



USDA Forest Service  
Fire and Aviation Management  
Briefing Paper

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Date: April 8, 2016

**Subject:** Wildfire Decision Making – WFDSS Incident Objectives and Incident Requirements

**Background:** In 2014, examination of wildland fire incident decisions revealed that most incident objectives were written generally enough to apply to any fire in the country, decreasing the likelihood that NEPA-based management direction or agency administrator intent was being adequately considered. Generic direction to firefighters inadvertently promotes higher exposure to risks, and marginal benefits of those actions. After working with agency administrators, IMTs, local units and publishing additional documents to support decision making, another review of WFDSS Published Decisions was completed in 2015 on 32 incidents. These incidents were within Great Basin, Northern Rockies, Southern California, Northern California and Pacific Northwest Region.

**Key Points:**

- When more than one decision was reviewed for the same incident, improvement usually occurred with each successive decision.
- In most cases values to be protected were given equal consideration regardless of land ownership or agency jurisdiction.
- Incident Objectives and Incident Requirements were clearer than previous reviews although there is still room for improvement.
  - Typically the entire decision had to be read to obtain a clear understanding of the values, leader’s intent, and priorities because information was inconsistently located throughout the decision.
  - If the entire document was read, it was apparent that risks were being considered although information could be clearer and better organized to ensure leader’s intent is articulated and not misunderstood.
  - Inconsistently locating important information throughout the Decision hinders full understanding because readers (including IMTs) often do not read the entire decision.
- Evaluation of whether WFDSS Incident Objectives addressed *what, where, why, and when* found:
  - **Why** – although one of the most important aspects to address, only 31% indicated a sense of priority and “why” for multiple objectives while 69% were neutral or did not.
  - **What** – 37% indicated the primary strategic fire response while 63% were neutral or did not to any degree.
  - **Where** – 51% indicated a specific location while 49% were neutral or did not.
  - **When** – 3% indicated a specific time (e.g. Labor Day) when actions were to be prioritized over others.
- The average time to publish an initial decision was 4 days with 12 being the longest and 1 being the shortest. Taking on average 4 days to publish a Decision means timely information is not being relayed to the team; potential risks are inadvertently being taken and ultimately, firefighters are exposed to risk unnecessarily.

**Recommendation:**

- Continue work improving specificity of WFDSS Incident Objectives and Incident Requirements, leading to a more deliberate Course of Action and Rationale. This will clarify intent and improve flow through the decision and support risk based fire management, ensuring intent is understood and addressed.
- Improve linkages between WFDSS Incident Objectives, Incident Requirements, Course of Action and Rationale. Incident Objectives and Incident Requirements must be tiered to LRMPs. The Course of Action must be developed to meet the Incident Objectives. The Rationale must provide a clear explanation of how elements of the decision link together, and why the specific Course of Action provides the best means of achieving the Incident Objectives and Incident Requirements.
- Agency Administrators, Incident Commanders, and fire personnel should be aligned in their understanding of priorities for the incident. A sense of priorities should be conveyed in the Course of Action and should also be described in the Rationale.

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