

2013 Wildland Fire Forum

Questions and Answers:

1. Can you put the list of structure triage criteria on your website?
Firefighter Structural Triage Assessment is provided as a separate document on this website
2. What about controlled burns and the forest service?
Chief Weege: We don't always know much ahead that the forest service is performing a controlled burn. They collect slash piles and then when there is enough snow on the ground and the weather conditions are right they burn those slash piles to get rid of them. This has been going on for a long time. Unfortunately last week there were really high winds in Evergreen but up on that mountain in Conifer where they were burning just south of Evergreen the winds weren't anywhere near what we were seeing here. I drove out there myself to see what things were like you could tell by the smoke that their wind was not like it was here. It makes a lot of people nervous. Our dispatch center took over 50 calls that day which we are happy to do. You will see those burns and sometimes we get a days notice or sometimes the morning of because they are watching the weather conditions and won't make a determination of if it's a go or no go until actually that day.
3. Do any of the systems you were talking about like CodeRed or Reverse 911 proactively notify residents if weather conditions have changed or bans are being put in place?
Diane Culverhouse: No they don't. They do have a weather warning system that you can sign up for free as part of their notification that you can sign up for but no they don't do that unless we prompt it.
So we could start a bbq and not know there's a ban against charcoal fires?
PIO Montague: For fire bans the media broadcasts those and they are posted on the Jefferson and Clear Creek County Sheriff websites.
FLSE Saba: You can register for the CodeRed with your cell phone if you use the QR tag on the back of the EFR business cards.
Chief Weege: We post signs at all roads into the district and at our stations. You'll see the Jefferson County mobile electronic sign out. We are trying to get the word out the best ways we can.
4. Can families go to your website to look up what to do as far as fire mitigation at their house, like trimming trees back or creating a barrier?
FLSE Saba: I talked about the **Ready Set Go** (available as a separate document on this website) program and that has exactly that. But also get an evacuation plan for your family and practice it. I don't know how many schools I go to and the kids tell me that they don't have an evacuation plan and haven't practiced with their parents. I have in my bag over there a smoke detector. If you put anything in your house that can save yourself it's a smoke detector. The fire we had last year on Bear Mountain – those people got out because their smoke detector went off. In a wildland sense smoke detectors go off pretty early in a fire so there's a good chance that if there is smoke or fire in the forest around you your detectors will go off.
Chief Weege: If you go to our website you'll see a link to Firewise which gives a lot of information. A lot of the counties have adopted it and Firewise will show you some pictures of how to properly mitigate your property. Colorado State University did a bunch of brochures that you can get access to. They draw zones out so in the first 15/30 feet around the house depending on how steep the site is should be clear. Low grass, no bushes, and the junipers we call gasoline. They are terrible so clear out that first 15 to 30 feet. The next zone you want to thin the trees and limb them up at least 10 feet high. The zone after that, zone 3, is continued thinning. That's part of the mitigation that Chief Johnson talked about that helps us look at your house and say yes we can save this house. If you have trees right up against

your house and the branches are down to the ground we can't spend hours there cutting all of those trees down and pulling them away from the house. That's just a red flag. I'm sorry, we don't have enough time to save this house.

5. I've been told and maybe this follows with the triage situation that if one had a fire suppression system or maybe some sort of retardant and leave a 55 gallon drum of retardant out on your driveway, I've been told that the fire department will actually apply that to your home for you. Is that something that's true or ever done?

Chief Johnson: Maybe, I don't have a clear answer there. Having done some structure triage protection it's difficult to say. We will use any tools that we find available for us to help mitigate the house and get it ready for the fire front. But it's hard to say for sure. It's hard to know when we are moving very quickly house to house we would have to be able to identify it quickly as something we can use and recognize. If it's well marked and there for us to use, you bet we'll use it. We use hot tubs, pools, whatever we can find to help. So yes if it's there and marked we will use it.

6. Some insurance companies have policies that they contract with private people to defend your house. How do you coordinate with that or do you prohibit that?

Chief Johnson: That's a great question and I don't have a clear answer for it. It really complicates how we work. We have heard of that being used on various fires. I know up in Boulder there were some fire companies that deployed it that way. It definitely complicates our command structure and how we are going to manage resources. Ultimately we do need them to fall under the command structure so that we can keep them safe too. We have to worry about those people as much as we worry about any other house that we have in the fire.

Should that be something that we put on that information that you have asked for (CodeRed) or is there an area where you ask for that and we can identify an insurance company?

Chief Weege: The counties have already started discussions with the insurance companies. Through the fire chiefs meetings that I go to it was discussed in our annual operating plan which is a county wide plan that all of the agencies sign up for. It was discussed this year for how are we going to address these guys to make sure they are checking in at the command post. The county and the sheriff's departments are working on that. We had those conversations last year and will continue them this year. The worst thing that can happen on fire scene is free lancing for people to see a fire and just show up and try to work it. The command system doesn't account for that and can't control that. We need to know where everybody is at all times. We are trying to bring that group into this because they are private contractors that are going in and we have to have them check in at the command center and then we'll tell them whether it's safe for them to get in there or not. Those conversations are ongoing.

Chief Johnson: As we said it is complicated and that does make it tough but if we can figure out a way to coordinate them and bring them into the incident command system so that we can keep them safe then the more people the better. If they have a crew out there that can operate safely inside our incident command system and they take one house off of our list that we have to go to that's pretty cool. So we'll take the help we can get as long as we can figure out the safety factor. I really worry more about the safety factor than having those extra people on the ground because as Chief Weege said accountability is a major challenge for us when we're on a fire scene, whether it's a structure fire or all the way up to the biggest wildland fires. It makes it hard. If we can figure out a way to do it we'll put them to work

7. Are you going to have the slash collection site this year?

Deputy Gutke: There will be slash collection at Conifer High School on June 15th and 16th, at Coal Creek on June 22nd and 23rd, and at Inter-Canyon on August 10th and 11th.

8. Are there any rules or regulations if you are a Level 1 or 2 evacuations when someone is away from home at the time but need to get back in to get animals out?

Chief Weege: The best thing you can do is call 911 and tell them the address and the situation. The determination can then be made for whether there is time to send someone in to get them.

What if send a friend to get them out? Will they be allowed back in to the area to get them?

Chief Weege: If it's a level 2 where it's a mandatory evacuation once they have people out they won't let you back in.

To add to that I am a pet sitter and I stay overnight at the houses while people are out of state so if I am gone briefly and hear about the fire how do I get back in to save the animals I am responsible for?

Chief Weege: Well hopefully we are at a level one to notify people so if the system is working the way we want that would be your trigger to drop what you are doing and get home and get the animals out. The level one is meant for that case where you need more time to get things together and get out of there.

So if I am gone from the house and haven't gotten the reverse 911 then what addresses do I put in my phone because I do the 285 corridor from Bailey to Morrison and I do Evergreen? So how do we cover this?

Diane Culverhouse: You can put your phone number into those addresses. Just register the phone number to the address that you are staying at and if you download the free app it will send you the alert notification of the geographical area that you are in on your phone. If your customers list your phone number in CodeRed to their address you will get the notifications.

9. When there is a fire ban in effect does that include the discharge of firearms?

Deputy Gutke: Firearms are allowed in sanctioned gun ranges and in the National Forest but it depends on what is being shot at, regular targets or explosive targets. We will try to address the explosive targets that explode into a fire ball as that would be a bad thing in a fire ban. You hope common sense would take over but not so much. Right now fire bans do not include a ban on firearms.

10. How do we work with HEAT for large animal evacuation?

Karla: Jefferson County Animal Response Team works with HEAT. So if you have livestock that you can't move out or you aren't home and can't move out call the Sheriff's office and we coordinate moving pets and livestock out of the area on your behalf. At level one call and we will get you some assistance.

11. Earlier you said that the reverse CodeRed calls have to go to a land line and this lady back here asked a question about her cell phone number but from what you said earlier that won't work.

Deputy Gutke: It can go to a land line but it takes longer. With 1000 people in a community there may only be 10 lines that feed that. The land line company determines that and the calls have to funnel through that so as Diane was explaining if you go with a text or email instead of a phone call then it goes out in minutes like a blanket.

Diane Culverhouse: You can set it up to receive it on your land line or cell phone. The phone companies provide the land line numbers to us for reverse calling. It's your cell phone that we don't have so if you want to receive the call on your cell phone you have to go to the website and register it for the calls. You don't have to sign up for text messages or emails to your cell phone. You can just get voice phone calls to your cell phone if you want. For VoIP phones all of the dispatch centers have worked really hard with phone companies to make sure that we have the data in order to call you. So the best thing to do is test the system or call if you have a VoIP phone and we will be able to tell you if you are in the system.

12. For a level one evacuation what kind of distance do you put around the fire? I know there are a lot of variable but for my comfort if I get that call how would I know if it's a mile or 10 miles?

Chief Weege: The message will mainly say there is something in your area. The Incident Commander determines how big of an area to evacuate based on variables and trigger points that he sets. Once trigger points are met it changes how he thinks and what an evacuation might be like. If we have a structure fire in the middle of a field and we are worried about the field starting to catch then we might do an evacuation of a mile radius but you won't know that; you'll get that because you are within the mile. If it's in the middle of the forest and the trees are starting to catch then the evacuation might be a bigger area and the incident commander is going to state that and it may change a couple of times throughout the incident.

Diane Culverhouse: One of the things that are important to remember as the undersheriff mentioned earlier it's important to remember the reverse 911 system is not 100%. One hundred percent of the people that we need to reach are never going to get a call. The last time 82% of the people they were trying to reach got the call. We will never reach 100%; this system is not fail safe. That is why you have to stay in-tune with social media, local news and media outlets. It's very very important that you don't solely just on reverse 911 notifications because there is a chance that you won't get it.

Deputy Gutke: Even more so than that to is looking at the smoke column and behavior, what are the temperatures, which way is the wind blowing. Make that decision on your own too.

Chief Johnson: Trust your instincts. Ultimately if you leave with anything tonight it's don't hesitate to get out, don't wait for the phone call or the sheriff to knock on your door.

If you are feeling uncomfortable or nervous and it's not looking right go ahead and get going. There is nothing that says you should have to wait for that. And one thing the chief mentioned about evacuation of structure fires earlier, one thing to keep in mind is that in Evergreen we are all part of the urban interface and that works the opposite direction too. In terms of the fire department perspective we view structure fires as the start of a wildland fire and we treat all of our structure fires that way. Our structure fires are close to the trees and all of the embers they tend to put off we attack them as a wildland fire. For wildland fires we wear different gear and use different amounts of water and types of trucks but in our heads especially the incident commander it's a wildland fire.

Deputy Gutke: In an ideal world you could get all three levels and time between them. Ideally it can be ½ hour between levels but as the past has shown we can go from a stage 1 to a 3 with no level 2 involved. It just went that fast. Wind driven events throw everything out the window. I don't want you to have a false sense that you're going to get a level one and an hour later a level 2, 30 minutes later a 3. It could just a 3 if it's close.

13. During lightening season is there any remote sensing technology to monitor where the lightning strikes are to help you?

Chief Johnson: There is some technology that we can use that we do look at that from time to time. Though I will tell you that last summer a couple of times I was standing up on top of some mountains watching hundreds of lightning strikes. We had 40-50 firefighters driving around district in all of the brush trucks to be ready to jump on them. It felt like bombs going off around us, a very scary time. That technology can helps us, a lot of times it is more helpful in terms determining location or cause instead than it is in terms of helping us with suppression actions.

Deputy Gutke: At the sheriff's office we subscribe to a weather company to try to track lightning strikes. Most of the software and services that we have seen renew their lightning strike data every thirty minutes. That helps but it's not quick enough. The one we are using updates every thirty seconds so we are hoping that will help us. Another thing we are trying to do with the fire districts is give everyone a heads up when we reach an extreme fire day.

Travis is tracking all of that and will hopefully give out 24 hour notices to the fire districts that we are headed into an extreme day. But we don't get it until 5am from the National Weather Service that all of the conditions are met. We're going to try to notify everybody through dispatch that we are in that extreme day. Everyone is going to fire up and watch. Captain Kleinschmidt of the Evergreen precinct (JeffCo Sheriff) is getting on board with his people and will probably respond on smoke checks with the fire department on these extreme days and red flag days to try to be a little more proactive.

Chief Johnson: From the fire department perspective on those extreme weather days we change strategically how we position people and resources throughout the district. We'll move trucks around so they're in more rapid response capabilities. We'll put people on trucks to patrol or man the stations to make sure they can roll quickly. So on the extreme days or red flag days we are changing how we position relative to wildfires.

Travis Griffin: Every day myself and Scott Halliday and other fire managers in the area that have done some research based on scientific findings on fuel moisture levels, wind speeds and directions, all these criteria have created certain trigger points and thresholds that basically narrow it down to 8 – 10 days per year that are above and beyond the national weather service red flag days. These are going to be wind driven fire events all along the Front Range which we all know is a very arid part of the west, very fire prone. So basically a lot of these minds collaborated together to come up with these thresholds and we monitor them. I send out a notification that we are approaching those thresholds and at 5 in the morning the national weather service for that day give us the winds, the temps, and the relative humidity that pushes us over the edge. Basically on those days if a fire is not contained in a half hour it's more than likely to turn into an extreme fire event where it's running with extreme rates of spread and spotting distances where we are looking at 3 things. Public and responder safety is the number one objective, the second is property conservation, and third is incident stabilization and that is driving all that we are talking about. Those 3 primary objectives and what fire personnel and law enforcement and dispatch and what everybody is doing together to make sure we are meeting those objectives. Extreme fire days are an alert to those responders to step up our awareness on those days.

14. How do you deploy volunteers for an emergency?

Chief Johnson: Our firefighters are paged via cell phones and radios when there is a fire or other emergency. We never have a 100% response but all volunteers are notified and those available will go, leaving their families and their work as needed. We're lucky to be able to call in our crew and call in our neighbors to assist as needed on large events.

15. Do you have access to aerial tanker support?

Deputy Gutke: Aviation assets are interagency through the state or the defense system. A rapid response of aerial support can be made at the county's request. The Colorado Division of Fire Prevention and Control has two tanker aircraft available on call. More support can be gathered as needed but when things get busy nationally there is priority sizing of the fires. There are 3 slurry bases in Colorado and Jefferson County has one of these.