

Implementing incident command systems on the ground

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Emergency services respond to a wide range of emergency incidents. In order to effectively manage personnel and resources, as well as to provide for the safety and welfare of personnel, services operate within the incident command system (ICS) during all incidents from Type 4 to Type 1. The incident command system is also used on medical emergencies and public service calls when the response exceeds the first turnout assignment. Single unit responses or Type 5 incidents may not necessitate the use of the full IC system but there will always be an incident commander. Incident types will be discussed in a follow up article.

The purpose of the incident command system is to:

- Ensure that a strong, direct and visible command will be established from the onset of the incident.
- Establish an effective incident organisation defining the activities and responsibilities assigned to the IC and the other individuals operating within the incident command system.
- Provide a system to process information to support incident management, planning and decision-making.
- Provide a system for the orderly transfer of command to subsequent arriving officers.

The incident command system will inter alia address the following:

- Incident command responsibilities
- Incident priorities
- Functions of command
- Personnel accountability
- Condition reports
- Command options
- Command posts
- Transfer of command
- IC and command and general staff roles and responsibilities
- Radio systems
- Proper personal protective equipment (PPE)



An ICS briefing

Responsibilities of the incident commander

The incident commander (IC) is responsible for safely managing the incident and ensuring everyone goes home! The IC has the authority to turn his/her decisions into actions by using ICS to formulate the incident objectives, strategy(s) and tactical direction to those units assigned to the incident.

Incident priorities should always involve and address:

1. The safety, accountability and welfare of personnel (this priority is ongoing throughout the incident).
2. Remove endangered person(s) and treat the injured.
3. Stabilise the incident and provide for life safety.
4. Protect the environment.
5. Property conservation.

Functions of command

The functions of command define standard activities that are performed by the IC to achieve the tactical objectives. The functions of command include:

- Establishing IC named by location (and, if appropriate, a command post).
- Rapidly evaluate the situation (size-up) and provide a 'situation report'.
- Identify the overall incident objectives and strategy.
- Assign resources and personnel consistent with incident priorities, plans and standard operating procedures.
- Request additional resources based on anticipated need.
- Establish and maintain personnel accountability.
- Develop an effective ICS organisation that meets the needs of the incident (expand system to fill positions as needed).
- Review, evaluate, and revise (as needed) the incident objectives and plans.
- Provide for the continuity, transfer (as necessary) and termination of command.

Establishing command and situation reports

The first unit to arrive at the scene establishes command. The initial IC remains in command until the command is transferred or the incident is stabilised and command is terminated.

As command is established, an 'initial situation report' is given. This report will include:

- A brief description of the incident situation (ie building size, occupancy, hazmat, multi-vehicle accident, etc).
- Obvious conditions (working fire, hazmat spill, multiple patients, etc).
- Any obvious incident priorities (safety, rescue, exposures).
- Additional resources needed (additional or special resource requests).

An 'updated situation report' will be provided based on further size-up, determination of necessary action and any need for additional resources.

Command options

The first arriving unit or member to establish command of the incident has several options, depending on the situation. One of the following command options may be used:

Nothing showing-investigative mode

These situations generally require investigation by the initial arriving resources while other units hold at a determined staging area.

Fast attack mode

These situations require the immediate action of the initial arriving resources and require the incident commander's (IC's) involvement in the action. In these situations the ICs lead their crew, to provide the appropriate level of supervision, while utilising radio or other types of communication to remain in command of the incident (command may be passed at the appropriate time). Examples are as follows:

1. Critical life safety situations that must be addressed immediately (ie rescue).
2. Offensive fire attacks.
3. Defensive fire attacks with immediate exposure threats.
4. Any incident where the safety and welfare of fire fighters is a major concern.
5. Obvious working incidents that require further investigation by the IC.



An incident command post (ICP) can start out on the hood of a vehicle and progress to a dedicated incident command vehicle

NB! The fast attack mode should not last more than a few minutes and will end with one of the following:

1. Situation is stabilised.
2. Situation is not stabilised and the IC must withdraw to the exterior or out of the tactical arena to assume a strategic role.
3. Command is transferred to another on scene officer (who confirms the acceptance of IC).

Command mode

Certain incidents, by virtue of their size, complexity or potential for rapid expansion, require immediate strong, direct, overall command. In such cases, the IC will initially establish an exterior, safe and effective command post, initiate the command mode and maintain in that position until command is transferred or terminated. An ICS 201 form or incident organiser should be initiated and utilised to assist in managing these types of incidents.

Establishing the command post

The first officer on the scene of an escalating incident should also establish an incident command post (ICP). An ICP can start out on the hood of a vehicle and progress to a vehicle, equipped for this purpose, providing appropriate work space for the IC and staff personnel, lighting, communications equipment, supply items and some isolation from external distractions making the command more effective and enhance safety for the on-scene members. Mobile command unit can be requested for this purpose.

In the case of wildfires, it may be necessary for the IC to initially remain mobile in order to determine the most effective strategies and develop the tactics needed to control the incident. If this occurs, a clearly defined reporting point for incoming units must be communicated.

Transfer of command

Command is transferred:

- to improve the quality of the incident command system and enhance the safety of the members assigned to the incident or
- dictated by the level of the incident or
- at the discretion of the chief fire officer or senior manager.

Transfer of command procedure:

- The more senior officer arriving on scene may at his/her discretion:
- Assume command of the incident.
- Allow the current IC to retain command and monitor command activity and effectiveness.
- Request a more qualified or more appropriate IC from another agency or an agency with higher level of jurisdictional responsibility to take over. The officer assuming command will communicate with the person being relieved by radio or face-to-face (face-to-face is the preferred method). The person being relieved will brief the officer assuming command indicating at least the following:
- Conditions – general situation status, significant events, plan (IAP), completed objectives, safety considerations.
- Actions – assignments of

Building resilience against wildfires in rural areas

By Malcolm Procter, deputy director, Department of Forestry and Fisheries (DAFF), Free State, South Africa

Climate change continues to challenge both the nation and affect food security. Fire seasons come later and stay longer each year, fires burn with more intensity. They are more damaging and dangerous to our fire fighters, the public and people's properties. When appropriate, management of wildfires for resource benefits is one component of fire management that can help us improve the condition of the land where, ultimately, we will be better able to control those unwanted fires when they happen.

Emergencies often strike without warning and can cause major damage and financial loss. Farmers are strongly advised to develop emergency preparedness plans before

an emergency occurs on the farm. First response to an emergency is the responsibility of an individual. Help should be sought once farm resources or ability has been overwhelmed. Having a contingency plan will assist in formulating a preparedness plan that is specific to your farm operation.

As disasters undermine both socio-economic development and environmental management efforts, there is a compelling need to explore how a lack of resilience changes hazard and vulnerability patterns. The degree to which farms can absorb impacts, increase overall resilience and provide effective and economical solutions to reduce disaster risks is therefore jeopardised. Furthermore, societies' traditional coping strategies are challenged.

While it may not be possible to prevent wildfires completely, wildfires resilience can be improved through good veld management. This should focus on reducing the likelihood of wildfires occurring, reducing the severity of damage and impacts on people and the environment if they do occur and assisting with fire suppression activities.

Resilience is the capacity of an individual or a community to recover from an adverse event, such as a wildfire. Resilience is not a static notion, being resilient now, doesn't mean you will be resilient forever and the opposite is also true. If you didn't cope well this time, it may help to improve your resilience and you may cope better in the future. Instead it depends on what the event

- companies and personnel.
 - Needs – for additional resources.

A ranking officer may elect to have a subordinate officer continue the role of IC in cases where an individual is effectively managing an incident and satisfactory progress is being made to bring the incident under control.

Additional overhead responsibilities

The response and arrival of additional senior personnel or qualified personnel from other agencies on the incident scene strengthens the overall ICS. As the incident escalates, the IC should use these personnel to fill various ICS positions. The priorities to fill IC positions include: operations, safety, divisions/groups, information officer (IO) and plans. It is important the ICS expand as necessary to accomplish the overall objectives. Incident command assignments will be based on incident need, priority and area coverage issues. Each incident is unique, therefore needs and priorities change. The flexibility in the use of incident command positions is critical to appropriate resolution of the incident.

In general, the first position to be filled after IC is the operations section chief. The officer originally managing the incident as IC can assume the operations section chief if command is transferred. This allows him/her to continue with his or her operational plan.

General staff positions

1. Operations section is responsible for the management of all operations directly applicable to the primary mission (implementing incident objectives, strategy and tactical directives).
2. Logistics section is the support mechanism for the organisation. Logistics provides facilities, services and material in support to all the organisational components involved in the incident.
3. Planning section responsible for collection, evaluation, dissemination and use of information needed for effective decision making.
4. Finance section evaluates and manages the risk and financial requirements for the service's involvement in the incident.

Command staff positions:

1. Safety officer to develop and recommend measures for assuring personnel safety and to assess and/or anticipate hazardous and unsafe conditions and/or tactics.
2. Information officer responsible for developing and releasing information about the incident to the news media, incident personnel, other appropriate agencies, organisations and the public on scene.
3. Liaison officer may be used in incidents that are multi-jurisdictional to communicate needs and concerns among participating organisations.

Command teams

If an incident is expected to potentially exceed district command resources and/or expected to last longer than one operational period, a provincial incident management team (IMT) can be requested to assist in certain positions. The provincial team does not however relieve the controlling authority of responsibility. 