



WILDLAND FIRE

Communications

Incident Dispatch Takes Root in Colorado

A blowup on Colorado's Missionary Ridge fire at 3PM on June 24th, one of two major fires that burned more than 208,000 acres and destroyed 189 homes last summer. At this point the fire is seriously bumping into one of the radio relay sites for La Plata County, adding to the incident's communications challenges. 90-degree temperature, 6% relative humidity, and wind speed of 15-25 MPH contributed to unprecedented fire behavior on this incident.



BRENT HABERER



Communications Technicians Mark Hall, with Colorado's Type 3 Incident Management Team, and Bryan Rowe, with the US Forest Service, setting up a repeater site for the Hayman Fire using computerized topographic mapping software.

By Nancy J. Rigg

Every forester knows that although wildland fires can devastate the landscape, they also play a vital role in the creation of new forests. The intense heat and smoke is an essential element that helps long dormant seedpods germinate. In Colorado, following the driest year on record in the midst of a years-long drought, the land was primed for disaster in 2002. Primed, too, were communications personnel in Jefferson County, who formed the county's first Incident Dispatch Team (IDT) in October 2001 in order to integrate 9-1-1 dispatchers into field incident command posts to improve communications during major emergencies and ease the burden that prolonged or complex incidents have on local dispatch centers.

IDT is a concept that germinated in California, where wildfires and other disasters are an annual ritual. The seed then sprouted in Florida before making its way to the Rocky Mountains. It is a concept that many dispatchers hope will take root nationwide.

Incident Dispatch: Communications in the Field

IDT is to communications what automatic mutual aid is to fire-EMS and law enforcement. According to Bruce Roome, Communications Manager of the Arvada Fire Protection District, who serves as coordinator of the Critical Inci-

dent Dispatch Team for Jefferson County, "Most agencies can handle the first 24-hours of a big or prolonged incident, but it's after that when they may need help staffing their mobile command center communications vans. During the Columbine High School incident in 1999 and a couple of large wildland fires, including the Buffalo Creek fire in May 1996 and the Hi Meadow fire in June 2000, the folks in the Jefferson County Sheriff's Office comm center got creamed, so they wondered if all the agencies in Jefferson County would be interested in contributing dispatchers to a 'Critical Incident Dispatch Team,' with specialized training for wildfire dispatch, SWAT team call-outs, and other emergencies."

The involvement of police, fire, and paramedic personnel in the Columbine High School shooting incident is well documented, but Roome pointed out that the impact of such a prolonged incident on 9-1-1 dispatchers from the Jefferson County Sheriff's Office (JCSO) went virtually unrecognized. In addition to fielding the usual emergency calls from citizens throughout the county, dispatch personnel also staffed the command post at the scene for two weeks non-stop.

Later that summer, JCSO dispatchers again performed extra duty when a series of wildfires erupted in the local mountains, including the Hi Meadow fire. "Columbine and the Hi Meadow

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Firefighters Tracy Vreeland, Karen Howlett, and Keith Hotal from Colorado's Upper Pine Fire District pull hose on the Missionary Ridge Fire.



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fire really strained our dispatch center,” explained Tim McSherry, JCSO Critical Incident Response Manager. “The Critical Incident Dispatch Team provides mutual aid for dispatchers. If one agency has a large incident that’s going to drain their dispatch center, we can call on the team, which is made up of dispatchers from the other agencies, to fill in and help handle communications for the incident.”

Bonnie Maney, Telecommunications Manager for the Town of Palm Beach Police Department and IDT Coordinator for the State of Florida, explained the advantages of the IDT concept. “If we have another major hurricane, like Andrew, or a huge firestorm, as our dispatchers and resources are thoroughly depleted, exhausted, and may have their own personal lives to attend to, we can have dispatchers from other areas who have the same standardized core training come in and aid the local dispatch centers,” she said. “The idea behind IDT is to take a specific incident and everything that goes with it that can bottleneck your communications and move it into a field command post. It takes all that chaos and confusion out of your dispatch center and puts it into the field where resources are being called.”

Traditionally, sworn personnel, including police officers and firefighters, are called upon to handle “scribing duties” like resource check-in and accountability in the field, Maney added. “The IDT concept allows dispatchers, who handle these duties every single day, to work in the field, instead of just within the four walls of the comm center. I can’t arrest anybody. I have no authority. And I really don’t want to go into a burning building or Hazmat situation. But I do know how to perform the functions and duties associated with being a dispatcher, and I have the multi-functional skills to take care of what needs to be taken care of.”

The IDT program in Florida was introduced in the fall of 1999. IDT dispatchers respond locally, regionally, and at the state level, depending on need. “The use of IDTs is identified in the statewide Emergency Response Plan,”

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BRIAN CAPALBO

A Hermosa Cliff fire engine supports a crew performing structure protection as fire encroaches on a garage in Vallecito during the Missionary Ridge Fire.

Maney said. "We may set up on the back of a battalion chief's vehicle or patrol car, or we may work out of a full mobile comm vehicle, but putting dispatchers in the field where they can be most effective allows an incident commander to put sworn personnel back out where they can also be most effective."

"Our goal is to become an all-hazards

response team," Tim McSherry said. "We have police dispatchers who are very familiar with law enforcement operations and fire dispatchers who know how to handle structural fires and EMS calls. But wildfire dispatching is kind of new for us. We're in a learning curve. We're still trying to find out what role our Critical Incident Dispatch Team



BRIAN CAPALBO

Smoke shrouds evergreens in the San Juan National Forest near Cool Water Ranch, during the height of the Missionary Ridge Fire.

will play in terms of wildfires.”

Wildland Fire Command and Communications

Using the standard, flexible Incident Command System (ICS), the management of major wildfires is carefully structured and orchestrated through the National Interagency Fire Center in Boise, Idaho. At the federal level there are 16 Incident Management Teams (IMTs) that are categorized as Type 1, and approximately 35 Type 2 Incident Management Teams, comprised of personnel from a variety of federal, state, county, and local agencies. Type 1 National Teams manage large wildfires with over 500 personnel assigned to them. These incidents involve the most complex logistical, fiscal, planning, operational and safety issues. Type 2 Teams generally manage less complex wildfires involving fewer than 500 people.

Like most disasters, there is a tiered response for wildfires, with resources first coordinated at the local level. In Colorado, by statute, elected county sheriffs serve as fire wardens. “From what I’ve been told, this statute goes



BRIAN CAPALBO

Assistant Chief Keith Hotal, Upper Pine Fire District from Bayfield (CO), communicates with his crew on the Missionary Ridge Fire.

back about 100 years,” Scott Wells, Director of the JCSO Critical Incident

Response Team, explained. “It was implemented when two fire departments

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were standing there arguing about who was going to put out a fire. Whether this is true or not, legend has it that this is how the sheriff became the local fire warden.”

JCSO supports a Type 3 Incident Management Team, which operates at the local or regional level. According to Tim McSherry, “A Type 3 Incident Management Team is a step between the local fire chief and a Type 1 or 2 federal team. Type 3 teams fit the niche between a local jurisdiction or agency that may not have all the skills and capabilities needed to manage an incident that’s larger or more complex than what they’re used to. For example, if a local fire department knows that a fire is big and the fire chief needs to focus more on operational issues, but may not have the manpower or knowledge needed to bring in showers, port-a-potties, and food, or do the planning needed for the next several operational periods, a Type 3 IMT can be very helpful.”

Within the ICS model, the Communications Unit falls under the Logistics Section and has traditionally drawn from a large cadre of communications specialists. However, until recently with the advent of Incident Dispatch Teams, few 9-1-1 dispatchers have been directly involved in ICS-based field operations. The Incident Dispatch Team concept has provided a structure for integrating dispatchers, with their unique knowledge and experience, into ICS Communications Units.

Mark Hall is the Communications Unit Leader for the Jefferson County Type 3 IMT. “Our unit manages all communications for the incident, including amateur radio and public safety frequencies. We develop the radio plan, clone the radios, and manage our communications organization exactly like the interagency organization would do at the Type 2 or Type 1 level.”

A combination of amateur radio operators and 9-1-1 dispatchers serve with the Jeffco IMT. Although HAM radio is not authorized for use at the federal level for wildfire field operations, in the Rocky Mountains, where radio communications can be tricky, HAM radio operators do serve in the field at the state and local levels. “We’re one of the only communications units in the country that has amateur radio operators at the line level who are fire qualified and out with the

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crews,” Hall explained. “We’ve got 18 people who are line qualified. We own our own personal protective equipment and we’re cleared by the county to go out with the fire crews to make sure that communications are functioning in the early hours of an incident.”

Although the HAM operators do not serve on the Critical Incident Dispatch Team, they work cooperatively with dispatchers in the field. “Dispatchers serve in dispatch positions,” Hall said. “Their professionalism and expertise is very desirable. When we deploy with the Type 3 IMT, two dispatchers from the IDT come with the auto-response. It’s a unique mix of dispatchers and HAM operators. We’ve become an indispensable resource for the county Incident Management Team. Communications has always been one of the biggest issues at the operational level during big incidents. What we work hard to do is minimize the amount of time that chaos exists.”

The Hayman Fire

In March 2002, when Colorado’s



GEORGE BRADFORD

The Communications Unit for the Missionary Ridge Fire. Incident Communications Center Manager Carol Shaw [left] and contracted dispatcher Jenille Boston manage the command net radio on dayshift, July 1st.

famous ski resorts are ordinarily cluttered with snow bunnies and switch riding snowboarders, the snow pack that graces the majestic peaks of the Rocky Mountains was only 56% of normal. Six weeks later it had plummeted to 27% of normal. Reservoirs and lakes were gasping for runoff. Vegetation choking the

forests and Alpine meadows was parched from years of drought and highly combustible. By the end of April and beginning of May, there were ominous signs of the fire season to come when the Snaking, Black Mountain, and Schoonover blazes were ignited, and nearly 88 homes were incinerated in the

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Iron Mountain fire.

But nothing prepared Colorado residents and emergency responders for the Hayman fire, the state's largest inferno in recorded history.

On June 8th, a small arson fire was ignited near Lake George in Park County, a picturesque, mountainous area south of the Denver metropolitan area. Conditions were ripe for wildfires, with temperatures in the 80s, single-digit humidity, and rising winds. The whole state was a tinderbox waiting to combust. Even as the Hayman fire sprang to life in Park County, two other huge blazes - the Coal Seam and Missionary Ridge fires - were ignited on June 8th and 9th, prompting Colorado Governor Bill Owens to despair that the "whole state" was on fire.

Jefferson County's Type 3 incident management team (IMT) was deployed immediately to the Hayman fire during the transition from local command to the federal Type 1 IMT. "We were deployed at the request of Park County," Mark Hall explained, "because we are the only resource in Colorado that handles inci-

dent management at the regional level."

Tim McSherry initially served as liaison between the IMT and local responders. He then stayed on as the JCSO representative once the fire had been turned over to the Type 1 Team. "When I got the call Saturday night, the fire was only about 150 acres," McSherry said. "By the time our team arrived on Sunday morning, the fire had grown to about 400 acres. But on Sunday it made a huge run up to 40,000 acres. It was nothing like we'd ever seen here before. The plume was up to 40,000 feet, with 45-MPH winds and gusts up to 60-MPH. Conditions were just right for the fire to do whatever it wanted to."

Brent Haberer was the Type 3 IMT's Incident Communications Leader, creating a plan for the radio frequencies, ordering extra phones for the command center, and ensuring that the radios were cloned so that everyone could communicate from the field. "In addition to the people in command positions," Haberer said, "there were four HAM radio people working with me, as well as two dispatchers."

Josh Green, a dispatcher with the Golden Police Department who serves as a Communications Specialist on the JCSO Critical Incident Dispatch Team, was called out for the first time to the Hayman fire. "The Hayman fire was a real eye-opener," he said. "For all our training, nothing could have prepared us for walking into an incident command post for the first time. At first it looks like pandemonium, one level below an insane asylum. But the more you watch things, you realize that everybody is doing their jobs and everyone has an assigned task." Green and his partner took the night shift while the transition was made from the Type 3 to the Type 1 IMT.

"As a general rule, dispatchers are not trained to go out into the field," Green said. "Comm centers are designed to handle short-term calls and we're used to knowing what's going on and who's on call. You go to a wildfire and you don't know anybody who's on call. It's a completely different world. When you're dispatching in a communications center you've got set policies, a computer sys-



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tem that runs one way, and you get used to that. When you move into the field, you use the incident command system, which involves a lot of writing by hand. You maintain records, answer phones, take requests from the Incident Commander and his staff and make things happen. You may be asked to do everything from ordering food to air attacks.”

For communications personnel who accompany fire crews into the field, Mark Hall noted, “Nothing in training prepares you for staring down a wildfire. Nature really has the upper hand and the power is awesome.” Although radio operators are always located in a “safe zone,” Hall added, “It’s an eye-opening, humbling experience to see 200-foot flames coming at you.”

The Hayman fire eventually consumed nearly 138,000 acres in four counties, destroyed 133 homes, one business and 466 other structures, and ended up with a remarkable three federal Type 1 IMTs assigned to it. It took six weeks to get the fire under control.

Incident Dispatch Teams: Future Operations

Carol Shaw is the Incident Communi-

cations Manager assigned to the Washington Interagency Management Team-3, a Type 2 IMT. During the fire season, Shaw moves from one inferno to the next. “There are no radio operators assigned to the IMT,” she explained, “just my position.” Once in place in the incident command post, Shaw orders communications personnel through the local interagency fire coordination center to fill staffing needs. For the Missionary Ridge Fire, which burned 70,485 acres east of Durango (CO), she managed a staff of 10 radio operators working night and day shifts.

Shaw likes the idea of adding 9-1-1 dispatchers to the cadre of communications personnel available to work wildfires and other emergencies. “I’ve never had a 9-1-1 dispatcher serve on one of my communications teams,” she said, “but it’s a terrific idea. Even though the interagency fire system hasn’t yet recognized Incident Dispatch Teams as a resource, dispatchers with the right background can get onto the interagency roster. I look for certain skills, including decision-making, leadership, and good, solid people skills to make up the team.”

Working wildfires may not be for everyone, Shaw said. “Field work doesn’t take place in a nice, air-conditioned room, with computers and guide sheets giving us prompts. It’s pretty rustic. This is piece-of-paper, radio-in-front-of-you, one-on-one communications and decision-making. Working in a comm center is no small challenge and public safety dispatchers are used to thinking on their feet, so a person with these skills would be such an asset in the field.”

Large incidents “aren’t going to go away,” Shaw added. “In fact with everything from natural disasters to terrorism, these incidents are going to continue to become more complex, and with more complexity we need skilled people. We’re always looking for good people to work with, and public safety dispatchers come from a talent pool that we haven’t drawn from as much as I think we should.” ■

Nancy J. Rigg is a writer, filmmaker, and public safety education consultant. She is a frequent contributor to 9-1-1 Magazine.



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