



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

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Introduction

DNRC's intent is to strengthen interagency performance and relationships by improving our collective ability to co-manage fires that are or have the potential to impact DNRC fire protection and/or jurisdictional boundaries. DNRC's primary objective will always be to co-manage and suppress wildfires alongside our partners in a cooperative manner.

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 lands for which the respective Federal Agencies are responsible are often intermingled or adjacent. There are also instances where the DNRC and federal agencies protect each other's land through offset agreements. DNRC remains committed to working collaboratively with our federal partners to fulfill respective missions, priorities, and operational needs while ensuring effective wildfire response.

Planning and Pre-season Discussions

DNRC Line Officers and fire managers are expected to assume an active leadership role in wildfire response in Montana. As Montana's lead fire protection agency, DNRC must actively participate in shaping fire management strategies at the local, state, and federal levels. Before each season begins, our Line Officers and their respective fire staff will engage with partners to establish expectations, strengthen relationships, and reinforce the State Fire Policy.

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

- Have expectations been explicitly stated and mutually understood:
 - Have we collectively defined and communicated our expectations regarding increased transparency, coordination, and information sharing?
 - Are all parties aligned on how these expectations will be met?
- Are we clear on who holds decision-making authority, and at what level key decisions are determined?
- 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?
 - Where does alignment exist, and where do discrepancies remain?

Sub-Geographic Area Operating Plans are considered supplements to the Montana Master Cooperative Wildland Fire Management and Statewide Operating Plan. These local 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, Off-set protection, Fires of Mutual Interest)
- 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

Partners shall be involved in developing the strategy, tactics, and mitigation actions to be used for a fire that is likely to impact their protection area. DNRC staff are to engage with partners during an incident to:

- Identify fires of mutual interest in their initial stages, or as early as possible to communicate our expectations regarding increased transparency, coordination, and information sharing 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.

Interagency discussions must be maintained throughout the duration of the fire. Line Officers and fire staff are expected to collaborate with partners and encourage them to engage adjacent fire protection entities and jurisdictional authorities. Local government representatives should be incorporated into planning and decision-making processes when wildfire activity poses a potential impact on their jurisdictions or communities. This engagement ensures transparencies in response strategies and promotes informed decision-making across all affected entities.

On fires of mutual interest, 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:

- Have we identified and conveyed our highest priorities and critical values at risk? Have we provided enough detail to fully explain what makes these values critical and why? How important are they? What is *most* important (severity/consequence)? What is the probability/likelihood of fire impacting those values?
- What direction are we (Agency Administrator/Line Officer or our authorized representatives) providing to our staff or Incident Management Teams?
- Have we completed a DNRC Incident Situation Assessment? Does it align with the course of action published in a WFDSS?
- Is there a need for a cost share? Do we agree if a cost share is appropriate?

DNRC Incident of Interest (IOI) Application

Fires of mutual interest to DNRC shall be documented in the Incident of Interest (IOI) application. IOI will serve as the initial collection of basic fire data that may require the attention of the Bureau, Division, and Department leadership. Line Officers, Fire Managers and/or Duty Officer are expected to routinely update the IOI throughout the duration of a wildfire incident.

LINK: [DNRC Incident of Interest Application](#) (DNRC AGOL Account Required)



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DNRC Incident Situation Assessment (ISA)

The DNRC Incident Situation Assessment (ISA) is a structured documentation tool designed for Line Officers and Fire Managers to systematically describe, evaluate, and record conditions related to wildfire incidents. The ISA provides a standardized approach for assessing and documenting threat levels at various stages of a wildfire event. This process includes risk evaluation, course-of-action development, and decision rationale documentation.

As the DNRC's officially designated decision document, ISAs should be completed for wildfires that escape initial attack or are expected to become incidents of interest to the DNRC (including federal fires of mutual interest). The level of documentation within an ISA should correspond to the complexity, cost, and potential duration and spread of the incident. As incident complexity evolves, additional analysis and reassessments may be required to ensure thorough documentation of decision-making processes.

For joint jurisdictional fires where DNRC operations align with federal agencies course of action, the Line Officer may utilize the federal Wildland Fire Decision Support System (WFDSS) to satisfy DNRC requirements for an ISA. If the WFDSS is used, a copy of the documented decisions must be retained by Line Officers and incorporated into the official fire package.

Incident Strategic Alignment Process (ISAP)

When co-managing wildfire, the Incident Strategic Alignment Process (ISAP) is a discussion format where partners can identify and weight critical values at risk (CVAR) and begin establishing a common operating picture. ISAP provides both Line Officers and IMT's an effective way of developing, discussing, aligning, and communicating clear priorities on the incident. ISAP is an ongoing risk-based conversation and consists of four key pillars: Critical Values at Risk, Strategy and Strategic Actions, Risk to Responders, and the Probability of Success.

Objectives of ISAP include:

- Identify, assess, and rate critical values at risk to inform actions.
- Promote development of durable strategies for the life of an incident – across functions, IMT rotations and Line Officers.
- Assess responder risks over longer timeframes, larger geography and multiple tactical actions.
- Promote an understanding of what could impact our success at all levels of the incident.

DNRC Co-Management of Fire, Conflicts, and the Escalating Response Continuum

DNRC leadership directs Line Officers and their fire staff to collaborate with partners in achieving mutual agreement when resolving operational issues and conflicts at the appropriate level whenever feasible. In cases of uncertainty or disagreement regarding co-management strategies and tactics, the DNRC Line Officer will promptly engage the Area Manager and Division/Fire Bureau Leadership who will coordinate with peer leadership from relevant agencies to determine the appropriate resolution pathways.

While DNRC's primary objective will always be to co-manage wildfires alongside our partners in a supportive manner, there are instances when disagreements arise, and the State may need to assert its statutory responsibilities. To guide the DNRC through conflicting fire management decisions, an escalating fire response framework has been developed. This guidance attempts to categorize conflicts by intensity and provides Line Officers and fire managers with response strategies and considerations for each level:



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- Co-Management of Fire
- Intentional Engagement
- Coordinated Intervention
- Full Independent Action

The response continuum is not a linear, step-by-step process. Rather, it is intended to reflect the dynamic nature of conflicts/disagreements in wildfire response situations which may shift as circumstances evolve. By aligning conflict levels with actionable response strategies (as authorized either by established agreements or statute) this framework enables the DNRC to influence action, promote resolution and minimize the need for escalation.

Fire Management Files, Documentation, and Conversation/Discussion Logs

DNRC Line Officers and Fire Managers are responsible for initiating and maintaining records of key conversations, communications, and decisions made during incident management. This is especially helpful for incidents spanning numerous jurisdictions, consecutive IMT rotations, and multiple/rotating Line Officers. A dedicated repository for all incident-related records from the current year has been established in [Microsoft Teams](#) (permissions required). Line Officers and Fire Managers are encouraged to use this resource for ALL incidents, to include those under DNRC protection.

Documentation should include:

- A Line Officer Conversation/Discussion Log or ICS-214WF
- ISA/WDFSS Decisions
- Emails or correspondence related to incident decisions or progress
- IAP's, Maps, Press Releases.
- Other relevant information.

Direction Specific to Cost Share Agreements

If wildfire spread to another protection area is imminent or likely, agencies will jointly assess financial responsibilities, establish cost-share methodologies and document decisions along with their rationale. DNRC staff must be prepared to engage proactively with partners at key points throughout an incident to ensure a clear understanding of the State's fiscal responsibilities regarding costs.

Fire cost-sharing should not be presumed. The DNRC will only enter into a cost-share agreement when State or County protection is affected and it aligns with the interests of the State. While DNRC does not oppose or seek to influence the land management decisions of other agencies, there are situations in which the DNRC will not assume financial responsibility for actions taken to meet another agency's land management goals. In such cases, the agency responsible for establishing the strategies and objectives may be required to assume full financial responsibility for decisions made under its jurisdiction.

Line Officers must carefully assess whether a cost-sharing agreement is appropriate given the specific circumstances of the incident. Situations requiring evaluation include:

1. Multi-jurisdictional fires under a full suppression strategy that implements management tactics misaligned with State fire policy.
2. Fires managed under a strategy other than full suppression that spread into a protection area where suppression is required.



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Additionally, cost-share agreements must remain adaptable as an incident dynamics shift. Initial agreements may require revision based on evolving conditions, and long-duration incidents may justify State participation for a portion of the response rather than the entirety of the incident. Fiscal commitments should be reevaluated periodically to reflect changing operational needs.

In cases where financial agreements cannot be reached, the DNRC Line Officer will immediately engage the Area Manager and Division/Fire Bureau Leadership, who will collaborate with peer leadership from relevant agencies to determine the appropriate resolution pathways.

Supplemental Incident Decision Document

The [Northern Rockies Decision Document Template](#) is a supplemental interagency tool housed within the Northern Rockies Incident Business Toolbox designed for archiving key wildfire management decisions. This document is distinctly different from WFDSS and the ISA. The documented decisions here and their rationale will ultimately inform the determination of financial responsibilities. If cost-sharing is deemed necessary, a cost-share agreement will be developed and appended to the decision document to formalize financial allocations and obligations.

The development of the document is a shared responsibility among agency administrators, Line Officers, and fire management personnel from the affected protection and/or jurisdictional agencies.

Helpful Reference Information

- [DNRC Line Officer Tool Kit](#)
- [Montana Fire Protection History Map](#)
- [Wildland Fire Decision Support System](#)
- [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.

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.”

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).



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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.

Suppression: Management action to extinguish a fire or confine fire spread beginning with its discovery.

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 fire managers 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?