



Risk Management

Committee



TO :

FROM : National Wildfire Coordinating Group

REPLY TO : NWCG@nifc.gov

DATE : 08/28/2006

SUBJECT : SAFETY ADVISORY : Burnovers



Burnover safety advisory.doc

From: NWCG Safety and Health Working Team

Date: August 28, 2006

Subject: Safety Advisory: Burnovers

In recent weeks, wildland firefighters have been involved in burnovers in a variety of fuel types in different geographic areas. These burnovers have resulted in one fatality, several serious burn injuries, and the damage or destruction of firefighting equipment. In some cases, firefighters deployed fire shelters; in others, they did not have time to deploy. It is time for us to take a serious look at the situation in which we find ourselves and ask some questions: why is this occurring, and how can we stop it?

The burnovers experienced in the United States in the past month have occurred in grass, brush and timber fuel types. They have involved different types of firefighters from different agencies with varying levels of experience, including some people who were highly trained and experienced. The following types of resources have recently experienced burnovers:

- Fire Use Module
- Engine crew
- Dozer operator
- Hotshot crew
- Line overhead

In most cases, investigations of burnovers are ongoing. We do not yet know with certainty all of the contributing and causal factors of these accidents. From what we do know, however, some common denominators seem to be emerging. Although all were not present in all cases, they seem to be common to most recent accidents. These include:

- Initial attack or Type 3 fires
- Sudden, unexpected changes in fire behavior, usually caused by wind
- Hottest, driest part of the burning period
- Approaching a fire to engage it for the first time
- Poor communications or confusing instructions
- Lack of situational awareness
- Extreme fire behavior and weather conditions were forecast for the area in which the burnovers occurred

Although conditions commonly contributing to serious accidents are ever-present, if there was ever a time for “heads up” firefighting, that time is now. Firefighters and managers need to remain cognizant of this and devote exhaustive efforts to ensure safety of the public and firefighters. We have been at Preparedness Level 5 nationally since July 28. Resources from all geographic areas and from other countries are engaged in wildland fire suppression across the United States. As the fire season progresses, firefighters are

experiencing long-term fatigue, injuries, illness and stress that can seriously interfere with safe and effective firefighting.

Over-aggressiveness in tactics and strategies can lead to tactical failure and injured firefighters; risk aversion can create some of the same hazards. Firefighters, and especially leaders of firefighters, must balance the risk of operations against the potential gain and act accordingly. At all times, entrapment avoidance should be first and foremost in the minds of firefighters:

- Build line from a solid anchor point.
- Practice LCES.
- Expect the worst! Be prepared for weather changes and extreme fire behavior.
- Maintain situational awareness; recognize when you don't have it and take steps to re-acquire it.
- Don't engage if you haven't established communications or if your instructions are unclear.
- Disengage if you lose communications.

Study your Incident Response Pocket Guide. It contains a great deal of information designed to keep firefighters alive. You are responsible for your safety. Don't become a statistic.