



Topic: Utilization and Viability of Area Command

Contact: Shawna Legarza, FS Fire and Aviation Director

Phone: 202-205-0808

Email: slegarza@fs.fed.us

Area Command (AC) provides the highest level of incident management expertise and agency support during highly complex incident situations. Given recent fire year trends with extended periods at national planning level four and five, we surely will see conditions where AC will be vital to ensuring positive outcomes. The 2019 “Red Book” provides an overview of Area Command in Chapter 11 page 43 and a Complexity Assessment for determining when Area Command might be needed in Appendix M.

Area Command has proven to be effective in assisting Agency Administrators when multiple wildfires have occurred in a single forest or sub-geographic area and multiple Incident Management Teams are assigned. In these situations AC can assist Agency Administrators by providing risk management information for the entire wildfire situation, coordinating analysis, synthesizing, interpreting and displaying this information. AC facilitates interagency meetings for cooperating agencies and important stakeholders so that all concerns can be heard and addressed in a comprehensive manner (rather than fire by fire). Especially during times when firefighting resources are heavily used (limiting ability to fill new resource orders) the decisions and actions on one fire oftentimes affects the outcomes on other fires. AC has the ability to provide a common operating picture and of a group of fires as well as analysis of risk-risk tradeoffs associated with resource allocation strategies and priorities on individual and collective fires.

AC reviews and consolidates direction, objectives and requirements for all agencies and all wildfires and facilitates resolution of any conflicts and/or misunderstandings between agencies and IMTs. AC prioritizes fires and firefighting resource assignments based on consultation with Agency Administrators and Geographic Area Multi-Agency Coordinating Groups. Through the use of a risk-informed process and incorporation of local agency/local government issues, concerns and agreements resources are assigned to the wildfires where they have the greatest likelihood of improving outcomes.

AC does not interfere with AA-IMT interactions, rather assists the AAs by facilitating meetings, managing transitions, and ensuring alignment of AA direction with IMT actions.

Issue Summary

In recent years AC has been rarely used even when several fires were in close proximity indicating a significant local oversight, priority setting and coordination need. Personnel



with Area Command qualifications and skills are declining with most qualified AC personnel retired. Only two current US Forest Service employees have Area Command qualifications. This is primarily due to sporadic use of AC resulting in waning participant interest and qualifications expiring.

Consequences to the lack of AC use in complex fire management situations are:

- Multiple large fires managed in an ad hoc manner with non-standard organizations reducing ability to assess and manage overall risk.
- Reduced effectiveness and efficiency in use of use of scarce firefighting resources and limited ability to evaluate and assign incoming resources to highest priority fires and missions.

Reluctance by Agency Administrators to use AC may be due to a perceived loss of "control." In 2018 when 30,000 resources were mobilized, independent and localized incident resource mobilization and priority setting was taking place lacking AC level strategic coordination. During these intense situations AC would provide a support structure for Agency Administrators. AC would also facilitate communication with Geographic Area Coordination Centers and Multi-Agency Command supporting prioritization of critical resources.

Recommendations

1. Encourage the use of AC when multiple large fires are in proximity on National Forest lands involving major commitment of resources.
2. Revitalize participation in AC by: a) building on work with Cal Fire to stand up a new AC course, b) encouraging participation of 22 USDA Forest Service employees enrolled in the new course, and c) supporting incorporation of State employees into AC.
3. Emphasize AC concepts and use in Agency Administrator training courses.
4. Advocate for AC as an interagency tool with cooperators and local jurisdictions.