

Audio Tour, Stop 9, Incident Command System

When fires get big enough they can readily drain local fire resources, personnel and equipment. When that happens, an incident management team (IMT) is ordered to take charge of the fire. The Rim Fire was moving so quickly up the canyon that a team was ordered on day one of the fire as the Initial Attack Incident Commander readily recognized the need for immediate help.

These teams respond nationally to fires and they are organized under the Incident Command System or ICS. This organizational tool helps trained professionals to take command and control of an emergency quickly be it a fire, a flood, a hurricane or even a disaster such as 911. It also allows them to tap into resources from across the country. Batteries, engines, bull dozers, fax machines, computers, food and shower units can all be ordered to support the incident through interconnected dispatch centers staggered across the country. As a logistics section chief on a lot of large scale fires, I've been responsible for the million widgets that enable crews to put out a fire.

On relatively short notice, a well organized team can move into a remote area, set up a suite of offices and begin feeding and supplying thousands of firefighters. Just imagine the logistics involved in feeding the 5,000 people assigned to the Rim Fire. Within a day or two, a small functioning town called fire camp is erected in a remote forest location. That camp will have the infrastructure to support the fire operation and will include such things as a sleeping area full of tents; a printing shop; a first aid station; portable toilets and sinks and even a rough version of a dining hall. They also have the means to order trained crews and equipment from anywhere in the country to help put the fire out.

Logistical support is, however, just one portion of the story. Incident command teams ensure that firefighters and contractors get paid under a finance department or section. Planning keeps on top of the big picture by analyzing the fire's behavior and making timely predictions about its growth and spread. This is critical when a fire is approaching a residential area so evacuations are timed and executed well. The planning function also tracks all of the resources assigned to a fire and they produce maps that show the fire's daily progression.

Public Information Officers work with the media to keep residents informed on critical issues. They provide daily fire updates, staff phone lines and post fire information bulletins in key locations.

Putting the fire out falls to the operations department for this is where the boots hit the ground. Chasing fire is what we do best. We sling dirt, hose down houses, drop trees and conduct burnouts to save residential areas. Firefighting is an arduous, dirty job. For those that like adrenaline and hard work, it's a great job.

All of these different functional areas are run from a central location called an Incident Command Post, or ICP. This is the hub of action for those managing the various functions of the team. The ICP for the Rim Fire was located in the meadow you are now looking at. Several different teams were housed here during the Rim Fire battle.