



# 2021 COVID-19 and Wildland Fire Suppression Operations

National Interagency Fire Center  
Interagency Talking Points  
*Updated May, 2021*

## Key Messages

- The safety of the public and all wildland fire responders is always the highest priority for all wildland fire agencies.
- In 2020, to further ensure the highest degree of readiness, the National Multi-Agency Coordinating Group (NMAC) worked with partners at all levels in the fire community to develop protocols for wildfire response. The teams worked with and followed guidance from federal, state, county, and Tribal health officials. They also worked directly with agency representatives; Geographic Area Coordination Groups (GACG); the National Wildfire Coordinating Group (NWCG); dispatch and coordination centers; local units; and federal, state and county health officials as appropriate to ensure thorough and current national response plans.
- The protocols were integrated into Wildland Fire Response Plans and made available to all Incident Management Teams and fire units to help guide effective wildfire response. NMAC will continue to coordinate at all levels to help ensure another healthy and safe fire year.
- While COVID-19 circumstances continue to evolve, and federal guidance continues to adapt with the situation, the wildland fire agencies are prepared for wildland fire activity and will be ready to respond to wildfires during the continued COVID-19 pandemic.
- As leaders, we see challenges as opportunities, and the 2021 fire year is an opportunity to fully embrace core risk management principles and employ new decision support tools and tactics. Wildland fire personnel are an inherently kinetic workforce; they must mobilize around the country as wildland fire activity occurs.
- Wildland fire personnel also work in close proximity to one another, as wildland fire suppression by its very nature requires crew cohesion and physically close contact. The federal wildland fire management agencies adjusted operations to meet the challenges created by the global pandemic.
- In 2020, DOI developed critical COVID-19 guidance for all employees, including suggestions to operate as family units; use of personal protective equipment; hygiene practices; testing and quarantine procedures; and CARES Act funding to ensure isolation and other necessary logistics. These measures greatly reduced outside exposure to the virus and thus, decreased spread potential within fire ranks.
- Federal agencies will continue with COVID-19 mitigation strategies this year, including a strategy to isolate and quarantine fire personnel if they become sick while working. These measures proved to greatly reduce COVID-19 spread among wildland fire personnel, particularly during a record fire year, when, at its peak in mid-September, more than 32,727 personnel were deployed to large, active wildfire incidents throughout the West.
- Wildland fire personnel are encouraged to get vaccinated against COVID-19 for their own safety, for their co-workers' safety, and to preserve the health of all those they come in contact with.



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## Talking Points

### Major Updates

- **Implementation of the President’s Executive Order (EO) on Protecting the Federal Workforce and Requiring Mask-Wearing.** When social distancing is not possible, masks are required on all federally managed incidents. Masks are to be worn in all common and shared workspaces indoors or other enclosed spaces such as vehicles or other transportation whether social distancing is achievable or not.
- **Application of the Module as One concept has changed.** *Module as One* should be used by crew and modules to reduce exposures to COVID-19 from outside resources or the public, and no longer as a tool to operate in close quarters without masks. Further, because Incident Management Team (IMT) members often travel from various locations, are not able to quarantine ahead of assignment, and often interact with the public and many other IMT members – they cannot achieve a closed “family” unit or be a *Module as One*.
- **Availability of the COVID-19 Vaccination.** The Wildland Fire Medical and Public Health Advisory Team (MPHAT) recommends the COVID-19 vaccination for wildland fire response personnel to maintain critical fire operations. The full recommendation can be viewed at <https://www.nwcg.gov/sites/default/files/docs/eb-fmb-m-21-002a.pdf>.
- **Quarantine requirements for vaccinated individuals has changed.** No quarantine is required if an individual can show they have had a full series of COVID-19 vaccination, is 14 days out from the last vaccination, and is without symptoms. The individual should be tested for COVID-19 following an exposure and thorough routine workplace screening programs should continue.
- **Cleaning with products containing soap or detergent once a day is usually sufficient to remove virus that may be on surfaces and help maintain a healthy facility.** If the space is a high traffic or use area, or certain conditions apply, cleaning and sanitizing may need to occur more frequently.

### Interagency COVID-19 Information

- [DOI Recommendations for Managing COVID-19 Exposures in Multi-Passenger Vehicle Operations](#)
- [Pandemic Physical Distancing, Daily Health Monitoring Implementation, and other Workplace Safety and Health Guidelines for DOI and Work Locations](#)
- [Frequently Asked Questions about Masks](#)
- [DOI COVID-19 Ventilation Checklist](#)
- [NWCG COVID-19 Prevention and Management During Wildland Fire Operations](#)
- [NWCG Prevention and Management of COVID-19 During Wildland Fire Operations Infographic](#)
- [NWCG Fire and COVID-19 Briefing Checklist Decal](#)
- [Infectious Disease Guidance for Wildland Fire Incidents, Emergency Medical Committee](#)
- [Fire Management Board 21-002 Coronavirus Disease \(COVID-19\) Vaccines for Wildland Fire Personnel](#)
  - » [Attachment A: MPHAT memorandum addressing COVID-19 vaccine for wildfire personnel](#)



# 2021 COVID-19 and Wildland Fire Suppression Operations

## Geographic Area Response Plans

Interagency Area Command Teams established wildfire response during the COVID-19 pandemic:

- [Alaska](#)
- [California \(Northern and Southern\)](#)
- [Eastern Area](#)
- [Great Basin](#)
- [Northern Rockies](#)
- [Northwest](#)
- [Rocky Mountain](#)
- [Southern Area](#)
- [Southwest](#)

## Current Strategies and Guidance

- DOI is actively involved in supporting the U.S. response to COVID-19 and will continue to collaborate with other federal agencies including the U.S. Forest Service, the Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Prevention and Control, and the Federal Emergency Management Agency.
- The federal agencies will use the [Pandemic Response and Preparedness Plan for the Federal Wildland Fire Agencies](#), which provides guidance to ensure the safety of all Department of the Interior and U.S. Department of Agriculture Forest Service employees involved in:
  - » Routine fire assignments during a pandemic event, and
  - » Activities for emergency responses to:
    - Avian influenza (AI),
    - Pandemics caused by other infectious disease agents
    - Other non-fire emergencies
- This plan also serves to assist agency administrators/line officers, agency liaisons and incident management teams (IMT) when an infectious disease:
  - » Has the potential to be introduced,
  - » Is suspected, or
  - » Is discovered in a wildland firefighting base camp, local community or workplace—and is thereby considered a threat to the health and safety of response personnel.
- Additionally, [the Infectious Disease Guidelines for Wildland Fire Incident Management Teams](#) plan, developed by the National Wildland Fire Coordination Group Risk Management Committee’s Emergency Medical Subcommittee, includes recommended guidelines to be followed by an IMT when confronted with a potential infectious disease outbreak during a wildland fire response.



# 2021 COVID-19 and Wildland Fire Suppression Operations

## Maintaining a Healthy Workforce

- All fire personnel should get a COVID-19 vaccine to maintain critical fire operations. Vaccines are one of the most effective tools available to protect health and prevent disease. Vaccines work with the body's natural defenses so it can be ready to fight if exposed to certain diseases, including COVID-19 (also called "immunity").
  - » At this time, per [CDC Guidance](#), fully vaccinated people should continue to "Follow guidance issued by individual employers."
- All resources should have a heightened sense of awareness on the most up-to-date signs and symptoms of COVID-19. All resources should monitor their own health and encourage all crew members to do the same.
- To reduce cumulative fatigue that may be present - especially later in the fire season, rest and proper nutrition should be prioritized for each operational period. If personnel feel unusually fatigued or have any signs or symptoms of COVID-19, they should follow the guidelines developed by MPHAT prior to returning to their normal duties.
- Conduct COVID-19 symptom screening, which includes a temperature check, to identify individuals with potential COVID-19 infection at duty stations or on incidents. Refer to the *Wildland Fire COVID-19 Screening Standard Operating Procedures* developed by MPHAT.
- Rigorous sanitary and personal hygiene practices are important for reducing the transmission of infectious diseases. All personnel must cover their coughs and sneezes. Proper hand hygiene must be performed by all personnel. Fire personnel must wash their hands or use hand sanitizer after touching potentially contaminated surfaces, removing face coverings or personal protective equipment (PPE), after using the restroom, and before eating or putting anything in their mouth. Make these hygiene practices part of all personnel's operational duties with dedicated time set aside daily.
- Mitigate smoke exposure for firefighters when tactics can be adjusted, and operational objectives can be met. Evaluate smoke impacts for spike camps and Incident Command Posts (ICPs). It is reasonable to assume that smoke exposure could exacerbate the effects of COVID-19.
- While fire personnel are often some of the most healthy and fit workers, it is critical all personnel evaluate their overall health and consider risks that may impact their susceptibility of experiencing more severe symptoms if they contract COVID-19. In particular, older adults (aged 65 years and older ) and people of any age who have underlying medical conditions (asthma, obesity, chronic lung disease, diabetes, serious heart conditions, chronic kidney disease, immunocompromised, liver disease) might be at higher risk for severe illness. These individuals should take extra precautions to protect themselves from exposure to the virus and should be assigned to duties that reduce their risk of contracting the illness (e.g., limiting interactions with other people, virtual and telework assignments).



# 2021 COVID-19 and Wildland Fire Suppression Operations

## Masks and Respiratory Protection

- Masks are required on all federally managed incidents. Masks are to be worn in all common and shared workspaces indoors or other enclosed spaces such as vehicles or other transportation whether social distancing is achievable or not. A mask is not a substitute for social distancing. Masks should still be worn in addition to staying at least six feet apart, especially when indoors and when interacting with people outside of their unit.
- There may be instances where wearing a mask is not feasible and people are exempt from the requirement to wear a mask as they would create a risk to workplace health, safety, or job duty. Examples may include: when individuals are performing unique work-related tasks and physical distancing cannot be maintained such as, where there is a risk that a mask will distort communication (i.e., dispatchers and pilots) and when employees are performing arduous work such as firefighter, physical training, physically demanding fuels reduction work or demanding natural resource management activities and wearing a mask can interfere with breathing and/or body temperature.
- Any mask worn near a fireline should be made of non-synthetic materials. See [CDC Guide on Masks](#) on how to select and wear a mask. The primary purpose of these masks (also known as source control) is to reduce the spread of the virus from resources who may have the virus and are asymptomatic.
- When social distancing is not possible outdoors and individuals are not engaged in arduous firefighting activities, individuals are required to wear masks that cover their mouth and nose. Arduous firefighting activities can include project work, physical training, and all fireline suppression duties.
- Per [CDC Interim Infection Prevention and Control Recommendations for Patients with Suspected or Confirmed Coronavirus Disease 2019 \(COVID-19\) in Healthcare Settings guidance](#), along with other precautions, *personnel with known or suspected COVID-19* should wear a disposable facemask or cloth face covering to contain secretions during interaction with other personnel or during transport.

## Social/Physical Distancing

- Limiting face-to-face contact (keeping six feet or more distance) with others is the best way to reduce the spread of COVID-19. See <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/prevent-getting-sick/social-distancing.html>.
- Do not gather in groups; limit face-to-face meetings and maintain a social distance of six feet during necessary meetings. Do not shake hands, hug, or engage in other physical contact. If possible, rely on remote units and virtual technology for IMT staffing, meetings and other communication. This includes incorporating virtual technology and communications (such as radio briefings and meetings) as much as possible.
- Minimize the size and number of personnel at ICPs. Set up fire camps that allow for social distancing. Use smaller spike camps to insulate crews and modules from each other and other outside personnel and resources. Consider the use of radio briefings and multiple-day Incident Action Plans.
- Create separate spaces in offices and shared housing where possible. Stagger work hours to create more open spaces in tight and close quarters.



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## Personnel Management and Hiring

- If possible, when on-boarding crew members, keep new members separate for two weeks before adding them to the module. COVID-19 prevention mitigations should be implemented at all times to the best of their ability. These crew members should minimize interaction with the public and outside community at this time to decrease introducing exposure to the other crew members. PCR serial testing can be incorporated in this separation time by testing every three to five days, dependent on local testing capability or contracting.
- When the module has been established, minimize interaction with the public and outside community to minimize the exposure you introduce to the module. If separation of new crew members is difficult, maximize telework and virtual training opportunities. Utilize the [Wildland Fire COVID-19 Screening Standard Operating Procedures](#) developed by MPHAT to screen for symptoms daily. Conduct training and meetings outside where at least six feet of spacing between all personnel can be maintained.
- Personnel must keep in mind, exposing yourself could mean also exposing your module and your family. Insulate and protect yourselves. Practice social distancing to a minimum of six feet from individuals outside of your module as well as wear a face covering unless performing arduous duties.

## While on a fire assignment

- Crews and modules should use a Module as One approach to insulate as one unit and reduce exposure to the public and other crews.
- By insulating as a unit, crews and modules can limit outside exposure to COVID-19 and become a closed “family” unit and reduce risk of exposure to the virus from individuals outside of the crew or module.
- Personnel must keep in mind: exposing yourself could mean also exposing your module and your family. Insulate and protect yourselves. Practice social distancing to a minimum of six feet from individuals outside of your module and wear a face covering unless performing arduous duties.
- Crews and modules should limit close contact with other resources both at their home unit or on incidents to insulate their module. When coming into close contact or riding in vehicles, all resources should wear cloth face coverings or masks. While the practice of handshaking, hugging, or any physical contact is a deeply rooted etiquette within the United States, this practice should be avoided to reduce further potential for disease transmission.
- Minimize contact with the general public. This is to protect every crew member, their family, and the community we serve. Identify select individuals on a crew or module that will interact with the public, ensuring this person relies on social distancing, wears a cloth face covering, and practices hand hygiene during or after every interaction. This is especially important if the crew is working in or traveling through an area with high community transmission.
- When social distancing is not possible, masks are required on all federally managed incidents (see recommendations below).



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## Firefighter training and preparation during COVID-19

- Federal agencies have prioritized hiring for critical wildland fire positions. Human resources staff across the country are working to follow and implement hiring guidance provided by the Office of Personnel Management and the Department of the Interior.
- Fire managers are conducting required fire training in small groups when necessary.

### *Fire Response*

- » Fire managers will consider new tactics, such as using an increased number of vehicles during crew transports whenever possible to allow more separation within each vehicle. They will plan for these extra vehicles when arriving at an incident and working on the fireline.
- » Fire managers will avoid establishing condensed fire camps and Incident Command Posts (ICPs) when feasible and limit close interaction with other incident personnel.
- » To keep firefighters and communities healthy and safe, all firefighters are asked to follow recommendations from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to reduce the spread of illness.
- » There will be firefighters on the ground, but the public will see a different approach to fire suppression. These new organizations will be smaller in nature using some of the same fire suppression tactics and strategies that have been used in the past. The sight of a large fire camp will not be the norm any longer. Most fire suppression efforts will be in small groups and dispersed into isolated camps or other means to provide social distancing for firefighters and the public to prevent COVID-19 spread.

## COVID-19 Outbreak Wildfire Prevention Messages

- The public plays a valuable role in preventing wildfires. On average, nationally, human-caused wildfires comprise 87 percent of all wildfire occurrences every year. Most of these fires can be prevented.
- Preventable wildfires threaten lives, property, and precious resources every year. Firefighters are needed more than ever to keep Americans safe, so please, do your part to prevent human-caused wildfires.

### *Recreation*

- » More people may be recreating on public lands during this time of social distancing and sheltering in place. Be aware of local public safety area closures. Take extra precaution before venturing out and be careful with anything that could start a fire.
- » Stay informed of current and predicted environmental conditions such as weather and drying vegetation. The National Significant Wildland Fire Potential Outlook can be found on the National Interagency Coordination Center website at [predictiveservices.nifc.gov/outlooks/](https://predictiveservices.nifc.gov/outlooks/).
- » It is important to stay informed on how you can safely spend time outside. To keep ourselves, our communities and our outdoor spaces safe and healthy during this time, please consider the Leave No Trace Center's recommendations: <https://lnt.org/>.



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- » Maintain your mechanical equipment. Many human-caused wildfires occur near roadways, communities and recreational areas, posing considerable public safety threats. Carry a fire extinguisher and know how to use it.
- » Vehicle exhaust systems spark hundreds of wildfires each year when they contact dry vegetation. If possible, avoid driving on dry grass when fire danger is high and never park a vehicle on dry grass. If you are towing a trailer, make sure it is roadworthy with good tires, greased bearings, and no chains dragging.

### *Home Projects and Burning*

- » If you are burning fields, debris piles, or just having a campfire, remember these tips: Have enough water and people nearby to control the fire, avoid burning on dry, hot, windy days, and never leave any fire unattended.
- » Take individual responsibility to reduce flammable material around homes and communities before a fire occurs to keep your property and firefighters safe.
- » Running out of home improvement projects? Consider making your property more resistant to wildfire.
- » Increase your home's wildfire resistance by creating a buffer between your home and trees, shrubs, or other wildland areas. Not only does this space help slow or stop the spread of wildfire, it also provides a safe place for firefighters to defend your home if conditions allow. Learn more at [www.firewise.org](http://www.firewise.org).
- » Adhere to your state's/Tribe's outdoor burning guidance. Prior to burning, contact your local fire agency as smoke from open burning can cause unnecessary public health and safety concerns.
- » Get involved with fire prevention; learn how to protect your community and keep your family safe from wildfire. There are many online resources, but you can start at [www.nic.gov](http://www.nic.gov): <https://www.nifc.gov/fire-information/fire-prevention-education-mitigation>





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