

National Fire Plan

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Why Did the Northwest Area Command Branch?

Branching in the AC has been talked about for several years. In Incident Command System (ICS), as the number of people assigned to an incident increase, branches are established to manage the span of control. The same concept is used for branching AC, but on a much larger scale. Branching AC allows proper management of span of control and geographic areas. In the beginning, each area was looked at individually, so that if branching was needed it could be implemented and each area would have a Branch Director. Rex Mann, Northwest Area Commander, said, "The concept is to have the Area Command stay in one place because there is a local need for information and a need for feedback to Area Command." This allows AC to cover a much larger geographic area. This is especially important as more and more areas need management oversight.

Branching in Area Command was established for the following reasons:

1. Shortage of Area Command Teams.
2. The area covered is massive (distance).
3. The need for an additional management level, due to the number of incidents and distance.
4. Establish a relationship with the Agency Administrators in order to assist with strategic planning and decision making on fires.

"Many think that a group can be assembled and everything magically works, but it takes hard work to put an Area Command together," said Bob Gilman, Deputy AC. An Area Command is a core team of people who work together to cover a large area. Gilman, also states, "The key is not to micro-manage, but to macro-manage. It is using the necessary information for strategic planning and decisions, and not tactical." Area Command establishes a sense of continuity in the area and having Branch Directors reinforces the connection of Area Command and agency administrators which is very important. The Area Command manages an incident for agency administrators, so it is imperative that they are on the same page. Without a symbiotic relationship, this system would not be successful. AC reassess their needs as the incidents decrease in complexity, but the relationship built and the trust established continues with local agencies. "Area Command is established to think ahead and not to react to what happens. It's looking at the whole picture and not just a piece of it," said Mann.

There is no one "best" way to organize an incident. So under the ICS, branching is a logical function. This expands the capability of Area Command because adding two Branch Directors allows you to manage 10 IMTs easily. Once you have added 5-7 IMTs to the Area Commander's (ACDR) staff, you exceed the span of control. Using the branching concept, it is easy to expand to 15 IMTs under a single Area Command by adding 3 Branch Directors. This keeps you under the recommended span of control, 5-7 for the ACDR. The organization should develop to meet the situation. The characteristics of the incident and the needs of agency administrators will determine what organizational elements should be established. The flexibility of ICS allows administrators to organize the incident, depending on the needs assessment.



Northwest Area Commander, Rex Mann, in conference call with Area Command and Incident Commanders.



Northwest Area Command branched out to become more effective in managing big fire situations.

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The Story of Branching in Area Command

ICS provides the opportunity to manage large fires in a large geographic area. The flexibility of ICS allows management to bring in the necessary personnel as an incident increases. Branching is an important part of the ICS. Under the ICS system, branching exists in many key areas including Operations, Information, Plans and Logistics. The goal is to keep the organization as simple and as streamlined as possible, and not to overextend the span of control. Branching can be applied at any level.

Under the ICS system, there are generally three reasons to use branches.

1. ***Span of Control***—under these circumstances organizational elements directly managed by another person at another location. Maintaining adequate span of control throughout the ICS organization is very important; effective span of control varies from three to seven.
2. ***Need for a functional branch structure***—some incidents have multiple disciplines involved such as police, fire, search and rescue, and medical. These disciplines may create the need to set up incident operations around a functional branch structure.
3. ***Multi-jurisdictional incidents***—some incidents may be better organized around jurisdictional lines. In these situations, branches may be set up to reflect differences in the agencies involved.

The Branch Director may not receive written delegated command authority. The Branch Director operates directly under delegation of the Area Commander (AC). Incident Management Teams (IMTs) report directly to the Area Commander (ACDR) through the AC Branch Director. In the delegation to IMTs, it should be noted that if the AC is branched, the Branch Director will have the authority to allocate and re-allocate critical resources, etc. within the branch. Ideally, AC Branch Directors would be qualified at the Deputy AC level. For AC Branch Director; Plans, Logistics and Aviation functions will still be served from the AC and they may serve under the ACDR. For instance, a Branch Director could be located at Cours de' Lene, Great Falls, etc. The Branch Director serves as the Local Area Command Contact, but can also provide supervision for the teams in that area. This person is the coordinator between IMTs and agency administrators and connects them both to Area Command.

"Sample" Flathead Area Command

