated, satisfies everyone involved with implementing that plan. In these cases, we all need to evaluate our position, whether we are advocating for the plan or are in opposition. We can all agree that nobody by themselves has the full picture.

“Big Picture” Discussion Questions

- How do we know when an opportunity is the “right” opportunity to change the way we suppress fire?
- What are some steps we can take to build the alignment necessary to successfully capitalize on unique fire management opportunities and outside-the-box strategies?
- What road blocks should we expect and how can we challenge pre-existing assumptions when it comes to fire management strategy within our suppression culture?
- How do we adjust our suppression culture to adapt to the unprecedented challenges we face?

Additional Resources

[Seeking Alignment: Six Rivers Lightning Complex and Happy Camp Complex 2023](#)

This 15-minute video from the Facilitated Learning Analysis team studying the Six Rivers Lightning Complex and Happy Complex fires explores the concept of alignment on wildland fire strategy from a variety of entities. [Video Discussion Guide & Video Transcript](#)

[Deferring Risk... Leader's Intent, New Technology and Indigenous Knowledge](#)

This 8-minute video produced by the Eastern Area IMT describes the strategic firing operations implemented for wildland fire suppression on the Six Rivers Lightning Complex from Sept. 15-28, 2023.

[Same Objectives, New Strategy](#)

In this four-and-one-half-minute video Dan Dallas, Incident Commander with the Rocky Mountain CIMT1 discusses the strategy being used to contain the Bluff #1 and Mosquito Fires, part of the Six Rivers Lightning Complex in 2023.

[Shifting the Fire Paradigm](#)

This video was created to tell a story about the 2023 Six Rivers Lightning Complex from the perspective of Karuk Tribal representatives and cultural specialists who worked closely with Six Rivers Forest Service AAs and IMTs to plan and implement strategic firing strategies during the incident.

[Incident Strategic Alignment Process \(ISAP\) \(Storymap\)](#)

Creating shared understanding between incident responders at all levels.

[Risk Management Assistance \(RMA\) Dashboard](#)

The US Forest Service, [Strategic Analytics Branch \(SAB\)](#), RMA Dashboard is a series of tabs to products to help line officers, agency administrators, fire managers, incident management teams, geographic area coordination centers, and multi-agency coordination groups make more risk-informed decisions to achieve safer and improved outcomes.

FLA Team

Ty Aldworth – Wildland Fire Decision Support Analyst/Research Associate, Colorado Forest Restoration Institute, Colorado State University

Erik Apland – Field Operations Specialist, Wildland Fire Lessons Learned Center

Tyler Beeton – Assistant Director and Senior Research Associate, Colorado Forest Restoration Institute, Colorado State University

Luis Gomez – Forest Fire Management Officer, Mendocino National Forest

Andrew K. Johnson – Forest Supervisor, Bighorn National Forest

Russell Long – Program Specialist/Operations Section Chief, National Incident Management Organization, Forest Service

Kevin Osborne – Fire Analyst, Predictive Services – Northern California Coordination Center

Jen Rabuck – Safety & Risk Program Specialist, National Incident Management Organization, Forest Service