

## RAPID LESSON SHARING

### COVID-19 Mitigations on the Holcombe Road Fire

#### SITUATION OVERVIEW

##### QUICK STATS

- Crockett and Val Verde Counties
- 25,958 acres
- 125 structures saved
- 4 out buildings lost
- 4 RVs lost
- 64-mile perimeter
- 209 personnel assigned

The Holcombe Road Fire, a human-caused wildfire that burned in Crockett and Val Verde Counties, started on April 19, 2020 and took 14 days to contain. Extreme fire behavior—including multiple days with crown runs and long-range spotting—coupled with topography challenges; oil, gas and electrical infrastructure; Wildland-Urban Interface and the remote location made the fire a challenge to contain and control.

The Holcombe Road Fire marked the first project fire (a large or complex fire that requires large organization and prolonged activity to suppress it) to deal with COVID-19 risks and protocols. The crews faced many challenges fighting a rapidly expanding wildfire while adapting to the pandemic risk, which was approximately a month old at the time of the incident. From the 30-year veteran to the Type II firefighter (FFT2) on their first assignment, this fireline risk was new to all.

While the fire was rapidly expanding, COVID-19 information was rapidly changing. The command adapted to response protocols, briefings from supervisors and agency administrators and dealt with the opinions of firefighters and the public based off the inundation of media information.

Met with very aggressive burning conditions, the initial attack incident commander (IC) determined the incident complexity would require a type 3 organization. The Lone Star State IMT 3 (Crimm) established a unified command with Crockett and Val Verde Counties on April 20 and managed the fire through containment.

Texas A&M Forest Service developed the “Texas A&M Forest Service COVID-19 Pandemic Wildland Fire Response Plan” (WFRP), based on the Southern Area WFRP, to provide guidance for maintaining continuity of wildland fire response in the presence of the COVID-19. This document provided a road map as the team assessed this new risk and put mitigations in place.

#### RESOURCES

- Texas A&M Forest Service: 12 dozers, 11 fire engines, medics and the Lone Star State Type 2 Initial Attack Hand Crew
- Multiple aircraft included a DC-10 VLAT (Very Large Air Tanker), 5 Air Tankers, 3 SEATS (Single Engine Air Tanker) and a Type 3 helicopter
- 1 Interagency Hotshot Crew (IHC)
- Emergency Medical Task Force medical support
- TIFMAS: 5 engine strike teams
- Multiple local fire departments and county resources
- The total number of assigned personnel: 209

## REALITY OF IMPLEMENTING COVID-19 PROTOCOLS

### *From the Team Safety Officer*

“COVID-19 protocol is very difficult in a wildfire environment. Because of the difficulty, firefighters tend to revert to the way fire business was handled prior to the pandemic. Also, the thought process about COVID-19 is on both ends of the spectrum. Some resources are actually worried and concerned and others couldn’t care less. Fireline supervisors are part of the solution. If supervisors lead by example and promote COVID-19 safety, the crew tends to follow. When a supervisor operates in a lackadaisical manner about COVID-19, the crew tends to follow that example, too.”

## RISK MANAGEMENT

Incident Response Pocket Guide (IRPG) Operational Engagement PG1

### IDENTIFY HAZARDS (SITUATIONAL AWARENESS)

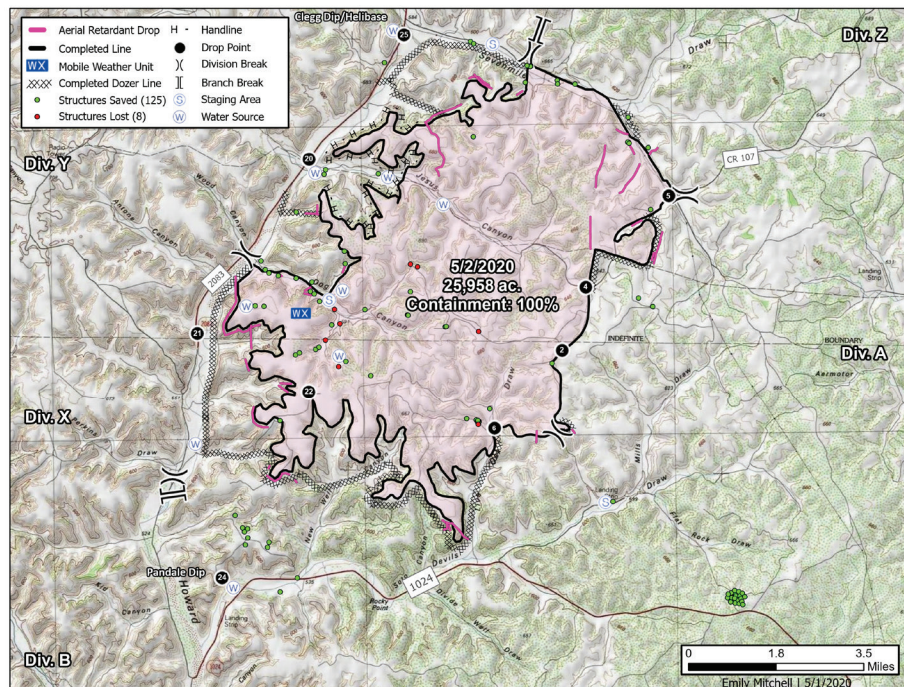
Gather information

- Fire is in a remote area.
- County is sparsely populated and has no positive cases.
- Resources will be coming from several locations across the state and neighboring states.
- Reliance for support (e.g., lodging, meals, fuel, etc.) will be from local sources.

### ASSESS HAZARDS

Estimate the potential

- The response will bring a large number of people from areas that may have a higher occurrence of COVID-19.
- Keeping resources separate and minimizing person-to-person contact is challenging.





## RISK MANAGEMENT CONTINUED

### DEVELOP CONTROLS AND MAKE RISK DECISIONS

Develop controls that reduce the risk

- The incident command post (ICP) was located in the conference room. The medical unit ensured that the room was sanitized at least twice a day. Everyone cleaned their own station/equipment.
- The medical unit had the capability and proper personal protective equipment (PPE) to evaluate a resource should they feel ill. If quarantine space was needed, logistics had two vacant hotel rooms on standby.
- COVID-19 testing was available locally. Only someone with symptoms could be tested.
- Due to square footage and social distancing requirements, the ICP had a 10-person occupancy limit. When in excess of 10 people, face coverings were worn.
- Morning briefings were limited to essential overhead positions. This helped keep crew resources from intermingling with one another, avoided overcrowding that would not meet distancing standards, and helped minimize person-to-person contact.
- All incoming resources were screened with a COVID-19 questionnaire and temperature check before starting the check-in process. This did not start until about mid-way through the fire.
- An extra step was added to the demobilization (demob) process, requiring a signature from the medical unit.

Resources were screened again, confirming they were healthy before heading home or to their next assignment.

- Large quantities of hand sanitizer, bleach, and disinfecting wipes were ordered and available.
- Logistics ordered meals for firefighters from various local vendors. Each vendor was verified to have proper licensing. Vehicles that transported meals to the line were sanitized to the best of their ability to deliver food to the line safely.

### IMPLEMENT CONTROLS

- All resources were reminded every morning at briefing to adhere to social distancing standards when possible, bleach their cooler, and to sanitize their hands and frequently touched areas in vehicles, such as the steering wheel, door handles, and controls.
- Lodging was arranged to keep crews together and separated from other crews.
- Rooms were single occupancy, no switching.

## SUPERVISE AND EVALUATE

Are controls adequately mitigating the hazards?

### *From the Team Safety Officer*

“Keeping resources separate is very difficult, whether trying to keep one DIV isolated from the next or just keep resources on the same DIV apart. Crew members who drove transports with dozers to the fire have to hitch rides back to the hotel. Dozers are swapped around divisions and then the operator is forced to ride with different people. Engines break down and the crew is shuttled back in different vehicles.

In such cases, masks should be worn, but how do you enforce that without riding with them?

Then when equipment trading occurs between DIVs, more interaction with different people also occurs.

I’m not saying trading equipment is bad thing, it’s just a reality of how the fire gets suppressed.”

## IC INFORMED OF POSSIBLE COVID-19 EXPOSURE

STEN informed the IC that one of his engine crews may have had contact with a COVID-19 positive individual. While on the line, the crew received a call from their home unit that an individual working at their station had tested positive for COVID-19. The individual who tested positive worked on a different shift, and E-101 had limited to no interaction with the known infected person. The IC, E-101, and STEN evaluated the potential impacts of the situation, and the decision was made to demob E-101 and order a replacement engine.

### **Exposure tracking questions were asked and indicated that:**

- E-101 had limited to no interaction with the known infected person at shift change and social distancing was maintained.
- E-101 had no interaction with TFS personnel.
- E-101 had limited interaction with other strike team members with social distancing maintained
- Only known exposure, if any, was to one another.
- Body temperatures of 97.77 and 97.76 were reported with no symptoms.
- Crew followed home unit COVID-19 protocols for possible exposure.
- Because the engine had traveled that day, the crew remained overnight and traveled back the next morning.



## OPERATIONS INFORMED OF POSSIBLE EXPOSURE

C1 had worked the Holcombe Road Fire for several days with 19 crew members. Their 20<sup>th</sup> member was available, and the home unit had a driver deliver the crew member to the crew at Holcombe. All dispatching procedures were followed. The afternoon of the first shift after the crew member joined the crew, operations was notified by dispatch of a possible COVID-19 exposure on C1. At the same time, the C1 crew boss was also notified from their region of the possible exposure.

OSC and CRWB evaluated the situation. The crew member, per the crew's protocols, was tested before assignment and was negative. He had no contact with an individual at the home unit that was asymptomatic but tested positive after the crew member traveled to join his crew. The driver that drove the crew member out had "contact" with the positive individual as they are from the same office but no direct contact or closer than the recommended social distancing standards.

C1 was to roll into a pre-positioning role for the next shift for potential IA. The crew boss and OSC discussed several options based on the information they had:

- C1 developed a list of who had contact.
- Logistics provided lodging to isolate the crew member from the rest of the crew.
- The crew was released from the Holcombe Road Fire to travel back to their home unit the next day. This was due to C1 completing their assignment on Holcombe and the ability of the team to cover IA with other resources.
- The dmob process included the "Am I Fit?" questionnaire and temperature checks of all crew members prior to travel.
- C1 made arrangements for the 20<sup>th</sup> crew member to ride back to their home unit separate from the rest of the crew.
- All crew members were tested for COVID-19 at their home unit and all tested negative.
- Crew boss contacted OSC with the test results to close the loop with resources that may have come in contact with crew.

## RESULTS

In both of these events, the team and affected resources not only had to evaluate the risk, but also scale the reaction to the risk. In both cases, "contact" was the key variable. All three individuals had limited exposure to a COVID-19 positive individual. The probability they were affected was minor, but the team could not assume. The team also had to consider how the information was handled so not to have rumors of a "COVID-19 incident" and result in undue worry and stress to a community that has zero cases.

### *From the Team Safety Officer*

"The overwhelming success of the operations was that everyone stayed healthy. Also, most people wanted to practice COVID-19 safety and did for the most part. Most just needed to be led by example. Another key factor was the availability of bleach, masks, and other sanitizing items."