



A lesson is truly learned when we modify our behavior to reflect what we now know.

Dispatch Operations on the Fireline - Lessons Learned



The LLC staff recently interviewed four Dispatch Center Managers and two Assistant Dispatch Center Managers from around the United States regarding their notable successes and difficult challenges in situational awareness (SA), effective practices, and pressing safety issues in managing dispatch centers. Special thanks are extended to these dispatch personnel for sharing their significant lessons and practices with the wildland fire community.

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Notable Successes in SA and Safety Getting Your "SA" On

In one dispatch center, everyone is given the tools to "Get their SA on." Maintaining situational awareness is critical in a successful dispatch center. Once a dispatcher walks in the door on a busy holiday weekend, they must have their SA on, including gathering a mental picture from personal observations as well as receiving a briefing from the supervisor. To safely and efficiently dispatch resources to an emerging fire, a dispatcher must develop a perception that reflects reality as closely as possible. Without situational awareness, dispatchers face continual challenges. Without the ability to process a mental picture of the fire situation, and what it is like for the people on the other end of a radio conversation, a dispatcher can become complacent. If they become complacent, they may fail to get resources to a fire in a timely manner.

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Scratchline

“On the Ground” Experience

One dispatch center found that initial attack and aircraft dispatchers having a working knowledge of “on the ground” operations aids tremendously in the dispatch environment. An initial attack dispatcher serves, in a way, as the Incident Commander on the fire until resources arrive on scene. If a dispatcher has “on the ground” fire experience, the dispatcher can see in their mind what the fire is doing. In other words, when smoke is reported, a dispatcher with on the ground experience will know what the fire is doing by the description of the smoke column and an estimation of the size of the fire; this helps them determine what resources are needed and anticipate what the needs may be. For example, if the fire will go to extended attack, the dispatcher will know that additional resources may be requested, meals needed, and a second shift required. One dispatcher feels that, “If I didn’t have the experiences that I have had fighting fire on the ground, I would not be as good of an initial attack dispatcher as I am.” Dispatchers should take details and other assignments that help them learn ground operations. Doing so will improve their situational awareness and understanding of LCES.



Photo Courtesy of US Forest Service

Moving Cargo Efficiently

While working the aircraft desk, one dispatcher supported a large wildfire in Alaska. The fire was in a remote location requiring paracargo to deliver supplies, because helicopters were in short supply and flight time from Fort Wainwright was about one hour. Cargo planes were also in short supply, and the organization pressed a smokejumper aircraft into service to deliver paracargo. However, because of the aircraft’s size, the flight time to the fire, and duty hour limitations for the flight crew, they could only make two runs per day and it proved very difficult to keep up with the

never ending amount of supplies and gear that needed to go to the fire. Supply delivery fell behind by more than 20,000 pounds. The dispatcher realized that if supplies were closer to the fire, they could reduce flight time in transit and the jumpship could be used more effectively. The dispatch center located and hired a cargo plane to move cargo from the Fort Wainwright ramp to the Fort Yukon airport.

Because there was no special use flying involved, the cargo plane could fly for ten hours, enabling them to make five trips. Smokejumper rigging the loads before loading them on the cargo plane; some jumpers went to Fort Yukon to help unload the supplies there and load them onto the jumpship. By moving the supplies to Fort Yukon, transit time to the fire was only 15-20 minutes, and the smokejumper aircraft was able to make several paracargo drops during their eight-hour flight day, allowing them to get caught back up on supply delivery. This change reduced pilot stress and fatigue as well, and may be used again in the future.

Avoiding an Incident within an Incident

One dispatch office supported initial attack on a brush fire caused when a vehicle hit a utility pole. When initial attack resources arrived on the scene, they realized that a power line from the pole had come down. Rather than having initial attack engines take action on the fire, they waited until they knew the condition of the downed power line. As it turned out, the downed lines were still “hot” and had the engines pumped water on the ground in the vicinity of the live electrical wires, firefighters could have been electrocuted. Firefighters were able to avoid a serious safety situation because good communication had flowed between the individuals reporting the vehicle accident, the dispatchers and firefighters.



Township of West Caldwell, NJ

Flight Following During Record Fire Year

During the summer of 2000, an assistant forest dispatcher served on a Montana National Forest that experienced a record 277 incidents. Of these incidents 39 were large fires (over 100 acres) occurring between mid July and the end of August. All of these 39 fires lasted longer than three weeks. The fact that the Forest managed several large fires, burning during extreme fire conditions and growing in size every afternoon, without aircraft incidents or serious personal injuries, represents a notable success story.

During that fire season, crews from all areas of the United States, as well as Australia and New Zealand, worked together. In addition, aircraft, large air tankers, single engine airtankers, lead planes, air attack platforms, smoke-jumper aircraft, and helicopters of every size, from Canada, Australia, and the U.S. aided the suppression activities. Consequently, the Forest requested a Temporary Flight Restriction (TFR) the size of Delaware. The TFR touched four national forests in two different geographical areas, and for nearly two months, inactivated a Military Training Route.

In the year 2000, Automated Flight Following (AFF) was not yet operational. The assistant forest dispatcher was responsible for some of the initial attack activity and all of the aircraft tracking during the season. Keeping track of each aircraft's arrival and departure presented a substantial undertaking, as each fire had multiple aircraft assigned to them. For a dispatcher, this level of aircraft operations requires the situational awareness to know when help is needed and the confidence to ask for help in a timely manner. All dispatchers should have these abilities.

Due to the level of activity and the complexities involved, the Forest Dispatch contacted the FAA and requested they place a temporary control tower, staffed by two Air Traffic Controllers, at the local airport. The FAA immediately responded and sent a tower with the Air Traffic Controllers (ATC) the next day. Once they arrived, the ATCs came into the initial attack dispatch center and spent four hours learning how to flight follow according to established U.S. Forest Service procedures. These procedures require contacting and recording the location of each aircraft every 15 minutes and notifying them of the location of other aircraft as they approach or enter into one another's air space. After this training period, the ATCs felt they could not do both, and expressed surprise that initial attack dispatch personnel had been doing so. The ATCs and the dispatch center staff compromised, and the ATCs managed the airspace over the local airport, advising incoming and outgoing aircraft of takeoffs and landings. Working with so many aircraft in a small airspace without incident, represented a notable success in dispatch operations with respect to both situational awareness and safety.

Pre-positioning Resources

For one dispatch center manager, pre-positioning resources is key in successfully responding to wildland fires. On one initial attack fire in Oregon, ground resources were mobilized for a long walk-in. Initial attack resources included firefighters and a Type 5 Incident Commander. The fire grew quickly and escaped initial attack. The complexity also increased and crews and overhead were needed. Fortunately, the Dispatch Center had pre-positioned contract Type 2 handcrews, and mobilized them. Overhead were in short supply so smokejumpers were mobilized, parachuted in, and a quality Type 3 organization was quickly established utilizing the smokejumpers overhead qualifications.

Because the Type 2 crews were able to respond quickly and qualified overhead were on scene in a timely manner, the fire was kept to 35 acres. This unit advises looking a week ahead in pre-positioning resources based on a thorough weather and local fuels assessment, noting that it can prove difficult to obtain resources on short notice unless they are pre-positioned. This dispatch center manager notes that "We have good support from fire managers to pre-position resources in order to provide rapid and timely initial attack."

Communicating the Priority of Air Tanker Resources

During a recent multiple fire event, Incident Commanders (IC) were in desperate need of airtankers. The logistics manager in an Interagency Dispatch Center assumed responsibility for coordinating with the ICs. After five airtankers arrived, the logistics manager prioritized tanker requests based on his awareness of the fire situation across the entire dispatch area. The logistics manager took in all available information from the ground and made informed decisions about which incident would receive air tankers and in what order. He took the time to communicate with the ICs on the ground, especially those who requested airtankers, but did not receive them. This communication helped the ICs to understand why they did not receive airtanker support, based on the overall situation and the dispatch center's priorities.

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DISPATCHERS

*When there is a fire and the smoke is just starting to show
Your friendly dispatchers are the first to know*

*They get the closest resources and send them on their way
With no regards to who will get the "H" pay*

*When you get on your fire and it's going up the hill
You put your requests in, the dispatchers say "Can fill"*

*The dispatchers finally get your resources and they call you back
You may not like the time frame, but you better not give them
flack*

*By now its getting late in the day, you ask for a current weather
forecast*

*The dispatcher comes on the radio and says "The hot weather
won't last"*

*About midnight when you hunker down for the night and try to
find a warm place*

*In your mind you think about the day, and hope the dispatcher
isn't on your case*

*Early in the morning when you get your crew up and about
Everyone is still tired and complain, "Don't shout"*

*Then you hear a friendly voice over the radio and everyone set-
tles down*

*The dispatchers were thinking of you and a hot breakfast is com-
ing from town*

*So my advice to you firefighters, at ALL levels of the ICS
Treat your dispatchers with respect and give them your best*

*Because dispatchers are the ones that get you what you need
and want*

If you don't treat them nice, it will come back to haunt!

By: Alyce Harris

Difficult Challenges in SA and Safety

Communications with Aircraft

During one fire observation flight, the dispatch office lost communication with the aircraft doing the observation. Another aircraft in the area contacted the observation aircraft and reported to them their need to land immediately. A wire had come loose from the radio and although the aircrew was irritated about having to land since they thought they could fix it in air, this action was absolutely necessary because the dispatch center had no contact and could not see them. Dispatch must be able to communicate with aircrew via radio.

Working with Area Command

Working with Area Command Teams (ACT) can pose a challenge to dispatchers, according to one dispatcher, who has struggled with this scenario on more than one occasion. Problems arise when an ACT mobilizes and takes over responsibilities for decision-making and resource prioritization, but does not notify the respective dispatch offices in the area of their decisions and actions. Resource decisions by ACTs, whether moving resources between fires or assigning pre-positioned resources, can negatively affect local initial attack operations. ACTs must notify initial attack dispatch personnel when they make resource decisions with implications for local initial attack, and interpersonal communications must remain the top priority at any level of a fire organization.

In one situation, a dispatcher met with the Area Command Team and explained the importance of keeping dispatch informed when the ACT moved resources around, so that dispatch knew where resources were and their status. The ACT and dispatcher resolved the issue by assigning a dispatch recorder to the ACT. The dispatch recorder took notes for ACT and helped them track resource movement. They would then inform dispatch of the location of all resources.

Dispatching During a Critical Incident

Dealing with fatalities on the fireline represents, by far, the most difficult challenge faced by dispatch personnel. They must monitor their work group for stress and post-traumatic stress. On a recent incident, a supervisory dispatcher had a radio in the expanded dispatch office in order to communicate during the incident due to limited cell phone coverage. The radio helped the expanded dispatch to support two large incidents as well as emerging incidents because they could monitor the forest net frequencies.

However, on one particular day, a dispatcher returned to the expanded dispatch after attending an in-briefing with a Type 2 Incident Management Team, to find everyone gathered around the radio because one of the fires was blowing up. About this time, the office telephone rang and the forest dispatcher informed dispatch that one of the fires was experiencing extreme fire behavior and that four helitack personnel were missing. Two people working in expanded dispatch had a son or daughter on the helitack crew, and they both knew it could be their family members that were missing.

The dispatch supervisor had everyone back away from the radio, turned the volume down and assigned a non-local person to monitor the radio for expanded dispatch traffic. The expanded dispatchers were advised of the four missing personnel and that their identities were still unknown. They continued to support three other incidents, while the dispatch supervisor took the two dispatchers with family on the helitack crew outside to explain the situation and console them. Family members came to pick the individuals up, to ensure they would not be left alone. They waited near the forest dispatcher's office so they could hear any news of the four missing employees from the Forest Supervisor.

Additional dispatchers came in to relieve the affected personnel. All personnel were monitored for stress and shock, as most of the expanded dispatchers were local personnel. When word came through that two of the four missing had perished, it was decided that no personnel would leave unless accompanied by someone they knew well. All staff members were then encouraged to attend the critical incident stress debriefing.

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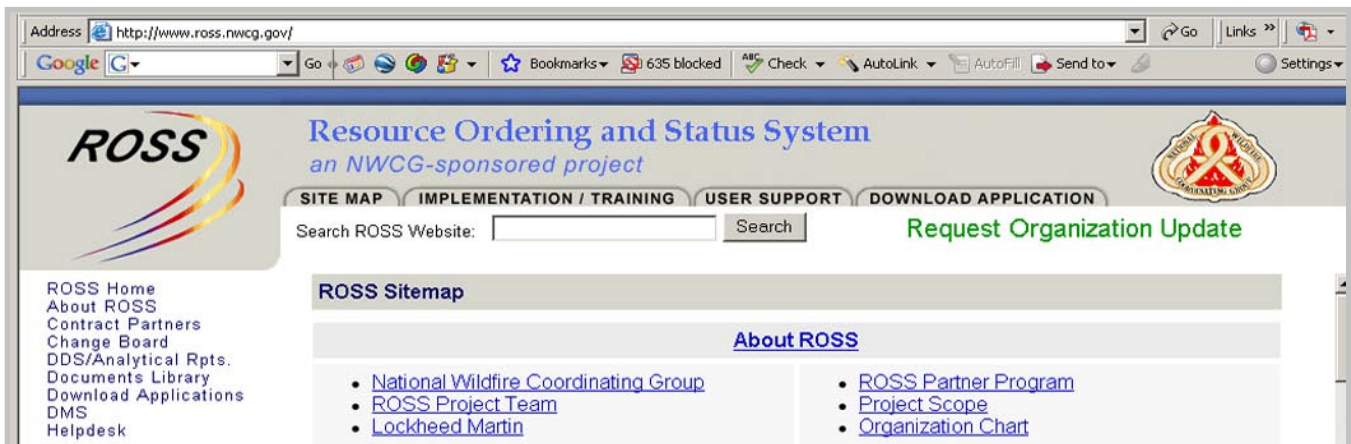
Overcoming Frustrations

A dispatcher's job can prove difficult and frustrating, particularly when Dispatch ends up stuck in the middle when the person in the field wants or needs something but dispatchers must work through an administrative consideration before the request can be accommodated. Dispatchers can struggle when they have to tell a person on the ground needing supplies that they either have to wait, or that they might not get them at all, particularly if cost or logistical considerations cause the delay.

One dispatcher recommends that her colleagues try not to take the requesting party's anger, frustration or disappointment personally when they find it impossible to obtain the requested supplies and/or equipment. She recommends being honest by explaining to the requestor why the request cannot be filled rather than stringing them along and making them think it is possible to get what they want. She also recommends offering alternatives, if available, and asking if the people on the fire can accept other alternatives that may work. Finally, this experienced dispatcher recommends asking to borrow or share equipment from a less active fire. Everyone must try to work together when fires are spread out or resources are scarce.

Developing an Expanded Dispatch Team

Every time individuals accept an expanded dispatch assignment, they become part of a temporary team whose members often have little, or no, experience working together. One center manager remembers going out on a fire assignment to work with a large and diverse group of people at an expanded dispatch center. The expanded dispatch team included a district ranger, a graphic artist, a fleet manager, a resource area manager, a range technician, and a timber sale contracting officer. All personnel had dispatch qualifications and provided the core of the expanded dispatch staff. Working with people from such different backgrounds proved very challenging, but the center manager noted, "These folks did not get to where they were without being capable and intelligent people. It was a little bit intimidating for me as these 'well paid' people came in! They treated me with respect, even though I was a GS7 and they were GS12s or higher." The Incident Command System (ICS) provides the basis for success in these situations. ICS works well because it recognizes that personnel are there because of their skills, qualifications and training rather than their pay levels or rank.



Overcoming Challenges with ROSS

When the Resource Ordering and Status System (ROSS) became fully operational in 2003, everyone waited nervously to see how it would work. People had to jump in, and start working with the system as best they could. To do so, one dispatch center began with training and practice well before fire season. They worked out basic issues such as how to order, mobilize, and demobilize resources, practicing the most common elements of dispatching. Once ROSS was up and running, it actually ran fairly well. There were some speed problems but with patience and utilizing the more experienced users and the ROSS Helpdesk, the dispatch center overcame these obstacles. Younger personnel tend to pick up ROSS quickly, while the older personnel sometimes struggle, because they are used to doing hard copy resource orders. Once employees have some successes with ROSS and gain some trust and confidence that ROSS would work, "ROSS becomes a good friend."

Ordering managers and supply unit leaders, for the most part, are still using resource order forms for ordering resources, while expanded dispatch operations utilize ROSS. This happens for two reasons: 1) the lack of Internet access or slow connectivity speeds at incident command posts and 2) a lack of training in ROSS. Unfortunately, ROSS training is not a NWCG 100, 200, or even 300 level class. The ROSS Project Team has established ROSS partners in each geographical area, who, along with the ROSS Team, assist with training and provide oversight of ROSS classes.

Training has become better over time, but it appears that the frequency of ROSS training is now diminishing. ROSS training is now a prerequisite for the D-310 Support Dispatcher course. However, as one dispatcher points out, geographic area training centers do not sponsor ROSS training classes, dispatch centers do. Consequently, because people have irregular access to ROSS training, individuals on incident management teams often remain unfamiliar with ROSS. The Northwest Geographic Area is working to improve the situation by making more classes available. In the interim, each dispatch center must set up ROSS training refreshers and initial training classes.

Effective Practices

Verbal Communication Enhances ROSS

The creation and release of the Resource Ordering and Status System (ROSS) has truly changed how dispatch centers order, track and document incident resources. When used properly, ROSS provides a powerful tool. It has the ability to run reports in a matter of minutes that show either available or committed resources. ROSS provides the ability to share information and give an overall view of the resources. Dispatch centers can use the report options in ROSS to give a quick view of local, regional and national resources that might be available to an incident. For extended attack and expanded dispatch operations, the higher the comfort level people have with ROSS, the more ROSS can help them make decisions about resource availability. However, dispatchers need to remember that verbal communication must still take place, and that ROSS did not replace the need to communicate; it just replaced the paper order. It is very important to pick up the telephone and talk between dispatch centers. For an overview of ROSS go to: <http://ross.nwcg.gov/>



Daily Dispatch Briefings

Dispatch center personnel should conduct a short staff briefing every morning no matter how busy it is at the dispatch center. Unplug the telephones, give a brief situational overview and do short tests on situational awareness. Ask questions such as, "What was '6 Minutes for Safety' about today?", "What is our current preparedness level at local, regional, and national levels?" and "What will the weather do today and tomorrow?" This way, dispatchers are thinking about these various factors, not waiting to be told what is happening.

It is also effective to include discussions about what expanded dispatch is currently working on, priority orders, and what is actually happening on the fires that expanded dispatch is supporting. The person conducting the briefing should familiarize themselves with the fires they are supporting and walk the expanded dispatch personnel around a posted fire incident map, looking at each division. Also, look at the incident action plan every day to see where resources are located and whether they are assigned, staged or set to be released. During the briefing, point out some of the tactics being used on the fire, so that dispatchers can see where the resource orders they are filling are being used and how.

Documenting and Communicating

One dispatcher constantly reminds herself and others to "Document, Document, Document, Communicate, Communicate, Communicate," and believes one cannot over-stress the importance of documenting and communicating who, what, when, and where, in everything a dispatcher does. The dispatcher may not be "on the ground" making decisions, but dispatchers' actions, or lack of, can seriously affect the outcome of any incident. As a dispatcher, one must confidently multi-task, especially when working as an initial attack or aircraft dispatcher, and they must know their limitations, asking for help before becoming overloaded.

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Remaining Calm During Every Incident

When speaking over the radio or telephone a dispatcher must remain calm, no matter how bad the situation is or how stressed, frantic or panicked the person is on the other end. If a dispatcher breaks down, someone else must step in and take over the incident. Laugh often, take many breaks, go for walks, hold barbeques, work out; do anything possible to take the stress level down a notch.

Know Locations of Personnel

One experienced dispatcher strives to remain vigilant about knowing the whereabouts of all personnel she dispatches for, and teaches them the importance of always checking in. By adhering to this practice, the dispatch center always knows the firefighters' last known location if they fail to show up at the end of their shift.

Using a Dispatch SOP

It is important to have a complete set of standard operating procedures (SOP), contained in a book, in every dispatch office. This allows a person to pick up the book and proceed step by step, using clear, layman's terms. Keep the SOP book simple so that visiting dispatchers can pick it up and use it. Dispatchers should be able to quickly find phone lists, know how to do morning briefings, and find search and rescue resources, among other information. One dispatcher tells of going to another dispatch center to help in initial attack dispatch because a dispatcher was going on maternity leave. The incoming dispatcher had to learn the ropes of the office very quickly because the outgoing dispatcher went into early labor. Unfortunately, the office SOPs were not yet in place. This experience prompted the visiting dispatcher to write SOPs for their home unit once they returned. The dispatcher emphasizes that SOPs must be very thorough and user friendly.

Adopting an Effective Tool or Practice

One dispatcher always tries to bring something useful back to their home unit, something that makes operations smoother, whenever they travel to another dispatch center. For example, the dispatcher used to keep a written dispatch log on a clip board. After traveling to another dispatch center where they used a tri-fold card, the dispatcher brought this practice back to their home unit. The tri-fold has space to list resources and complexity levels on one side and room to take notes on the other, and is given to crews as they go out on initial attack. Each tri-fold documents a single incident, rather than listing many incidents on a single log. This practice allows dispatchers to keep critical information in one place. When a given fire ends, the tri-fold travels to the Fire Management Officer to help them complete their report. To view a sample of the tri-fold card, go to: http://www.wildfirelessons.net/documents/IC_fire_organizer.doc

Team Communication in Dispatch

It is important to ensure that the dispatch center staff works together as a team and that everyone communicates well with one another. Without strong teamwork and communication, a dispatch center ends up with several people in the room, all with different pieces of information, running in different directions. When this happens, a significant amount of time and effort is wasted. When a new dispatch center supervisor first arrives at a dispatch center, they should first explain to the staff the vision of open communication and the importance of working together as a team. Prepare them to remain situationally aware, ready to listen to what is going on with one another, and willing to offer help or suggestions if another dispatcher needs it. Each dispatcher has an area of expertise, such as aircraft dispatching, and is normally assigned to that desk. They typically have enough training and knowledge to also cover the other desks when needed.

Sending Resources to Other Units

Most dispatch centers send their home unit personnel to off-unit assignments. When one dispatch center in Michigan sends personnel on wildland fires, they give them a minimum of three telephone numbers in the home dispatch center to contact if there are any problems, or if issues arise. Normally, when resources are mobilized, they become the receiving unit's concern. This office turns it around so that they make sure they get there, as well as come back safely.

Assessing Skill Level of Dispatchers

One dispatcher recommends interviewing people as they come into an expanded dispatch to assess their skill level. He points out that about 50 percent of people in expanded dispatch have little or no experience, and advises pairing them with more experienced people. In his experience, it does not take long to figure out who may need extra help.

This dispatcher points out the importance of mentoring new dispatch personnel and understanding how this mentoring helps maintain continuity in the center. He recalled one assignment at a Geographic Area Coordination Center helping with the phones. After awhile, the manager there became a mentor to this dispatcher and encouraged him to get more involved with dispatching, and consider it as a career choice. Eventually he became qualified as a coordinator, and was asked to mentor some other interested personnel. This dispatcher supported two others individuals by getting them into classes, monitoring their assignments, and helping them to succeed in their professions.

Pressing Safety Issues

Monitoring Employee Stress Levels

Stress, and the impacts of stress, represents a serious safety issue among dispatchers. The job requires a great deal of attention to detail. The results of dispatchers' actions impact others and there exists little margin for error. Fire situations can quickly escalate regardless of whether dispatch centers are poorly funded and/or understaffed. Consequently, dispatch centers sometimes have one or two individuals that must be on call 24/7. This situation causes burnout and fatigue. Dispatchers need to realize that they cannot always personally fill an order or solve the problem. They need to be able to recognize when to ask for help, and the rest of the dispatch team needs to be willing to help when asked. They also need to have a sense of humor so that they can handle the associated stress.

One dispatcher advises that dispatch center supervisors make safety the number one priority by monitoring employee stress levels and potential burnout. He recommends encouraging people to take an hour lunch to get away from their desks and enabling them to leave dispatch centers which often lack windows. Dispatchers suffer from a different sort of fatigue than firefighters. Though engine crews typically work longer hours, they experience much change and variety throughout the day. This dispatcher recommends that center managers try to keep shifts in the dispatch center to a 12 hour maximum to avoid burnout.

Emergency Communications

In order to remain effective, dispatchers must be able to communicate from initial attack dispatch centers to the incidents and the field-going resources they are supporting. Positive communications with dispatch provide field going resources with a lifeline to emergency help, should the need arise. Lack of radio communication interoperability with cooperators, especially rural fire departments, presents a serious safety concern. Trying to manage these interoperability issues from the dispatch center can prove difficult. Unfortunately, these communication issues cannot be solved locally and need to be addressed nationally.

Following the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, the Department of Homeland Security and its Federal Emergency Management Agency planned to re-write policies and procedures concerning dispatching and communications. It seems that a proactive approach was required for several issues. Radio communications provide one example. One state is going to the 800 Megahertz radio system. However, it has proven impossible to get their federal cooperators converted, and radio communication interoperability between agencies suffers. One dispatcher recommends that the Department of Homeland Security develops the emergency communications system. According to this dispatcher, emergency responders should be able to go anywhere in the United States and immediately use their radios.

Exchanging Identities and Frequencies

Dispatchers often operate like a kind of air traffic controller, using the automated flight following software application, in conjunction with 15 minute positive radio check-ins. This practice is especially critical on fires bordering the dispatch center's jurisdiction. One experienced dispatcher recommends following the general rule that when any fire is within five miles of the center's jurisdiction, the center needs to contact the other dispatch operations centers to exchange identifiers and frequencies needed to maintain contact.

Budget Constraints and Staffing

Many dispatch offices are understaffed due to either budget constraints or because they lack support from local units. Consequently, when fire activity is on the rise, dispatch centers bring in outside dispatch assistance. According to one experienced dispatcher, this practice works well to staff expanded dispatch operations, but has no place on the initial attack side of dispatch, particularly since temporary personnel lack familiarity with place names and people, and that lack of familiarity has a negative impact on the efficiency of radio communications. Having a knowledgeable and consistent presence on the radio during emergencies and emerging incidents proves necessary for uncomplicated communications to occur. All dispatch areas have certain nuances and unique concerns that one cannot teach a temporary dispatcher.

Since it takes about two weeks to become familiar with place names, frustration can build, not only for the dispatcher, but also for the incident commanders they serve. This dispatcher finds it easier to bring outsiders into expanded dispatch because they benefit from an established relationship between the incident and the permanent dispatcher.

