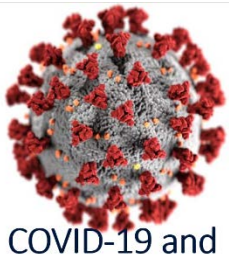
Rapid Lesson Sharing

Event Type: COVID Mitigations on the Silver King Fire

Date: April 17, 2020

Location: Florida



COVID-19 and Fire Season 2020 Lessons

For the latest on COVID-19 visit CDC.gov/COVID19

Be patient with all proposed COVID-19 mitigations.
No one has done this before so there is bound to be challenges.

The Main Challenge on this Fire: Balancing Heat-Related Risks with COVID-19 Risks

Narrative

During the first operational shift of the season, the IHC statused as a Type 2 IA crew with 21 personnel, was tasked with completing a firing operation to limit fire spread. The crew had completed annual training on April 1 and had been in a modified telework schedule as part of COVID-19 mitigations since April 6.

The order for mobilization to the Silver King fire was received on April 15. The crew travelled from its home unit to Naples, Florida the following day.

Onsite weather at 1500 was 94 degrees with 57% humidity, which resulted in a heat index between 101 and 105 degrees—which falls into the National Weather Service Heat Index category of "Danger".

The crew was in-briefed and assigned to Division Zulu on the Silver King Fire at approximately 1030 on April 17. After completing a snagging operation, the crew began a firing operation. Onsite weather at 1500 was 94 degrees with 57% humidity, which resulted in a heat index between 101 and 105 degrees—which falls into the National Weather Service Heat Index category of "Danger".

Heat-Related Illness Preventions

This heat index, combined with the radiant heat of the fire, increased the likelihood of heat-related illness being a safety concern. As expected, individuals tasked with carrying out the firing operation quickly showed signs of exertion due to these environmental conditions.

In addition, because of limited vehicle access, the Superintendent's truck was the only vehicle immediately available to use to rotate crew members through air conditioning to cool down before rotating back out to the holding line.

Under normal circumstances, the crew would have been more aggressive in the number of ignitors and pace of the operation as social distancing in vehicles would not be a consideration. However, given the current COVID-19 mitigation environment, the crew decided to use less ignitors and rotate individuals through the Superintendent's truck in smaller numbers.

The crew leadership discussed the current COVID-19 mitigations and the risks of having too many individuals in the truck at any given time. It was decided to organize the operation so that the only three individuals would be in the truck at any given time (the driver and the two crew members recovering in the backseat).

Crew Leadership Determinations

The firing operation was completed around 1730. With cloud cover and light rain over the fire area, the crew returned to the parking area and began refurb of equipment. The crew also conducted a debrief focused on what could be improved on to carry out the same operations, but increase the reduction of risks associated to both overheating and COVID-19.

Throughout the entire operation, it was agreed on by crew leadership that the primary threat to the crew's well-being was the potential for a crew member to have a heat-related illness. Crew leadership also determined that we will occasionally find ourselves in positions where all COVID-19 mitigations cannot be met.

However, as soon as the primary threat to safety is mitigated, the crew leadership is responsible for shifting back to meeting all COVID-19 mitigations that are achievable.

Lessons

Vehicle Seat Coverings – Vinyl is Best

- If the need arises to rotate individuals through one vehicle, utilize a vehicle with seat coverings that are of vinyl material. These seats are much easier and quicker to clean with disinfectants between each rotation. The front seats of the Superintendent's truck have cloth seat covers that proved to be much more difficult to disinfect after being occupied by an individual who was producing great amounts of sweat. The individual tasked with driving the vehicle can be assigned to wipe down the rear seats, arm rests, and hand grips as one pair leaves the vehicle and prior to another pair cycling in.

Keep Masks in Ziploc Bags

- The crew constructed washable masks prior to being mobilized. The masks were worn while in public. However, the masks were left in the crew carriers during the firing operations. In the future, all crew members will always keep their masks in a Ziploc bag with them while in the field. Therefore, if individuals must pile into a vehicle for shuttle or to cool down, a face covering will be readily accessible. This will also allow a face covering to be available for impromptu briefings or discussions that may occur with outsiders while away from crew vehicles.

Successfully Prevented Exposure to Heat-Related Illness and COVID-19

- Discuss with local units any challenges you see in completing an operation if you think it may impact the ability to adhere to the recommended COVID-19 mitigations. Leadership for this incident showed great motivation and dedication to help ensure the crew completed the desired mission without unnecessary exposure to both heat-related illness and COVID-19.

Drawback Considerations Regarding Telework Training

- Be cautious of engaging in risk mitigation for COVID-19 while at home without further consideration for how it may increase risk when in the field. For this event, the crew leadership agreed that the modified telework may not have achieved the desired goal. Because most crew members live together, their level of isolation was not much different than if they were in station. Additionally, everyone agreed that during the telework period, everyone spent more time in an A/C-cooled area as opposed to outside acclimating to the hot and humid conditions of the southeast. Furthermore, the crew leadership agreed that any acclimation that was achieved during the annual training was most likely lost during the telework period. This inevitably increased the risk of a heat-related illness once on scene at the first incident of the year.

Greatest Challenge: Balancing COVID-19 and Heat-Related Risks

- The greatest challenge was balancing the risks of COVID-19 vs. the risk of a heat-related illness. For this operation, not having the ability to rotate individuals through air conditioning would have either resulted in an injury from a heat-related illness or breaking from the recommended COVID-19 mitigations. The crew is certain that balancing COVID-19 mitigations and all the other hazards associated with the fire environment will be posing conflicts throughout the fire season. When in doubt, utilize the Risk Management Process in the IRPG for COVID-19 just as you would any other hazard.

Patience is a Virtue

- Be patient with all proposed COVID-19 mitigations. No one has done this before so there is bound to be challenges. After assessing the challenges of this one operation on the Silver King Fire, the crew leadership has been conducting more regular AARs and adjusting small components of how the crew would typically operate in the absence of COVID-19. The crew has found that some very minor changes to Standard Operating Procedures can have large impacts on improving the risk mitigation of COVID-19.

This RLS was submitted by:
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