



The Division of Forestry is responsible for protection of life and property in preparation of and responding to wildland fires. As a protection and a jurisdictional agency, this is a monumental task even during normal conditions. With the COVID-19 overlay, our intent is to meet the challenges this fire season will bring. The 2020 fire season will be different than any we have ever seen. We are learning daily and adjusting our decisions and actions to meet the challenges and provide the service we are responsible for. This document is intended to provide guidance and priorities for spring readiness and the transition into the 2020 fire season.

A strength of the Division of Forestry fire program during the COVID-19 outbreak is that our workforce already identifies hazards, reduces exposure and acts after evaluation of risk. From the first day of our training, we focus on firefighter safety. We have processes in place to communicate risk and share best practices. Every incident commander, from Type 5 to Type 1, has one primary objective – to provide for firefighter and public safety. It's in every incident action plan, every tailgate safety session and is discussed at every Area briefing. It is what we do.

As we work through our seasonal preparations, let's ensure safety is in the forefront of our communications and actions. None of us are COVID-19 experts, but know where to get the best science-based information. None of us will have all the answers, but we have developed a team led by Deputy Director Tim Dabney to address administrative processes. None of us have experience responding to fires in this environment, but we have interagency task groups working under the National Multiagency Coordinating Group to develop and share with local, statewide and national responders best practices to provide for firefighter safety for the. Every one of you is expected to continue to take part in developing these measures for the Division of Forestry. We know we will have fires; we know we will need to respond; and we know there is an invisible hazard in addition to the regular dangers of wildland firefighting. I have confidence in your ability to rise to these challenges.

This season I will be working closely with the regional foresters, area foresters, and FMOs to develop strategies to reduce the number of responders needed to contain our initial attack of fires at the smallest acreage possible. The intent of aggressive actions is to reduce exposure to COVID-19 to our first responders, minimize smoke impacts to communities, and maintain statewide readiness with a limited workforce. Each situation will be unique, but in most cases an aggressive and expedited initial attack will be the default response in or around communities. Each situation will be assessed using risk-informed decision-making, but I want to emphasize that our response will be timely, aggressive and mission focused.

I ask you to help implement the following actions as we continue to prepare and plan for this season.

### **Health of our Firefighters**

- Reduce, to the extent possible, exposure and transmission among our firefighters, staff, families, and communities we support.
  - Develop best practices for engine and helitack module sanitation processes. (*Guidelines to follow CDC recommendations and developed by areas and DOF Safety Officer*)
  - Implement social distancing at each Area. Develop and share best practices to do so, for example:
    - radio briefings,
    - small group PT sessions,
    - no traditional fire camps during extended and complex fire responses.
  - Strict enforcement of mandatory and compensated leave for flu-like symptoms. Take care of your brothers and sisters by not showing up to work if you have symptoms.
  - Provide PPE to each IA module and prevention officer. Train on proper use and when and how it needs to be utilized. Develop list of needed supplies by area to accommodate.
  - Practice and track quarantining mitigations. Where available, use testing to incorporate firefighters back into the workforce in an expedited time frame.
  - Survey our firefighters to determine if they or their immediate family are in a high-risk category.

### **Preseason Preparations and Protocols**

- Prevention
  - We will initiate a May 1<sup>st</sup> hard date burn permit suspension, mandatory for all Areas. Intent is to decrease direct contact with the public, minimize smoke concerns and reduce human-caused fires.
  - Delay or cancel any State-sponsored Rx burns.
  - Initiate an external public information campaign to include villages, Native corporations and stakeholders.
  - Coordinate and preplan a statewide burn ban with all AWFCG members and Native land managers. Ensure standardized language and interagency alignment to avoid confusion and conflicting information.
  - Coordinate with the Alaska State Fire Marshal to preplan a fireworks ban as a mechanism to reduce human-caused fires.
- Planning
  - Pre-identify Continuation of Operation Plans (COOP) for DOF dispatch and initial attack centers. Operations Forester, FMOs and Area Foresters develop Primary, Alternate and Contingency options in the event of a COVID outbreak in a specific Area, tanker base, dispatch center or office that could potentially disrupt fire response and firefighter safety.
  - Area Foresters and Facility Managers, work with Regional Foresters and SOF Greiling to develop process of contracted or deep cleaning services to ensure expedited continuation of operations in the event of a COVID exposure in a facility. Establish contract or process pre-May 1<sup>st</sup>.
  - Area FMOs to develop simulation or sandbox trainings to game out fire responses, fire camps and COVID mitigation concerns with staff. Involve all functions.

- Areas and Operations Forester discuss sharing of resources in an expedited manner to support aggressive initial attack. Closest resources is a model that will be embraced. Fight the fire we have!
- Areas contact local school districts and common ICP sites for expectations of facility management during COVID. Determine if our normal ICP locations will be available. Look for alternatives.
- Develop a plan to replace leadership positions should someone need relief because of family or personal COVID related symptoms. Make sure the next person up is briefed and ready to engage on short notice.
- Work with community health officials to determine COVID testing availability. Fire staff (Greiling) will work on first responder priority to maintain staffing levels and reduce 14-day quarantine mandates. Each Area should do the same.
- Develop Agency Administrator questions regarding COVID-19 that should be included in decision making.
- Agency Administrators develop COVID-19 strategic direction with every required WFSS on State of Alaska Fires.
- Technology
  - Ensure staff is familiar with and has the tools to use virtual formats. We will be doing much of our regular meetings while in some version of social distancing. Tablets, phones and laptops need to be available for all levels of leadership to participate and ensure a common operating picture. Work through your chain of command to remedy shortages. IA staff need to be included and prioritized for these devices.
  - All firefighters and managers, not just the IA Technicians, need to be familiar with using an ALMR radio. This will be our contingency plan if regular systems of communications become unusable or overloaded. Nate Skinner can't do it all, so Technicians, lead from below. Help train are support staff and managers if needed.
  - Purchase equipment to ensure social distancing standards are met. Phone speakers are an example.
- Training
  - A big part of our regular spring routine is training. Many classes have been cancelled due to exposure concerns. This does not mean we stop learning. Develop proficiency training to ensure fire season readiness.
    - Dispatchers get familiar with other Areas' procedures. Practice dispatching adjacent areas.
    - Engine foremen and helitack foremen, develop ways to provide hands on training in small groups.
    - FMOs, find alternative ways to ensure our ICs are ready to respond.
  - Share your ideas and experiences with others. These are the environments where our next generation of leaders step up. Be part of the solution.

### **During Fire Season Considerations**

- Initial Attack will focus on aggressive response and rapid containment
  - Provide for the most aggressive tactics that reduce COVID-19 exposure to our firefighters. Develop strategies and tactics that minimize the number of people and reduce duration.
  - Use tactics that reduce heavy logistics components.

- Establish multiple camps for even small overnight fires. Reduce numbers of personnel in one place to minimize exposure.
- Develop cleaning procedures for our apparatus, both engines and aircraft. Implement as part of our pre- and post-shift checklists. *(Guidelines to be developed by Areas and SOF Greiling using CDC recommendations.)*
- Staffing
  - Consider altered workweeks to maintain PL 1 capabilities 7 days a week to reduce the number of personnel on a compound or in an office on any given day.
  - Consider isolating engine crews. Develop module quarantine plans to reduce cross-crew exposure. Share ideas on ways we can accomplish this, including remote reporting sites.
  - Area Foresters and Regional Foresters will be asked to allow flexibility in work locations. We should accommodate opportunities for separation of crews and modules if they remain available to respond to incidents locally and statewide. Think outside the box.
  - Rest, recovery, and reassignment will be keys to maintaining an aggressive initial attack profile. Focus on building staffing and availability needs around this.
- Resource sharing
  - This will be a national topic. Alaska imported 5000 firefighters to assist us this past fire season. This may not be an option for 2020. Identify where and how we will support resource-ordered or detailed firefighters to the State or Areas.
  - Pre identify prepo locations and facilities for crews, pilots, OH and dispatcher. Confirm regular locations are available.
  - Work with our interagency partners to develop best practices for a mob center. Share your ideas and concerns with importing firefighters into your Areas.
- Increase employee support
  - Take care of each other - this is a stressful and potentially dangerous job.
  - Share Teledoc information with staff.
  - Share COVID-19 workers comp information with fire staff and responders.
  - Identify hospital and family liaisons to provide a support network. Take care of our own.
  - Develop AARs that include COVID-19 mitigation measures as part of our after-fire process. Did we do everything we could to reduce exposure? Share lessons learned to be better after each assignment and incident.
  - Provide decontamination equipment with CDC direction to each Area and crew. Provide decontamination kits to each firefighter. *(SOF Greiling will coordinate with Areas to develop what these will include and sources for products.)*

Sincerely,

Norm McDonald  
Chief of Fire & Aviation