



Covering Wildfire

In North Carolina

A GUIDE FOR NEWS MEDIA

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This guide is dedicated to the firefighters throughout North Carolina who risk their lives protecting our state's natural resources. It is presented as a public service for media in North Carolina and other interested organizations by the North Carolina Division of Forest Resources (NCDFR). For more information, please visit our website at
www.dfr.state.nc.us

This guide is a modification of a document originally prepared by the **Virginia Department of Forestry**.

Introduction: Getting Your Story

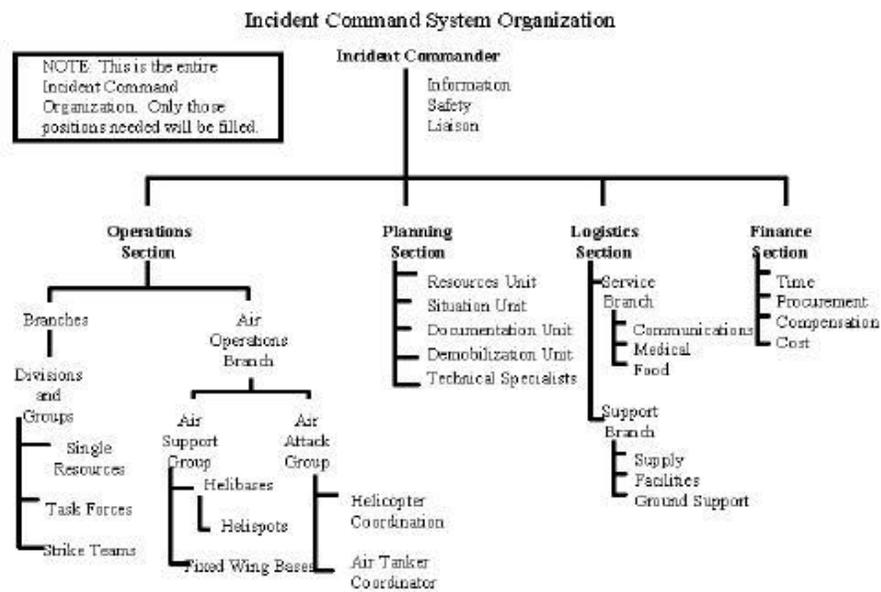
Wildfires and other catastrophes are major news events and attract considerable media attention. This is particularly true for those areas in North Carolina with smaller markets where stories about wildfire often lead on the broadcast news and make headlines in the local papers. The public definitely has a right to information about such incidents; however, access to incidents is often complicated by the emergency nature of what is going on.

The purpose of this document is to help you better understand the organizations, policies and terminology associated with suppression of major wildland fires. This information will help you cover your story more easily, so that you can keep your audience better informed.

The public agencies involved in the suppression of wildland fires invite and appreciate media coverage. They recognize that media coverage is an integral part of keeping the public informed and spreading the wildland fire prevention message. These agencies major concern is that everyone approaches wildfires safely and in a manner which does not interfere with suppression efforts.

The Incident Command System

There is no way one agency can fight all the wildland fires that crop up in North Carolina. For the past several years, the land management and fire fighting agencies on many levels of government have worked together under the very carefully coordinated **Incident Command System (ICS)** to fight fires and deal with other emergencies as they arise.



Who to Contact When a Fire Breaks

When a fire erupts in North Carolina, the first reaction may be to jump in the van and follow the smoke. Sometimes, however, that isn't the best option. For one thing, a smoke column may not be a wildfire. For another, if it is a wildfire, you should gather information as to where to go and who to meet with so you know you're not approaching a potentially dangerous situation. The story is important, but safety is first priority.

So when a fire breaks out, follow this quick checklist before you run:

1. Is it a wildland fire?	A column of smoke is not proof that a wildfire is occurring. Smoke may come from debris or prescribed burning. Even if it is a wildfire, smoke can sometimes drift for hundreds of miles depending on weather conditions. The smoke you are viewing may be from a fire outside of your news coverage area.
2. It's a wildland fire! Who do I contact?	If you're the first person to see it, please report the fire by calling 911, your local fire department, or your County Forest Ranger.
3. Who is my main source of information on the fire?	If it has already been reported and the NC Forest Service has responded to it, the next person you will want to speak with is the local Fire Information Officer (FIO). The FIO's job is to collect complete and accurate information about the incident's size, cause, status and resources involved. The FIO also responds to matters of general interest. The FIO will usually be found on a fire's Incident Command Center.
4. Who else should I call?	If the fire is particularly complex, an "overhead" team may be called to help manage the fire. This team will normally have an FIO on staff.
5. Is there any way I can help?	Occasionally, the FIO may request that the news media help with sending out information the public needs to know about. Frequently, citizens will venture close to the fire lines for a better look.

	<p>Often, the added traffic can block equipment access to the fire, or nearby cars may reduce a plane's ability to drop retardant from the air.</p> <p>The media plays a very important role in helping local residents stay informed and safe.</p>
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Bottom Line

The fire Information Officers are there to help you get the best story possible. Sometimes they may limit your access to the fire for safety or logistical reasons, but they are there specifically to provide information---not deny it. They may escort you to the scene of the fire and can help arrange interviews with firefighters and the Incident Commander. The Information Officer should always be your "first call" person when a fire breaks.

How to Get to the Fire Line

There is one overall rule for covering wildland fire stories: **SAFETY FIRST!**

As a common-sense rule, nothing will be allowed to jeopardize the safety of the news media or those involved with suppression activities. The Fire Information officer will explain the rationale for any specific access restrictions. If you want to go out to the fire line you'll be advised of the danger. You will be discouraged from going off by yourself. In some locations, the FIO or another responsible official will escort you to the line. Usually, there are areas you can safely go to see the action.

Although no physical test is required, the Incident Commander may deny access to any individual who appears to be at risk if exposed to hazardous conditions on the fire line, or who may be a risk to those managing the fire line. Denial of access is usually the exception and not the rule.

Here are some things to consider before going out on the fire line.

1. **Location.** Access to wildland fires in North Carolina can be easy or difficult depending on the location and availability of access roads. In some remote locations access by non-emergency personnel may be limited to foot travel or four-wheel-drive. Some wilderness locations do not allow motorized access at all. The key to finding the fire is by getting in contact with the Information Officer before you start chasing smoke columns.
2. **Personal Protective Equipment (PPE).** All firefighters are required to wear personal protective equipment while out on the line. You are no different. *Most of today's synthetic clothes are not fire retardant, and some may actually be harmful to*

you if a fire gets too close. Likewise, some hairsprays and makeup may be **flammable** if you get in close proximity to a fire.

Again, **SAFETY FIRST!**

Today's personal protective equipment worn by firefighters is designed to ensure safety, and must be worn by all persons at or near the fire line. Sometimes PPE will be available for your use at the scene. This gear will include:

- A hardhat
- Nomex fire resistant pants and shirt
- Gloves
- An emergency fire shelter and instructions on how to use it

If you don't have these items at your place of work, the Fire Information Officer can issue you clothing on a temporary basis. You will need to provide your own leather boots (no sneakers, hightops or dress shoes allowed) and cotton undergarments (synthetics are more combustible or tend to melt to skin when exposed to high temperatures).

How About a Plane Ride?

One frequently asked question is, "Can we get a ride up in one of your planes for some aerial shots?" The answer is **NO**. By Federal regulation only persons who are essential to the mission are allowed on fire suppression flights. On rare occasions a media flight will be organized to allow reporters to view fires. Seating on these flights is limited and will be divided between representatives of various media groups. News media using their own aircraft may have limitations too, as airspace may be restricted in the area around and approaching the fire for safety reasons. Any aerial access to a fire must be cleared in advance and a shared radio frequency for pilot communications must be obtained (Talk to your pilot about FAA flight restrictions under 91.137a). Pre-approved fly-overs can usually be arranged, but they must be coordinated with the Incident Commander first. This is something the Fire Information Officer can help to arrange. He or she will coordinate your flight with the IC and Air Operations.

Other Parts to the Story

There are numerous angles to follow when reporting a wildland fire beyond the simple facts of the fire. Here are some ideas:

Logistics. Getting people and resources to a fire is no easy task. Fires can break any time, day or night and NCDFR uses a small army of people to get equipment and personnel to the scene. Their work continues even after the fires are out to get people and supplies home and the bills paid.

Planning. The Planning Section of the fire collects and evaluates the latest information on the fire, examines suppression strategies and shift plans, and

distributes information on the fire to other sections of the Incident Command System.

The Camp. Fire camps are often small communities within themselves. The men and women who are our firefighters can range in age from 18 to 60+ years old, come from different nationalities and backgrounds, and generally work 12 hour shifts. Fire camps may contain as many as 500 firefighters depending on the size and complexity of the blaze.

Services within the camp also vary depending on the number of people involved. If a base camp has been established, a media representative can usually find an Information Officer to help. The IO will orient you, the reporter, to what facilities and services are available, like:

- Access to team members for interviews
- Maps, shift plans, special interest items and general information.
- Contacts or coordination with local law enforcement, security personnel, or government officials
- Access to telephones or other media services
- First aid or medical needs
- Sanitation facilities and wash area

On a case-by-case basis they may also help with ground or air transportation, food service, shower service and overnight accommodations.

Fire Prevention. NCDFR has a very active Fire Prevention program, especially in locations outside cities and towns near public lands. Many serious wildland fires are caused by the careless acts of people. The news media is especially valuable in making the public aware of potentially dangerous fire situations, the conditions that contribute to wildfires and what can be done to prevent them.

Rehabilitation. Once the fire's out, then what? There may be many reasons we would choose to rehabilitate a burned area: to reduce wind erosion, to prevent the invasion of noxious weeds, to protect water quality, or simply to restore beauty. Rehabilitation can include reseeding an area with native or non-native vegetation, smoothing or removing berms in fire line roads, protecting stream channels and soils, or other activities. A team of specialists from a local NCDFR office is usually assigned after a fire to determine what rehabilitation, if any, needs to be done. Sometimes the plan is developed while the fire is still burning.

Tactics. Aircraft are one of the tools used to fight fire, and often many different types of aircraft are used. Many are helicopters that transport people or equipment to remote areas. Some are tankers filled with retardant or water. The retardant is usually a fertilizer based mixture used to slow the rate of the fire's spread and cool the flames. Once the fire is out, the fertilizer in the retardant will help spur plant growth. These are just a few of the many tactics firefighters may use.

Key Definitions

Air Tanker- A fixed wing aircraft capable of delivering water or retardant on a fire in a bombing fashion.

Backfire (or Backburn)- A fire set along the inner edge of a control line to consume the fuel in the path of a wildland fire, and/or to change the direction of force on the fire's "convection column".

Blow-up- A sudden increase in fire activity or rate of spread sufficient to preclude direct control or to upset existing control plans. Often accompanied by a violent convection and may have other characteristics of a firestorm.

Burning Out- Setting backfires on a small scale and with closer control, in order to consume patches of unburned fuel and aid in the construction of control lines.

Closed Area- An area in which specific activities, or even entry, is temporarily restricted to reduce the risk of fires caused by people.

Closure- Legal restriction of specific activities such as smoking, camping, or entry into an area.

Contain a Fire- To restrict a fire within determined boundaries established either prior to, or during a fire.

Control a Fire- To take suppression action as needed, which can be reasonably expected to check a fire's spread under prevailing conditions.

Crown Fire- A fire that burns in tree tops (going from tree top to tree top) and which burns all or a large part of the upper branches and foliage of the trees.

Engine- Any ground vehicle providing specified levels of water pumping capabilities.

Escaped Fire- A fire that has exceeded initial attack capabilities and is spreading.

Fireline- A break in a fire's fuel source, used to stop the fire's spread.

Fire Shelter- A personal protection item carried by firefighters which, when deployed, unfolds to form a tent-like shelter of heat reflective materials.

Fuel Type- Refers to the type of vegetation in which a fire is burning. The fuel type is used in predicting fire behavior and determining a fire's effects.

Initial Attack- The control efforts undertaken by firefighters who are first to arrive at an incident.

Lead Plane- A plane used to guide other aircraft (usually Air Tankers) to a "drop" location.

Prescribed Burn- Controlled application of fire to wildland fuels under specified environmental and weather conditions, to produce a fire that is confined to a pre-determined area. The reason for such burning is to produce the intensity of heat and rate of spread required to attain a planned resource management objective, such as reducing fuels in an area.

Resources- All personnel and major items of equipment available for assignment to a fire incident.

Slop Over- A fire which has breached the fireline.

Spot Fire- Unwanted fire that occurs outside the perimeter of the main fire. Caused by flying sparks or embers.

Strike Team- Specified combinations of the same kind and type of resources, with common communications and a leader.

S.E.A.T.S- Single Engine Air Tanker. Small Air Tankers capable of delivering up to 600 gallons of retardant or water.

Torching- A tree that suddenly erupts into flames from the base to the top.

Wildfire- Any fire occurring on wildland, except for a fire under prescription.

Wildland- An area in which development is essentially non-existent, except for roads, railroads, power lines, and similar transportation or utility structures.