



## Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation Program Guidance for the Co-Management of Wildland Fire

**Finalized 4/26/2023 \*\*\*This is a living document. Occasional updates and adjustments should be expected\*\*\***

### Introduction

DNRC's intent is to strengthen interagency performance and relationships by improving our collective ability to co-manage fires that have the potential to impact DNRC fire protection and/or jurisdictional boundaries.

In Montana, interagency cooperation is guided by individual agency policy and the Montana Master Cooperative Wildland Fire Management Agreement. Lands for which the State is responsible for wildland fire protection in Montana, and the lands for which the respective Federal Agencies are responsible, are intermingled or adjacent in some areas, and wildland fires on these intermingled or adjacent lands may present a threat to the lands of the other. There are instances when DNRC and federal agencies protect each other's lands through offset agreements; this can complicate working relationships when federal agencies have management objectives other than full suppression. DNRC seeks to work with our partner agencies to achieve our respective missions, interests, and needs even when they are different.

### Planning and Pre-season Discussions

Before the season begins, our line officers and their respective fire staff will engage with our partners to strengthen existing relationships, and reenforce the DNRC mission while simultaneously learning and respecting their mission. Discussion should focus on common ground where we can find avenues to support each other's mission. Discussions will be ongoing during fire season to deliver one singular message to ICs and teams with agreement on how follow-up will be performed. We will resolve any conflict that arises through the trust built through relationships and guided by strong leadership.

#### Key pre-season discussion questions to have with our partners may include:

- Have we developed a common understanding of values to be protected by answering:
  - What is important?
  - Why is it important?
  - Who is it important to?
  - And how important is it?

Sub-Geographic Area Operating Plans are considered supplements to the Montana Master Cooperative Wildland Fire Management and Statewide Operating Plan. These local Sub-Geo plans provide the most appropriate place to document each partners' commitments to one another in the co-management of wildfire. This includes:

- Specific Protection Responsibilities
- Fire Notifications (Boundary Line Fires, Independent Actions)
- Response to Wildland Fire
- Decision Processes and Decision Documentation
- Cooperation (Response, Communications, Delegation of Authority, Investigations)
- Communications and Public Information Responsibilities



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### When a Wildfire Incident Occurs

Each applicable agency should be involved in developing the strategy, tactics, and mitigation actions to be used for a fire that is likely to impact their protection area. If the spread of fire to another protection area is imminent or appears likely, the agencies will identify financial responsibilities, cost share methodologies, and document the decisions and rationale. If an agreement cannot be reached regarding financial responsibilities, discussion will be elevated to the next level agency administrators for the respective agencies.

#### We ask DNRC staff to engage with our partners during an incident to:

- Identify fires of mutual interest in their initial stages, or as early as possible to increase coordination and communication amongst co-managing agencies.
- Engage partners in the initial stages of a fire to discuss overall objectives, strategy, and risks that may impact the State's interest.

Discussions should continue throughout the life of the fire to assure all affected agencies can achieve their respective missions, interests, and needs. We ask our line officers and their respective fire staff to work with partners to engage adjacent fire protection entities and jurisdictional authorities. This includes local government, to enable them to share in the planning and decision-making processes when a fire may impact their jurisdiction or communities.

#### Key discussion questions to have with your partners may include:

- What is or were the initial response actions on this fire, and why?
- Were risk management decisions (strategic, operational, or real time) made during or after the initial response on this fire? What conditions were present that led you to that decision?
- What objectives are being considered or established for this incident? And what strategy or strategies are being employed to achieve those objectives?
- What are or where are the critical values considered when developing the strategy or strategies?
- How is risk management incorporated into decision making? Are we considering transfer of risk to neighboring entities or future firefighting resources if the fire leaves this jurisdiction?
- How are we going to co-manage this fire and ensure the tactics and actions we choose are implemented on the ground?

#### Key questions we should be asking of ourselves:

- What direction are we (Agency Administrator/Line Officer or our authorized representatives) providing to our staff or IMT?
- Have we completed an Incident Situation Assessment? Does it align with the course of action published in a WFDSS?
- Do we agree if a cost share is appropriate?

DNRC leadership asks line officers to find mutual agreement with partners when resolving issues and conflict at the most principle level when possible. However, should a DNRC line officer feel uncertain of their position or support, they shall immediately engage the Area Manager who will work with their partners' leadership



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peers and/or the Fire Protection Bureau Chief/Forestry Division Administrator/Deputy to determine the appropriate avenues of resolution.

### Conversation/Discussion Logs

Keeping a record of relevant conversations and decisions made during the management of incidents is a valuable practice for line officers and fire staff. Like an ICS-214 form, a standardized conversation/discussion log should be initiated and maintained throughout the incident. Personnel should document how relevant incident activities are occurring and progressing, or any notable events, decisions or communications.

As a best management practice, maintaining these conversation/discussion logs using shared platforms (MS Teams, SharePoint, etc.) that allow for editing and transparency is encouraged. This is especially helpful for incidents spanning numerous jurisdictions, consecutive IMT rotations, and multiple/rotating line officers.

### Direction Specific to Cost Share Agreements

Development of the Cost Share Agreement shall be the joint responsibility of the agency administrators/line officers from the affected protection and/or jurisdictional agencies.

Sharing of fire costs should not be assumed. For the DNRC to enter into a cost-share agreement, it must be in the best interests of the State. We are not opposed to, nor trying to dictate, the land management objectives of other agencies; however, there are circumstances in which the DNRC should not pay to meet another agency's land management objectives.

Line Officers should always consider if a cost-share agreement is appropriate in certain circumstances. Examples include: 1) a multi-jurisdictional fire that is full suppression but has management strategies or tactics that don't meet DNRC's mission; 2) a fire that has a strategy other than full suppression that spreads to a protection area where it is unwanted. In these cases, it may require the agency who established the strategies and objectives to accept the full financial responsibility for those decisions. Line Officers should engage Area Managers and Bureau staff to determine if the state sharing costs is appropriate. It should also be noted that an initial cost-share agreement can change as the incident evolves and circumstances warrant. A long duration fire may justify State participation for some portion of incident, but not necessarily all of it, or that level of fiscal participation could change.

Should a DNRC line officer feel uncertain of their position or support, they shall immediately engage the Area Manager who will work with their partners leadership, peers, and/or the Fire Protection Bureau Chief/Forestry Division Administrator/Deputy.

If agreement cannot be reached regarding financial responsibilities, discussion will be elevated to the next level agency administrators/line officers for the respective agencies.

### Supplemental Incident Decision Document

There is a supplemental interagency template for archiving decisions made, located in the Northern Rockies Incident Business Toolbox, called a "[Northern Rockies Decision Document Template](#)" (not to be confused with the WFDSS and ISA). It is used when we enter a situation where we are jointly managing a fire that is either on



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multiple protection areas or is imminently likely to be. Development of the Document shall be the joint responsibility of the agency administrators/line officers from the affected protection and/or jurisdictional agencies.

The purpose of the document is to record the decisions and major actions of Agencies that have responsibilities related to the fire. This includes the who, what, why, when, and where to support those decisions, actions, and situations of disagreement. The decisions and rationale contained in this document will ultimately support the determination of whether costs are to be shared. If costs are to be shared, then a cost-share agreement will be developed and serve as an addendum to the decision document.

### Helpful Reference Information

- [DNRC Line Officer Tool Kit](#)
- [Wildland Fire Protection and History Map](#)
- [Wildfire Decision Support System \(WFDSS\)](#)
- [Risk Management Assistance Dashboard](#)
- [Incident Strategic Alignment Process](#)

### Strategy Definitions

For discussions surrounding the co-management of fire, the following definitions have been drawn from the glossary of the Montana Master Cooperative Wildland Fire Management Agreement:

**Fire Management Strategies:** Strategies available to wildfire agencies include: monitor, confine, point zone protection, and full suppression.

**Monitoring:** The orderly collection, analysis, and interpretation of environmental data to evaluate management's progress toward meeting objectives and to identify changes in natural systems particularly with regards to fuels, topography, weather, fire behavior, fire effects, smoke, and fire location. This may be done onsite, from a nearby or distant vantage point in person, for example, the work done by Fire Effects Monitor (FEMO) or Field Observer (FOBS) positions or by using a sensor, or through remote sensing (aircraft or satellite).

**Confine:** Restrict the wildfire within determined boundaries, established either prior to, or during the fire. These identified boundaries will restrict the fire, with no action being taken to put the fire out.

**Point or Zone Protection:** A wildfire response strategy which protects specific assets or highly valued resources from the wildfire without directly halting the continued spread of the wildfire.

**Full Suppression:** A strategy to "put the fire out," as efficiently and effectively as possible, while providing for firefighter and public safety. To complete a Fireline around a fire to halt fire spread and cool down all hot spots that are immediate threats to control line, or outside the perimeter, until the lines can reasonably be expected to hold under foreseeable conditions. Full suppression is synonymous with "Full Perimeter Control" and "Control."



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**Response to Wildland Fire:** The mobilization of the necessary services and responders to a fire based on ecological, social, and legal consequences, the circumstances under which a fire occurs, and the likely consequences on firefighter and public safety and welfare, natural and cultural resources, and values to be protected.

**Strategic:** Strategic elements of incident management are characterized by continuous, long-term, high-level planning by organizations headed by elected or other senior officials. These elements involve the adoption of long-range goals and objectives, the setting of priorities, the establishment of budgets and other fiscal decisions, policy development, and the application of measures of performance or effectiveness.

**Contain:** Restrict a wildfire to a defined area, using a combination of natural and constructed barriers that will stop the spread of the fire under the prevailing and forecasted weather conditions, until out.



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[USFS Risk Management Protocol Reference](#)

[USFS Operational Risk Management Guide](#)

The following is the USFS Risk Management Protocol, it comes from the Interagency Standards for Fire and Fire Aviation Operations. The 10 standard questions under Risk Assessment and Risk Decision are typically answered by USFS line officer in every published WFDSS decision document. The questions are designed to inform fire management decisions by stimulating thinking and prompting dialogue, analyzing and assessing risk, and recognizing shared risks and then communicating those risks within the Agency staff, partners and stakeholders.

DNRC line officers and FMOs may consider these questions to help frame their decision and ensure a consistent perspective of risk between line officers and their partner agency administrators.

### **Risk Assessment**

1. What are the critical values at risk?
2. What is the chance the critical values will be impacted, and if so, what are the consequences?
3. What are the opportunities to manage fire to meet land management objectives?
4. What are the possible low probability/high consequence events?
5. Who are the stakeholders that should be consulted prior to making a decision?

### **Risk Decision**

1. What alternatives (objectives, strategies, and tactics) are being considered?
2. What is the relative exposure of responders for the alternatives being considered (exposure in terms of numbers of responders needed, amount of time (days) of commitment needed to accomplish the objectives and the amount and types of risks these responders will be asked to accept if the alternative is chosen)?
3. What is the relative probability of success associated with the alternatives being considered?
4. What alternative provides for the best balance between the desired outcome and risk to responders?
5. What are the critical thresholds that will trigger reconsideration of the proposed alternative and how will they be monitored?