



USDA Forest Service Wildfire Decision Making Incident Objectives & Incident Requirements



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Topic: Wildfire Decision Making – Incident Objectives and Requirements

Background: Examination of wildfire incident decisions revealed that most incident objectives are written generally enough that they could apply to any fire in the country. This makes them of little use to incident management teams in developing strategies and tactics to achieve an agency administrator's intent for managing a specific fire and for agency administrators seeking to clarify the objectives they want accomplished. Similarly, strategic objectives and management requirements, established from forest plans, are the basis for incident objectives and incident requirements but are rarely written with wildfire specificity. This decreases the likelihood that NEPA-based management direction is adequately implemented on a wildfire or as intended. It also increases the likelihood of additional risk to firefighters with marginal benefit.

A systematic evaluation of wildfire incident decisions was undertaken during the 2014 fire season, to better understand the situation and recommend solutions. This included site visits to 23 fires and interviews of agency administrators, incident commanders and WFDSS authors. An analysis of all objectives in the WFDSS database as of May 2014 was also conducted.

Key Points:

- More than 90 percent of incident objectives are generic (e.g. minimize the size of the fire), refer to policy (e.g. keep costs commensurate with values at risk), are doctrinal (e.g. adhere to LCES), state core values (e.g. firefighter safety is the number 1 priority), or have vague terms that have different meaning to individuals (e.g., keep the fire small).
- The lack of specificity of objectives makes it challenging to understand the relative importance of one objective to another. This leads to potential mismanagement of resources based on unclear priorities, jeopardizing a sound risk management process that may expose firefighters to hazards needlessly.
- When suppression assets are limited, AAs and IMTs must choose which objectives they have capacity to achieve. Beyond protecting life (civilian and FF) everything else is second priority and by virtue of all those "second priorities" being such, they sometimes get lumped into an incoherent mass. (Keeping the fire out of the Ft Collins municipal watershed likely is more important than protecting a pine plantation on the Arapaho-Roosevelt NF, yet they may be listed as though they have equal importance.)
- Objectives and other agency administrator direction often differ and sometimes conflict between the WFDSS decision, delegation of authority, the briefing package, other documents and ad hoc discussions, which sometimes results in misdirection in managing risk and the fire.
- In many cases IMTs are not even reading the WFDSS decision.
- The tie from Land and Resource Management Plan (LRMP) strategic objectives and management requirements to incident objectives, incident requirements, and the course of action is unclear and inconsistent in most WFDSS decisions. Often the rationale does not provide an overview of this information or why the decision is made. These inconsistencies lead to delegations of authority and briefing packages that are inconsistent or do not provide adequate agency administrator intent.
- The number of strategic objectives and management requirements from the LRMPs are excessive with at least two-thirds of them not being applicable to the wildfire incident.
- Spatial fire planning will assist managers in gleaning pertinent information for developing direction for managing a wildfire and will inform that direction with only relevant LRMP information.

Recommendations:

- There is a need to improve the specificity while reducing the number of incident objectives and requirements for a fire. This should lead to a more deliberate course of action and rationale. This in turn will support risk based fire management and ensure the most important objectives are addressed.
- There is a need to streamline team transition documents to ensure incident objectives and requirements are delivered in a consistent manner.
- Strategic objectives and management requirements not applicable to fire incidents should be eliminated from WFSS prior to fire season. The result will be better risk management.
- 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.
- There is a need to improve the linkages between 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 devised to meet the incident objectives and the Rationale must provide a clear explanation of how these elements of the decision link together and why the specific course of action provides the best means of achieving the objectives.

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Examples of Incident Objectives: Although SMART objectives are often referred to, it is understood that this can be challenging at the strategic level. The intent is to provide a sense of prioritization – why, where, what, when.

Original Incident Objective	Recommended Improvement
Keep fire south of Bear Ridge. Keep fire east of Red River. Keep fire north of Blue Lake. Keep Fire west of Highway 37.	Protect high value pine plantations north of Bear Ridge from moderate to high severity fire. Protect the high wattage power transmission line that lies on the west side of Red River until arrangements can be made to de-energize the line. Protect marten habitat south of Blue Lake from moderate to high severity fire. Protect residences and infrastructure along and to the east of Highway 37. <i>(explanation of “why” control line is located where it is)</i>
Keep fire south of the Cape Royal road at the Fuller Canyon	Keep fire south of the Cape Royal road at the Fuller Canyon intersection to allow for public access to Point Imperial during Memorial Day weekend. <i>(explanation of “why”)</i>
Use appropriate suppression response based on values at risk, resource damage potential, forest wide fire situation, and predicted weather and fire behavior.	Utilize roads, swamps and natural fuel breaks whenever possible to reduce the amount of dozer lines and minimize the disturbance of PETS habitat and cultural sites in the Abercrombie Creek area. <i>(explanation of “why”)</i>
Minimize economic impacts to communities.	Insofar as safely possible, keep FS Road 4422 open to the public for access to Hiawatha Lake and the recreation-based businesses there through Labor Day weekend. <i>(explanation of “why”)</i>
Keep the fire small as possible.	Keep the fire from entering the Long River drainage to avoid long duration, costly, and hazardous fire operations. <i>(explanation of “why”)</i>
General incident objectives that could apply to almost any fire anywhere, are not related to managing the fire itself and should be written elsewhere.	
Minimize suppression impacts to resources.	Use low severity firing operations to limit damage to pine plantations near Bear Ridge. <i>(Although more clear leader’s intent this should be either an Incident Requirement or Course of Action)</i>
Maintain positive landowner, permittee, and community relationships.	<i>Should likely be in the Delegation of Authority/Leader’s Intent rather than in the Objectives section of the Decision.</i>
Provide timely and accurate information.	<i>Should likely be in the Delegation of Authority/Leader’s Intent rather than in the Objectives section of the Decision.</i>
Manage the fire cost effectively considering values at risk.	<i>Should likely be in the Delegation of Authority/Leader’s Intent rather than in the Objectives section of the Decision.</i>

For more detailed information regarding Incident Objectives and Incident Requirements please go to the [WFM RD&A website in the References & Guidance Section](http://www.wfmrda.nwcg.gov/reference_&_guidance.php). (http://www.wfmrda.nwcg.gov/reference_&_guidance.php)