
“We’ve made huge improvements in how we address firefighter safety. It has been painfully slow, though. All things are doable over time; it’s just the speed of change that is difficult. We will change over time, but do we want to wait 20 years and sustain the 20 firefighter deaths per year and increasing public deaths?”

—Type 1 Incident Commander, Society Focus Group

A 10-year review of accidents and incidents within the USDA Forest Service wildland fire system.

USDA Forest Service photo by Jace Jacobs.
Abstract

This document seeks to describe the wildland fire system and culture within which U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service employees operate. To do so, this review presents a narrative of the Forest Service’s wildland fire system based on the opinions, experiences, and perspectives of those who operate within it.

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Chapter 9. Is “Safety First” a Myth?

“I’ve always thought ‘safety first’ was about the most stupid thing you could say because you all know that’s not really the over-riding thing.”

—Assistant Regional Fire Director, Fatalities and Injuries Focus Group

“Safety first” is a phrase heard often during wildland fire operations. Well, let’s be honest, “often” is an understatement. The phrase is usually the number one objective on every fire and is vocalized several times a day at briefings and on the fire line. Yet, to participants, the phrase can feel disingenuous; in one breath, safety is promoted as the highest priority and that “no home is worth a life,” but in the next breath wildland firefighters are tasked with conducting structure protection.

Time and time again, focus group participants stated how the work they do is inherently risky; no matter where firefighters are working, they will always be exposed to some form of hazard. Yet the work they do is vital to the mission. This creates an ever-present goal conflict between safety and mission accomplishment that the wildland fire organization must navigate daily. It is an ongoing challenge that has been in the wildland fire system for quite some time, as the opening quote from Chief Dale Bosworth in the 2007 Dialogos Diagnostic Memo illustrates:

“We have grieved too often for those who lost their lives in support of our mission...
At the end of the day, I want everyone to go home to their families.”

While this statement is hard to argue with, it also doesn’t resolve the problem, and has left firefighters to figure out what is “safe enough” and what risk is acceptable at any given moment. Various organizational initiatives have been implemented in an effort to help find this illusive sweet spot including the “Safety Journey,” “Stop, Think, Talk, Act,” and Chief Tidwell’s goal of zero fatalities. But rather than a universally accepted aspirational statement, the goal of zero fatalities has sparked a provocative conversation that had not been formally discussed before: is zero realistic or is it impossible within the current wildland fire system?

“Is that what people are preaching when they say, ‘Yeah shoot for zero,’? Are you pitching for drastic, dramatic change? And then once we figure out what it looks like on the ground, are we still onboard with it?”

—National Interagency Fire Center Branch Chief, Fatalities and Injuries Focus Group

While many participants would disagree with the possibility of achieving “zero,” it has never stopped the fire organization from striving for that number. As focus group participants grappled with this question, they asked themselves what would need to change within the fire system to make it safer while still accomplishing the mission of the agency? At one extreme, some participants felt a complete overhaul of how the Forest Service approaches wildland fire operations was needed, like investing entirely in preventative and educational services and abandoning fire suppression. Others felt simply dropping the term “safety” and replacing it with an investment in risk management skills was the best path forward.
Several focus group participants felt the emphasis in recent years on risk management has been a positive step forward. They see developing sound risk management skills within employees as a means to improve performance and decrease accidents, injuries, and fatalities. Additionally, some felt using the risk management process is an important departure from the term “safety,” which to some, implies a zero-risk option. The wildland fire environment is far from being free of known dangers, and by using a process that acknowledges the inherent risk, it validates the work firefighters do every day. Practicing risk management provides those in the fire organization with a common process and vocabulary with which to talk about the ever-present risks of the wildland fire environment. The “Burdette Fire Case Study” offers just one example of what success can look like when risk management processes are put into place.

Expanding on the conversation around zero fatalities, participants acknowledged that under the agency’s current approach to wildland fire, accidents, injuries, and fatalities are likely to continue at the rate they have been. Sending firefighters into remote areas where true safety zones are often not available or where evacuation times of an injured firefighter are extended is a recipe for increased risk. If the agency truly wants to reduce the risk, some participants felt a complete overhaul of the wildland fire system of work was needed. At the extreme end, the suggestion was made to completely stop suppressing wildland fires. The science shows fire is a natural part of the landscape. So instead of pouring billions of dollars into fighting fires, some participants suggested pouring that money into implementing vast fuels reduction projects, educating the public on how to live with fire, and collaborating with partners to ensure they are successful in their missions despite the change in Forest Service mission. Participants also recognized this was a titanic-level shift that would take a large budget, a dedicated communications plan, time, and most of all, courage.

“|The fire system is as safe as the fire system can be until we change the system itself.”
—Assistant Regional Fire Director, Fatalities and Injuries Focus Group

Knowing with the certainty of hindsight and experience that unless the system changes, the agency will continue to experience injuries and fatalities, what steps can the fire organization take to start changing? For many, completely overhauling the system will seem daunting and impossible; for others it will be unnerving as it is a system that fundamentally works well. Despite the vocalization to change the wildland fire system, are those who operate within the system willing to change and what would the effects of those changes be? One facilitator...
posed this hypothetical question to their peers in the fatalities and injuries focus group and to the agency as a whole:

“If we’re willing to drive 20 miles an hour everywhere we go, we can guarantee zero fatalities on the road [excluding pedestrians] ...so if you do a system-level change that drastic, then the goal is possible. Are we willing to do that drastic of a change and accept all the other consequences that come with zero fatalities on the highway?”

In other words, is it possible to accomplish the mission of the Forest Service or the objectives of an incident while truly holding safety as the highest priority? Given the challenge, focus group participants recognized the need to understand the conditions of influence that tip the balance between safety and mission accomplishment. These discussions will likely be difficult as most value conflicts tend to feel like choosing between two “rights” while grappling with uncertainty. But by giving the safety-mission accomplishment continuum the attention it deserves, maybe the agency can move closer to who we aspire to be as an organization.

**Threads of Change**

While few would argue with Chief Bosworth’s observation that “we have grieved too often,” what has the agency done to fundamentally change the wildland fire system? Interwoven through the conversations was an underlying current of fatigue and frustration but also threads of optimism. While fatalities and serious injuries are still occurring, it is important to acknowledge positive change is happening, hard truths are being heard, and tangible investments are being made. Learning Reviews and Facilitated Learning Analyses strive to prioritize learning from events to prepare for the future. Courses like “You Will Not Stand Alone” and “Stress First Aid,” as well as initiatives such as safety engagement sessions, hiring a medical director, and standing up an agency-wide emergency medical services program were acknowledged as important steps by focus group participants. These examples show tangible investments in prioritizing the health and safety of agency employees. Yet, most of these threads of change serve only to reduce the severity of events or to learn from them. How do we as an agency make more substantive changes that remove or alter system drivers rather than just mask them?

“Maybe this is the conversation that needs to happen at the higher levels of the organization. They [senior leadership] wish for a different outcome of what’s going on when we have fatalities, right? So, is part of that conversation the way we staff our fire organization?”

—Regional Safety Manager, Fatalities and Injuries Focus Group
Learning Challenge

Gather your work group and discuss this chapter using the following questions as a facilitation guide:

Q What do you think... is “safety first” a myth?

Q In what ways does the tension between the desire to do meaningful work and the need to bring everyone home safely manifest at your home unit or within the larger agency?

Q In what ways do you see safety held as a core value in your workplace? Is safety one of your core values?

Q In what ways does safety become a lower priority when faced with other pressures?

Q How do you feel about the organizational efforts (e.g., the safety journey, the safety empowerment card, “Stop, Think, Talk, Act”) implemented in recent years to improve safety? Have you seen these efforts change how work is done?

In the fatalities and injuries focus group, a facilitator asked participants to consider why the agency still experiences injuries and fatalities, to which one participant responded:

“Would it be worth it to say it's just the cost of doing business?”

Q Are the losses of friends and colleagues the cost of doing business? If not, ask yourself if you are truly willing to make the necessary changes that may be required to achieve that goal.

Q What improvements to how the fire organization manages risk have you seen in recent years? Where can the fire organization further improve?

Continued Learning

Want to dive in a little further into the topic of working safely in the wildland fire environment?

Check out the article “Same as It Ever Was...” from the winter 2015 publication of “Two More Chains.”

Opportunity

Tell us about your experience participating in this challenge at this [team learning link]!
Endnotes


