



Date: 22 July 2021

TO: Erin Horsburgh, Chair, Fire Management Board

FROM: L. Kaili McCray, Chair, Medical and Public Health Advisory Team (MPHAT)

SUBJECT: **Wildland Fire COVID-19 Prevention and Mitigation 2021**

Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome- Coronavirus- 2 (SARS-CoV-2), the virus that causes Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) remains a significant threat to 2021 fire operations. As of mid-July, the Delta variant is now the dominant strain of COVID-19 in the U.S. and is proving to be more contagious than other predominant variants. The U.S. saw a decrease in the number of COVID-19 cases following vaccination, which resulted in a science-based relaxing of public health recommendations and requirements. However, cases, hospitalizations, and deaths due to COVID-19 are again increasing in many areas across the nation. While there are some infections occurring among fully vaccinated individuals, most of the new cases are occurring among individuals who are not fully vaccinated, and nearly all deaths and hospitalizations are among those who have not been fully vaccinated.

As the U.S. is seeing an increasing number of COVID-19 cases, the interagency wildland fire community is also seeing a rise in cases among our fire personnel. This is especially true as mitigations on fires have been relaxed. Other illnesses that have historically impacted wildfire operations such as camp crud, common colds, and influenza may also contribute to increased illnesses and reduced response capacity across the U.S. with relaxed mitigations.

At the current Preparedness Level 5 (PL5), wildland fire response resources have become limited, with many resource requests *unable to fill*. The wildland fire community is a small subset of the population with a limited number of qualified individuals. Given the increased spread of COVID-19 in the U.S. and among the wildland fire community, the transitory nature of our workforce coming from many different states, and the unknown vaccination status of our personnel, it is extremely important to implement and reinforce infection control mitigations **now** to keep our wildland fire personnel safe and healthy.

Currently, reports from the field indicate very limited application of the MPHAT science-based, fire-specific, infection control measures (e.g. mask wearing, hand hygiene, physical distancing, moduling as one) taking place on incidents. MPHAT recommends fire leadership address this gap immediately and reinforce infection control practices and mitigation strategies used last year and include these in the delegations to Incident Management Teams.

To do this, fire leadership, fire managers, agency administrators, line officers, and incident managers should implement the following:

- Reinforce the importance of prevention and mitigation of COVID-19 in the workplace.
 - MPHAT would like to remind all leadership and fire personnel that MPHAT's guidance has been proven effective and is critical to prevent the further spread of COVID-19.
 - Leader's intent and expectations must be clear that COVID-19 prevention and mitigation is still a priority for the 2021 fire season.

- With vaccination status not being systematically tracked, face covering/mask and physical distancing requirements on wildfire incidents needs to be strengthened. It is recommended that everyone follow COVID-19 prevention and mitigation guidance for unvaccinated individuals regarding physical distancing and mask/face covering use in fire camp, unless outdoors and able to maintain at least 6ft of distance at all times, alone in an enclosed space or actively engaged in firefighting on the fireline.
- Ensure that COVID-19 prevention strategies that were considered standard operating procedures in 2020 are prioritized and incorporated such as:
 - Daily individual screening tool, distributive operations, spike camps, boxed meals, community cooler mitigations, remote briefings, decentralized staging areas, virtual and remote participation, and module as one (updated) to the maximum extent possible.
- Expand the scope of the Wildland Fire Incident COVID-19 Tracker during PL5 to include required reporting of all COVID-19 cases experienced by incident-going personnel to maintain a high level of awareness of potential impact on resources. Agency specific reporting should also continue as required.
- Require all personnel who are exposed at close contact to COVID-19 but are not fully vaccinated follow MPHAT guidance regarding quarantine. This simple measure significantly reduces the likelihood of COVID-19 outbreaks that can have detrimental impacts on other wildland firefighters and wildland fire operations.
- Require all personnel who have been fully vaccinated and become symptomatic follow MPHAT guidance by not physically reporting to work and notifying their supervisor of their symptoms.
- Be aware of local and state public health guidance and orders. As local and state regulators change their requirements for masks, it is important to be familiar with and apply all applicable policies and laws.

Despite an active fire season in 2020, effective COVID-19 prevention measures were implemented, which enabled firefighting capacity to be maintained. By not continuing to follow these measures, fire personnel may be at risk for illness, may endanger the health of others on the incident, and may adversely affect resource availability to respond to the already elevated 2021 wildfire season. Now is the opportunity to intervene and minimize the potential impact of infectious disease on our workforce. Leadership must prioritize infection control measures, communicate their expectations, and continue to take steps to safeguard human life and protect their most valuable resources this fire season. **The COVID-19 pandemic is not over.**

Supportive Material

Daily individual screening tool <https://www.nwcg.gov/sites/default/files/docs/eb-fmb-wildland-fire-covid-19-screening-tool.pdf>

MPHAT [Guidance for Prevention and Management of COVID-19 During Wildland Fire | NWCG](#)

Module as one blog <https://wildfirelessons.blog/2021/06/14/what-does-module-as-one-mean-in-2021/Fire-Management-Board-COVID-19-Information-NWCG>