



Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation
Fire Protection
COVID-19 Recommended Actions and Guidance



MT DNRC COVID-19 Fire Response Framework

*****THIS DOCUMENT WILL BE SUBJECT TO ROUTINE UPDATES*****





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DNRC Fire Response Framework

Effective Date: **4/27/2020** or until Modified/Rescinded

Agency Intent

The agency intent for the Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation's fire preparedness, COVID-19 mitigation actions, and COVID-19 precautions in the state's fire operations are that:

- The DNRC's mission critical work, including suppressing wildfires, will continue with appropriate risk management strategies consistent with current guidance from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and state health safety guidelines regarding COVID-19 mitigation.
- The DNRC is committed to engaging in local and statewide COVID-19 emergency response while prioritizing and balancing our responsibilities to execute our mission critical duties.
- The best way to mitigate COVID-19 exposure throughout our fire operations is to maintain our capacity to do what we do best—succeed on initial attack, build the capacity of our local partners, and support our federal partners in doing the same.
- Community preparedness and fire prevention will play a critical role leading up to the 2020 Fire Season to reduce firefighter exposure and reduce nonessential interactions.
- Management of wildfire is inherently interagency, and we are working to align national plans with ongoing efforts across Montana and the Northern Rockies Geographic Area.

Introduction & Purpose

The DNRC is charged by state statute with providing wildland fire protection for state and private lands in Montana. The Department intends to continue its mission critical work, including that of responding to and suppressing wildland fires to protect Montanan's lives, property, and natural resources. Maintaining our capacity to execute mission critical fire response services while simultaneously minimizing and mitigating risks associated with COVID-19 for our employees, their families, and the public we serve will prove challenging. The guidance contained in this document represents initial actions the DNRC will undertake in maintaining our successful fire response framework and adapting it to an already complex operating environment made more complex by the outbreak of COVID-19 and precautions to contain it.

Since fire response represents an inherently dynamic and interagency effort, this guidance provides a framework for our fire response operations, not a set of instructions intended to provide direction for every circumstance. There will be instances that our current direction or policy does not anticipate. Our managers and supervisors should use their best judgement to implement the overarching goal to *maintain our fire response capacity, redeem our statutorily mandated services to Montana's citizens, and minimize and mitigate risks associated with COVID-19 for our employees, their families, and the public we serve.*

This interim guidance is based on what is currently known about COVID-19 and founded on CDC recommendations for the minimal to moderate community COVID-19 transmission currently occurring in the State of Montana and complimentary guidance is in development. In addition, since fire response in Montana is an inherently interagency undertaking, our efforts must align as much as possible with our key response partners from local, tribal, and federal governments. The DNRC will update this interim guidance as needed or as additional information becomes available. Additional strategies may be needed if a substantial increase in COVID-19 transmission occurs, as fire conditions change, as interagency efforts come into focus, and as resources draw down.



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Wildland Fire Response Intent

1. Firefighter and public safety is and always will be our highest priority. All decisions about how to engage a fire will be based on maintaining the safety of our personnel and the public we serve. This year, that means safety from the usual variety of risks fire personnel face and COVID-19 exposure.
2. Maintain our capacity to do what we do best—succeed on initial attack, build the capacity of our local partners, and support our federal partners.
3. We operate a unified, statewide wildfire protection program. We implement that program in two major ways and at multiple locations, but we are one program guided by a single doctrine. That will not change during the COVID-19 epidemic. We will use direct protection resources as surge capacity in areas of County Coop fire protection and we will continue to rely on both our local and federal government partners to succeed in areas of both coop and direct protection.
4. Focus on effective initial attack and containing all fires within the first operational period. We are committed to aggressive initial attack, in part, because we want to minimize risk exposure to our personnel and the public by keeping fires as small as possible and their duration as short as possible.
5. We maintain an exemplary safety record built on a foundation of excellent training, effective leadership and active supervision. Assure that fire response personnel are well and prepared – adapt training delivery using technology and alternative training methods as much as possible.
6. Staff dispatch and coordination centers to assure adequate coverage and have an effective alternate dispatching system in place should a COVID-19 outbreak disrupt dispatch center operations.
7. Re-position resources from low fire hazard/fire occurrence areas to high fire hazard/occurrence areas as necessary. Enhance wildfire response preparedness in areas more likely to experience large, long-duration wildfires and/or structure loss.
8. We succeed through partnerships and cooperation; and magnify our own effectiveness and the effectiveness of our partners through interagency effort. In a time when staffing may become short and resources from outside the geographic area hard to obtain, maintaining our interagency partnerships will be more important than ever. Maintain frequent communications with agency partners and share resources. Coordinate response actions and procedures related to COVID-19 with interagency partners and cooperators. Do not assume business as usual. Current mutual-aid agreements may not prove reliable during the COVID-19 epidemic. Communicate daily with your mutual-aid cooperators or partners to understand their situation and how you can help one another.
9. Make use of severity funding to maintain and enhance IA capacity as conditions merit. We value cost-effectiveness and strive to provide efficient, effective services without making unnecessary expenditures; keep that core value in mind. However, we also often spend money to save money; incurring costs to keep fires as small as possible and their duration as short as possible.

Protect the Workforce

An outbreak of COVID-19 within the fire protection workforce with a corresponding loss of individuals from service will, in even a moderate fire year, severely limit our capacity as well as the capacity of our local government, tribal, and federal partners to maintain an adequate wildfire response. Consequently, our goals are to:

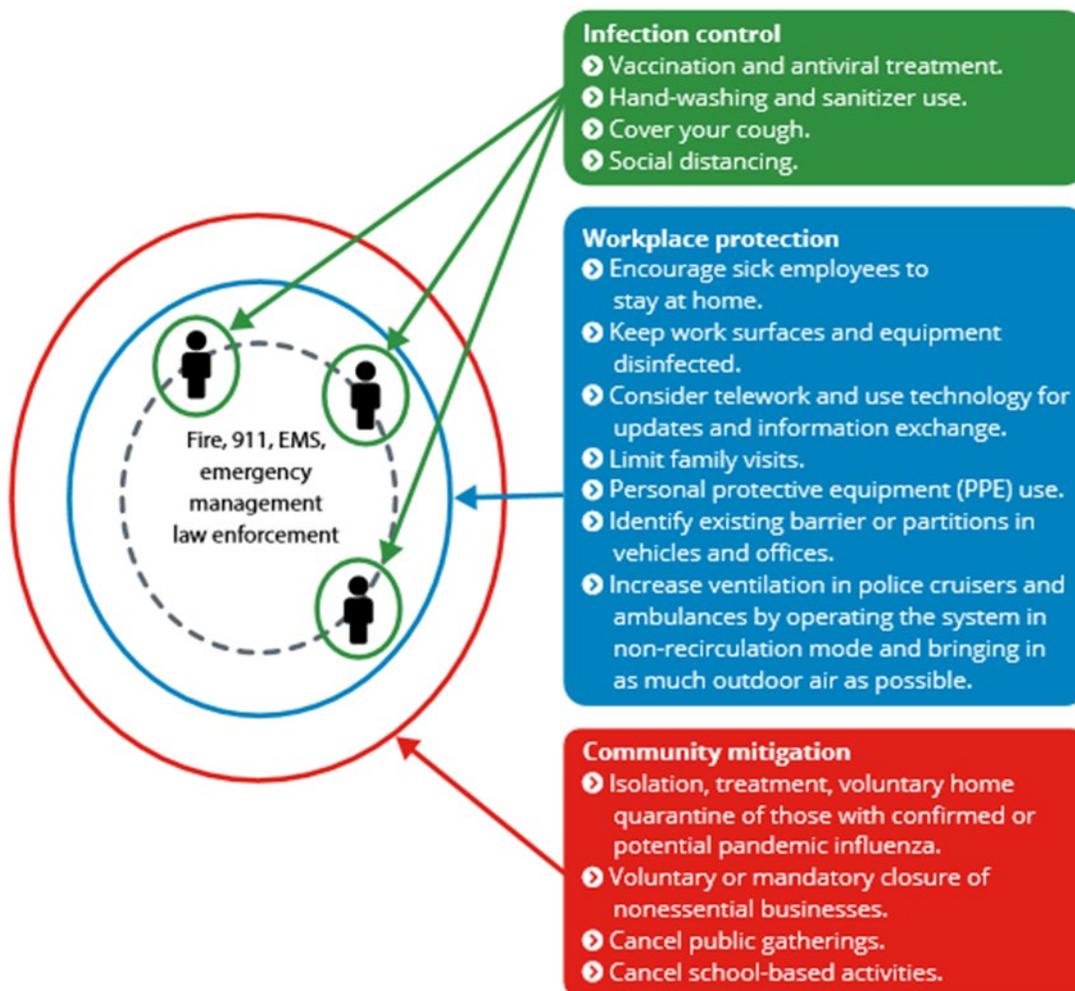
- Limit personnel exposure to infectious disease and disease transmission
- Maintain an essential level of service and continuity of operation



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A common security concept is that of layered defense or layered protection. The goal is to create multiple layers of protective measures against exposure to the virus for the first responder. The more layers of protection, the better protected our people will be. For first responders, the goal is to protect the emergency service or function that is performed by the emergency service responder. The responders, in turn, protect their families, their workplaces and the community at large. Better-protected first responders are thereby better able to protect their communities.





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1. Continue to monitor local information about COVID-19 in your community. Refer to the following Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services link for information:
<https://dphhs.mt.gov/publichealth/cdepi/diseases/coronavirusmt>
2. CDC website link: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-nCoV/>
3. Continue to monitor and follow CDC recommendations and the State of Montana guidance.
4. Adopt an “insulate the module as one” concept. Due to the nature of our business, wildland firefighters are often unable to maintain recommended social distances when accomplishing our mission. It is crucial for modules to stay healthy as a unit, so think of each module (engine, helitack module, etc.) as one individual/family unit. This is not different from our desire to insulate our families at home from COVID-19. DNRC Fire COVID-19 Protocols are intended to provide multiple layers of protections and implementing these actions together will help ensure the health of our fire protection workforce.
5. Ensure employees are completing the twice daily **DNRC Daily Health Monitoring and Self-Screening Protocol** and based on local work Unit direction.
6. Insulate mission-critical fire staff (including dispatchers, engine and aviation crews and support staff) from the general public, office staff, and nonessential partners. This may mean restricting certain areas and creating physical separation between modules, support functions and other mission essential functions. Consider designating restrooms, breakrooms and traditionally shared spaces, if practical, for specific functions. DNRC Fire Facility Access Control Protocol will be forthcoming.
7. Most importantly, impress upon DNRC fire crews the personal responsibility during off hours to reduce the potential of bring the virus into the workplace. Provide clear leader’s intent and expectations of fire staff on their off-duty responsibilities to protect themselves and their crews from exposure. Refer to DNRC Fire Off-Duty Expectations (will be forthcoming)

Operational Best Practices

Preparedness Activities

1. Physical training (PT) should be conducted outdoors rather than using indoor training facilities. Stagger PT time for modules if necessary. Strictly maintain social distancing in shared locker rooms and ensure shared facilities are thoroughly sanitized. Refer to the Facilities and Equipment Cleaning Protocol for specific guidance on sanitizing shared facilities.
2. Daily readiness activities (operational briefings, safety meetings, weather reports, staffing plans) should be done in well ventilated facilities or outdoors while meeting or exceeding current social distancing guidelines.
3. Consider remote work options for modules once preparedness activities are complete. Position resources where they can isolate themselves from unnecessary contact with others.
4. Use alternative methods to present and attend training. Maintain social distancing to the maximum extent possible when training together.
5. Clean and disinfect work areas and vehicles frequently and between operational periods. Make necessary cleaning supplies readily available. Refer to the Facilities and Equipment Cleaning Protocol for specific guidance.
6. Maintain adequate stocking levels of PPE and cleaning materials, coordinate ordering to minimize orders and share limited resources.

Dispatch/Coordination Centers

Distance dispatch personnel from one other and isolate them from outside contacts. Maintain the “insulate the module as one” concept. Only personnel with essential dispatch functions should be allowed in dispatch facilities (See **DNRC Fire Facility Access Control Protocol** or defer to specific IDC protocols)



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When feasible, rotate members through remote work assignments to limit exposure time. Utilize remote/telework operations as much as possible.

Ensure availability of sufficient laptops, cell phones, and mobile base station radios to operate dispatch functions remotely from Area/Unit/Field Offices if required. Ensure back-up communications and dispatch systems are available and working.

Increase cleaning and disinfecting schedule for dispatch consoles, facilities and all telework equipment. Refer to the **DNRC Fire Facility and Equipment Cleaning Protocol** or the following CDC link for more detailed information:

https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/disinfecting-building-facility.html?CDC_AA_refVal=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.cdc.gov%2Fcoronavirus%2F2019-ncov%2Fprepare%2Fdisinfecting-building-facility.html

Aviation Operations Considerations

1. The potential for limited ground resource availability may require more frequent and earlier use of aviation assets including both rotor and fixed wing aircraft.
2. Increase State/Federal coordination and cooperation for the prioritization of aircraft use.
3. Aviation modules (pilots, flight crews, fuel truck drivers, mechanics) should self-quarantine whenever possible with limited public contact. Maintain the “insulate the module as one” mentality. See **DNRC Fire Facility Access Control Protocols**.
4. Increase use of electronic situational awareness tools for briefings Collector, Google Hangouts, Zoom Meetings).

Vehicle and Aircraft Occupancy

Vehicle Occupancy

We require multi-person teamwork to make effective and efficient use of our engines, water tenders and other equipment. In addition, driving remains one of the highest-risk activities in which our personnel engage and increasing the number of vehicles and drivers on the road to accommodate social distancing represents an undesirable risk trade-off. Finally, recent experience has shown that increasing the number of fire response vehicles to accommodate social distancing created dangerous congestion on the fire ground. Consequently, the DNRC will allow more than one person to occupy a vehicle (including command and support vehicles as necessary) when engaged in mission-critical fire protection work. When necessary to have more than one occupant in a vehicle the following guidelines apply:

1. No one who has had a known exposure to a COVID 19 patient will be allowed in a vehicle with others without having first served a period of quarantine and achieved the Department’s Return to Work Protocol (and should be quarantined.)
2. No one displaying any symptoms of COVID 19 (fever, cough, shortness of breath) will be allowed in a vehicle with others (and should be quarantined.) Employees should complete **DNRC Fire Daily Health Monitoring and Self-Screening Protocols**
3. Supervisors will minimize, to the extent possible, the number of individuals traveling in one vehicle.
4. Minimize the amount of time multiple personnel are in a single vehicle.
5. Maintain ventilation in vehicle cab, weather permitting, by keeping windows cracked and fresh air fan on.

Aircraft Occupancy

- Refer to the MT DNRC COVID-19 Helicopter Operations Protocol



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Vehicle Cleaning

Reference the **DNRC Fire Facility and Fire Equipment Cleaning Protocol** and the Montana Department of Transportation Vehicle Disinfecting Guidelines when performing cleaning and disinfecting of DNRC vehicles. Vehicle/heavy equipment

high touch points:

- Exterior door handles
- Start/Stop button
- Steering wheel — including buttons
- Touchscreen
- Center console — outside only
- Key fob
- Gear Selectors and gearshift levers
- Radio/HVAC Areas
- Seat Belt Buckle
- Hydraulic controls on equipment
- Other – Depending on vehicle or equipment, ensure all other key touchpoints are wiped down.

Other Operational Best Practices

1. Emphasize strategies with low resource demand and high likelihood of success.
2. Increase use of heavy equipment and aviation resources to increase IA success.
3. Conduct radio or remote briefings for incoming resources instead of face-to-face briefings.
4. Plan operations to reduce smoke exposure. This includes limiting mop-up to the minimum amount necessary for a fire to remain contained.
5. Do not share PPE, flight helmets, radios or other equipment.
6. Use single-serve sack or boxed meals, take-out, drive-through, MRE, etc. instead of dining in restaurants.
7. Provide plenty of handwashing stations, hand sanitizer and disinfecting wipes.
8. Allow state owned response vehicles to be taken home to facilitate fire response. Seek approval in advance.



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Large Fire Considerations

Co-Management of Large Fire

The DNRC Fire Protection Program is operating under interim direction/guiding principles for co-management of wildfires. The intent is that, whenever multiple protection areas are affected due to the location of a fire, or when fire spread from one protection area to another protection area is imminent or appears likely, the involved protection agencies will immediately consult with adjacent fire protection entities, including local government, and enable them to share in the planning and decision-making processes whenever a fire has the potential to impact another protection area or agency with differing land management or fire protection objectives. This intent will not change during the COVID-19 epidemic and we will continue to operate under our existing interim direction. At least one interagency partner indicates that, as a COVID-19 mitigation, they may limit their fire response; including allowing some remote fires to burn without suppression intervention or with very limited intervention. For that reason, our commitment to early engagement and to executing our interim direction will remain a priority for DNRC line officers.

Fire Camps (pending NRCG guidance)

Fire camps can create an ideal environment for the transmission of infectious diseases including high-density living/working conditions, a highly mobile workforce, and situations where social distancing requirements are unattainable. These factors and other environmental and occupational factors (smoke, heat, fatigue, physically demanding work) can increase the likelihood of disease transmission. Until NRCG and/or national direction on the management of fire camps comes into focus, the DNRC will work with assigned incident commanders to implement the following:

1. Operate IMT functions remotely to minimize the number of people in camp whenever practical.
2. Use closed camps.
3. Use non-traditional fire camp layouts with an emphasis on facilitating social distancing.
4. Eat and brief outdoors and designate larger areas than normal to assure proper social distancing.
5. No buffet style service or food lines. All meals to be individually packaged. Do not allow self-serve eating.
6. Maintain social distancing in camp dining area.
7. Consider having resources dine in areas distant from one another.
8. If using common eating areas, consider eating in shifts and cleaning between shifts.
9. Maintain ice chest/cooler cleanliness by cleaning hands prior to use.
10. Camps should be designed so crews can maintain separation from each other.
11. Consider separate "pods" for each module, to include sleeping areas, restroom facilities, and eating areas.
12. Consider having each module maintain self-sufficiency.
13. Use remote/radio briefings and/or expand briefing areas to accommodate social distancing.
14. Order extra handwashing stations, hand sanitizer and portable restrooms. Consider shower and laundry units.

Off-Unit Assignments

In the interest of maintaining a robust and effective statewide and interagency fire response system, the DNRC will continue to mobilize personnel to off-unit incidents consistent with resource availability, local needs, and established drawdown plans. Doing so requires DNRC personnel to travel both throughout the state and outside the state, potentially increasing their risk to COVID-19 exposure. Consistent with our desire to both maintain our capacity to provide mission critical services as well as minimize and mitigate risks associated with COVID-19 for our employees, their families, and the public we serve; DNRC resources will adhere to the following guidelines.

Pre-Mobilization

Supervisors should ensure personnel have no present symptoms of illness using the **DNRC Fire Daily Health Monitoring and Self-Screening Protocol** (meets the *FMB Wildland Fire COVID-19 Screening Tool*) prior to consideration of incident



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assignments. In addition to this initial screen, Supervisors should inform personnel going on assignments of ongoing routine daily screening on all incidents during COVID-19.

During Assignment

During assignment, DNRC personnel will cooperate with all COVID-19 precautions instituted by the hosting unit and/or their incident management team.

Post-Mobilization

Personnel returning from off-unit fire assignments will follow the **DNRC Fire Daily Health Monitoring and Self-Screening Protocol** and run through an assessment with their supervisor prior to re-entering the workplace and engage in the Daily Health Monitoring and Self-Screening Protocol once in the workplace (see Fire Protection Workforce Onboarding Protocols.)

Complementary DNRC Fire COVID-19 Protocols

- DNRC Fire Protection Workforce Onboarding Protocols
- DNRC Fire Daily Health and Self-Screening Protocol
- DNRC Fire Facility and Equipment Cleaning Protocols
- DNRC Fire Facility Access Control Protocol (in draft 4/29/20)
- DNRC Fire Off-Duty Expectations (in draft 4/29/20)