



# USDA Forest Service Fire and Aviation Management Briefing Paper



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**Topic:** Firefighter Safety & Training – Thirtymile Hazard Abatement

**Background:** On July 10, 2001, four firefighters lost their lives on the Thirtymile fire on the Okanogan National Forest in Washington. In addition to the Forest Service investigation, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) conducted a separate investigation. OSHA cited the Forest Service with two willful, and three serious violations. OSHA delivered the citations to the Pacific Northwest Regional Forester on February 8, 2002. A Hazard Abatement Plan was submitted to OSHA on March 26, 2002, and was accepted.

The Forest Service and cooperating agencies have excellent firefighter safety and training programs. However, the Thirtymile tragedy prompted an in depth examination of both programs to identify areas needing improvement. An Accident Prevention Plan was developed containing 38 specific actions (29 that are interagency in nature) to enhance firefighter safety and training. These actions have resulted in significant changes within the Forest Service and Department of Interior. To date, the Forest Service has completed 32 of the actions. Implementation efforts will continue and are posted on the Internet at <http://www.fs.fed.us/fire/>. Firefighter safety improvements include:

## Key Points:

- Managing risk in the fire suppression environment is one of our biggest challenges. A new process for assessing and managing risks has been distributed to each fireline supervisor in an interagency Incident Response Pocket Guide.
- Agency Administrators sharing their expectations concerning safety and performance with their Incident Commanders (ICs).
- Requiring a complexity analysis for every fire at the time of initial attack as part of the size up, to ensure each fire receives the appropriate level of incident management.
- Requiring ICs to ensure all firefighting activities are in full compliance with the 10 Standard Fire Orders, and mitigation of the applicable “Watch Out Situations” have been accomplished.
- Directing Line Officers and Fire Managers to increase their inspections of fires for safety and health hazards, and to monitor the performance of ICs.
- Requiring Type 3 fires (moderately complex) to have a full time dedicated Incident Commander, with no collateral duties.

- Dispatching protocols to ensure that all personnel on fires are notified as to who is the Incident Commander, and when any changes in Incident Command occur.
- Establishing a standardized format to brief fireline personnel arriving at a fire addressing: planned suppression operations, hazards and risks, and critical fuels and weather conditions, and other crucial information.
- Developing with interagency partners new work/rest guidelines to manage fatigue and establishing a limitation on the maximum hours that can be worked each day.
- Directing ICs to manage fatigue and ensure firefighters comply with the work/rest guidelines of one hour of rest for every two hours worked after the first operational period.
- Identifying thresholds for critical fuels and weather conditions that lead to extreme burning conditions and publishing these on pocket cards for use by firefighters to assist in recognizing critical watch out situations.
- Developing and distributing training packages on entrapment avoidance, deployment site management, and fire shelter deployment protocols to all field units for use in initial and refresher fire training.
- Modifying curriculum for initial and refresher fire training to include the findings and lessons learned from the Thirtymile Fire incident.
- Revision of applicable fire training courses curriculums to include lessons on fatigue recognition and management, along with the lessons learned from the Thirtymile fire.
- Developing a “simulator” for use in various training courses to enhance firefighters training related to critical fire danger conditions and fireline hazards.
- Developing a new fire shelter that provides additional protection for firefighters entrapped in life threatening situations.
- Adopting the handbook Standards for Fire & Aviation Operations to provide implementation guidance to field level fire and aviation managers.
- Adopting and implementing the interagency fire program manager qualifications standards for the OPM GS-401 position series.
- Developing and implementing Fatigue Awareness training to address fatigue issues.
- Developing fire management core competencies for agency administrators.
- Filling a full time staff position at the National Interagency Fire Center to coordinate the implementation of the hazard abatement actions.

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