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Incident Safety: Deploying Trained and Equipped Safety Officers

SUMMARY

Incident commanders should ensure that properly trained and equipped safety officers are immediately deployed at large scale incidents. The incident safety officer must participate in all planning meetings to ensure the implementation of a safety plan in the Incident Action Plan (IAP).

DESCRIPTION

The San Diego, California, area suffered one of the most destructive fires in the state's history in October 2003. The Cedar Fire began in the Cedar Creek area of the Cleveland National Forest late in the afternoon of October 25, 2003. The City of San Diego's Fire-Rescue Department (SDFD) initially committed 2 Strike Teams to support fire operations across 116,000 acres in neighboring jurisdictions. The fire entered the city of San Diego the next morning. Over the next 2 days, the wildland/urban interface fire consumed more than 28,000 acres within the city and the Miramar Marine Corps Air Station. The SDFD response included several hundred personnel and approximately 100 apparatus. In some instances, personnel worked in excess of 36 hours on the fire line and were exposed to a variety of safety hazards.

SDFD did not designate a safety officer for the first 2 days of operations due to a lack of available personnel and equipment. There were insufficient personnel to staff dedicated safety officer positions. The SDFD training staff members, who are SDFD's designated safety officers, had been assigned to other duties. In the absence of dedicated safety officers, branch directors and division supervisors assumed the role and responsibility of safety officer as a collateral duty. Consequently, inadequate attention was devoted to safety issues such as the appropriate use of personal protective equipment, work/rest ratios, and respiratory protection. Many personnel were observed in high risk/low benefit situations; in some instances, the lack of appropriate safety equipment led to injuries. These safety positions were not filled on a dedicated basis until October 28.

Incident commanders should assign an incident safety officer from the outset of a large scale incident. The safety officer assists the incident commander by ensuring that appropriate safety measures are implemented and adhered to by personnel. The safety officer actively participates in the incident planning process and ensures that the IAP addresses personnel safety. According to the SDFD after-action report, "this briefing must be reviewed with all units prior to a work assignment."

CITATION

Bowman, Jeff. *Cedar Fire 2003 After Action Report*. City of San Diego Fire-Rescue Department. Jun 2004.

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