



Understanding Wildfire Response

Morgan Russell, Assistant Professor and Extension Range Specialist
D. Galloway, Texas A&M Forest Service

When wildfires erupt the first response in most areas is to attack the blaze with all necessary resources. Wildfire suppression activity—particularly on large fires or during periods of high fire danger—can quickly involve multiple jurisdictions, large numbers of responders and a variety of equipment. However, unless the attack is well coordinated, opportunities may be lost even though there was adequate manpower and equipment available. To properly coordinate a multi-jurisdictional response, it is critical that all participants use a standard terminology and have a common understanding of how operations will be conducted. These terms and operational structures are described below.

Initial Attack

1. When a fire occurs, local fire departments (volunteer, municipal and combination) are typically notified through 911 dispatching and respond with available resources and personnel to extinguish the fire.
2. Local officials should work to notify landowners of the affected property - providing fire information such as size, location, rate of spread and values lost or at risk. Depending on local protocols, Emergency Management Coordinators (EMC) may be notified of the fire's location, assessment, and request for additional resources.

3. Fire departments, law enforcement, and other emergency responders will coordinate local resources and communications to ensure a safe, effective, and tactical plan for suppression efforts. In some cases, landowners may be involved in the coordination. If landowners are engaged in fire suppression efforts, fire officers will coordinate with them to effectively utilize their equipment and ensure safe operations. Landowners can also provide important information on values at risk, best access routes, oil and gas distribution lines, and available water sources near the fire.
4. Mutual aid with neighboring jurisdictions is also utilized to provide additional resources and fire size or intensity increases.

Resources arriving on scene

5. All resources arriving at an incident should check-in and receive an incident briefing. The briefing should commensurate with the incident complexity. This initial briefing should also serve to establish the incident management structure and the Incident Commander (IC). Resources will then engage in fire suppression as directed.
6. The county, city, or fire departments should have established procedures and/or agreements to request and incorporate additional resources from neighboring

jurisdictions, also known as mutual aid. The request for additional resources should be made by the IC and will typically flow back to the 911/county dispatch. As the incident expands, the IC can involve local authorities such as the fire marshal, sheriff, or other designee to provide communications for landowners or others affected by the fire.

Incident Command System (ICS) expansion involving multi-jurisdictional resources

7. If the fire activity exceeds local fire suppression resources and/or directly threatens human life or structures, the Texas A&M Forest Service (TFS) may be requested by the IC through the county EMC or county judge. This would typically be formalized through the disaster district coordinator (DPS Highway Patrol) or Texas Department of Emergency Management district coordinator using a State of Texas Resource (STAR) request. Issuing the request for State of Texas resources may be made via WebEOC, hard copy fax, or email through the Texas Department of Public Safety District Disaster Committee (DDC). The primary DDC contact for the local IC will be the TDEM District Coordinator. TFS (and resources operating under their control) have statutory authority (Texas Code 88.102 and 88.104) for wildfire suppression and entry onto private property in the performance of these duties.
8. The local IC will remain in command until TFS resources arrive on scene. Upon arrival, TFS should coordinate with the local jurisdiction and authorities (ex. County Judge, EMC, Sheriff, Fire Chief, etc.). If the TFS becomes actively involved in suppression activity, local IC authority may be transitioned to TFS. However, it is preferred that Unified Command (UC) be established with local authorities.
9. Unified Command (UC) unfolds when ICS involves multiple jurisdictions or agencies. Unified Command enables institutions and agencies with different legal, geographic,

and functional responsibilities to coordinate, plan, and interact effectively.

County judge's Delegation of Authority/ Letter of Expectations to Texas A&M Forest Service

10. On very large or complex wildfires the County Judge may sign a Delegation of Authority or Letter of Expectations with the TFS that outlines the expectations from the local authority as resources transition to UC.

Transition of Incident Command

11. Any transitions in command (between individual IC's, jurisdictions, or to UC) will be clearly announced and communicated as they occur. When possible these transitions may be coordinated with shift-changes (operational periods) to reduce overall confusion of resources.

Unified Command (UC)

12. Typically during multi-jurisdictional incidents, UC is established by the entities with jurisdictional authority. In a UC structure, IC's designated by the jurisdictional authorities jointly determine objectives, plans, and priorities, and work together to execute them. The types and number of jurisdictional authorities involved may vary depending on the location, nature and size of the incident. For wildfires, UC may involve the TFS, local Fire Chief, Mayor, EMC and/or County Judge. ICs within the UC make joint decisions and speak with one voice, to organize responders into a unified team. UC should involve an integrated General Staff, such as a single Operations Section Chief to oversee tactical operations.
13. An Incident Action Plan (IAP) is developed for each operational period (typically every 24 hours) and published prior to the beginning of the operational period. The IAP is a key document that outlines objectives, assignments and tactical operations. The IAP is developed through the Incident Planning Process (Figure 2) and incorporates

the objectives, plans and priorities as developed by the UC organization.

14. All responders should operate within the UC structure and in accordance with the IAP to safely achieve the objectives set by UC.

Landowner Liaison Capability within Unified Command

15. During large fire incidents TFS may activate Landowner Liaisons through existing agreements with Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service, Texas Sheep and Goat Raisers Association, and Texas Southwestern Cattle Raisers Association. These cooperators have agreed to provide trained landowner liaisons to participate in the IC planning process. They enhance communication between landowners and the UC by providing information regarding the situation, and landowner priorities, values, and concerns.

After Action Review

16. Following a wildfire, responders should conduct an after action review (AAR). The AAR is an opportunity for responders to review the incident, discuss operations, and identify possible improvements for future responses.
17. During large wildfires that affect multiple landowners and communities, numerous public meetings should be scheduled throughout the incident to inform residents. These should include question and answer periods that allow residents to gather information and express concerns.

Prevention, Mitigation and Preparedness

The items listed above describe wildfire suppression operations when wildfires occur. However, many of the most effective measures you can take need to take place before a wildfire starts.

Recommendations include:

- Landowners should establish defensible space around their homes and structures and have a personal evacuation plan. Home protection and other safety measures can be found online at: http://texasforests.tamu.edu/Protect_Your_Home/
- Local responders should have up-to-date contact lists for emergency officials, land managers and agency personnel as well as established mutual aid agreements and protocols
- All responders should be familiar with the Incident Command System and the national framework of incident management, including Unified Command
- Everyone (including firefighters, local decision makers and the public) should stay informed and base their decisions on current weather, fire danger, fire behavior and spread
- Unified operations, coordination of response activities and efficient communication are critical to effective and safe wildfire suppression operations

Nomenclature

AAR - After action review
DDC - Department of Public Safety district disaster committee
EMC - Emergency management coordinators
IAP - Incident action plan
IC - Incident commander
ICS - Incident command system
STAR - State of Texas resource request
TFS - Texas Forest Service
UC - Unified command

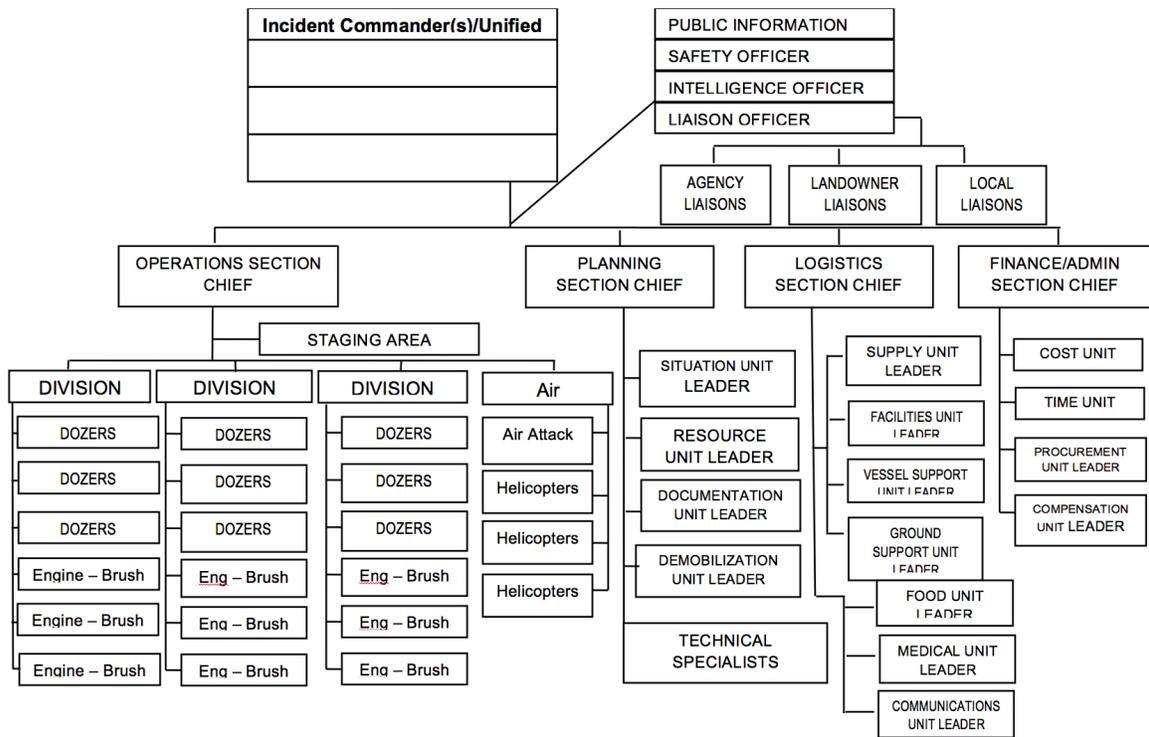


Figure 1. A breakdown of the Unified Command (UC) structure involving different sections responsible for operations, planning, logistics, and finance/admin responsibilities on a wildfire.

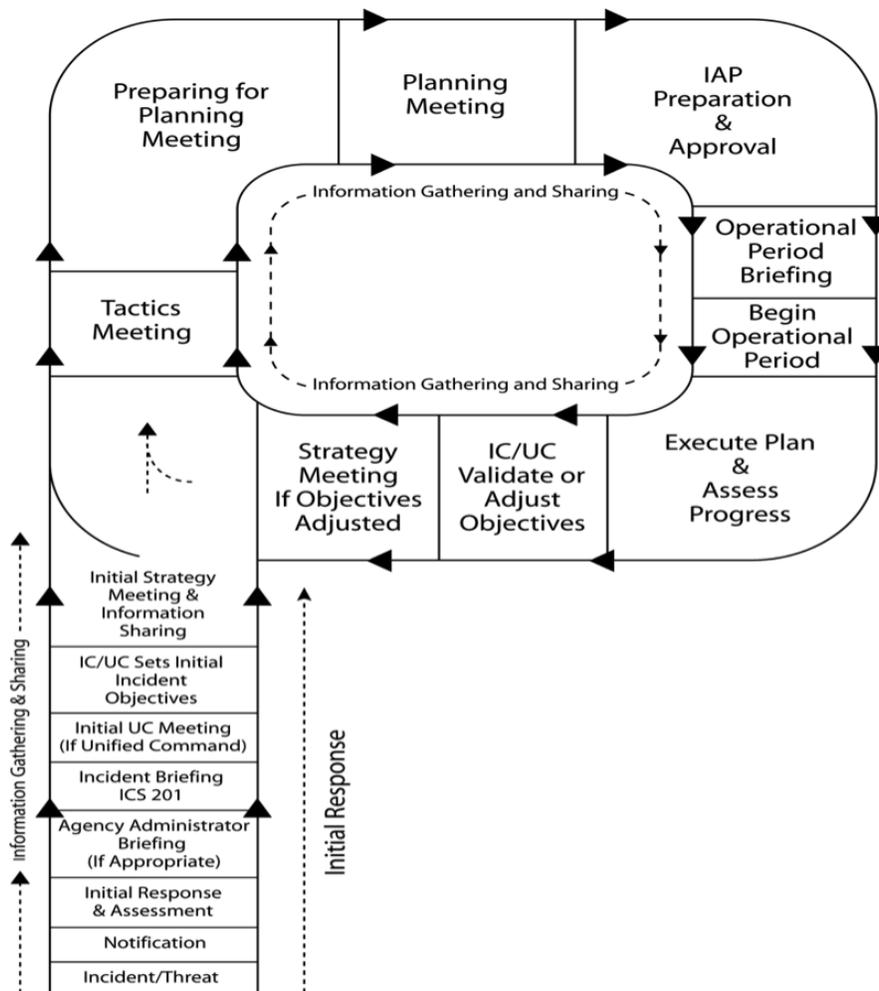


Figure 2. An example of the daily schedule for ICS/UC Planning where an Incident Action Plan (IAP) is developed for the next 24-hr operational period and published prior to shift operations.

Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service

AgriLifeExtension.tamu.edu

More Extension publications can be found at *AgriLifeBookstore.org*

Texas A&M AgriLife Extension provides equal opportunities in its programs and employment to all persons, regardless of race, color, sex, religion, national origin, disability, age, genetic information, veteran status, sexual orientation, or gender identity.

The Texas A&M University System, U.S. Department of Agriculture, and the County Commissioners Courts of Texas Cooperating.

New