



Facilitated Learning Analysis Executive Summary: Gray and Oregon Wildfires, Spokane County 2023

The full facilitated learning analysis is available at dnr.wa.gov/fla

In August 2023, the Gray and Oregon (referred to locally as the "Oregon Road Fire") Fires ignited in Spokane County, Washington, scorching 23,000 acres of dry forests, grasslands, shrub lands, and residential areas amid record-breaking summer heat, low humidity and relentless winds. These fires erupted just 41 miles apart, destroying 366 primary homes and a total of 710 structures. With four large fires starting within 24 hours in the region, resources were stretched thin until a shift in weather conditions and the arrival of Incident Management Teams (IMTs) provided crucial relief after three days of extreme fire behavior and rapid spread. The impact on both community members and first responders was profound. If it was not for the exceptional collaboration among Spokane County fire districts, wildland fire agencies, emergency communications centers, law enforcement, private landowners, and volunteers, the impact of these fires would have been far worse. This Facilitated Learning Analysis examined this collaborative response and focused on the following elements: evacuations, interagency coordinated effort, Wildland Urban Interface (WUI) strategies, and interactions of wildfires with fuels reduction treatments.

EVACUATIONS

During the initial stages of both the Gray and Oregon Road Fires, evacuations were swiftly and extensively conducted as a top priority to safeguard lives. Within just two hours of the first 911 report for the Gray Fire, over 1,000 Level 3 (GO NOW!) evacuations were ordered, with a 13-mile segment of I-90 closed in both directions and more than 2,500 residents of Medical Lake and Four Lakes told to evacuate. Similarly, over 8,000 people were evacuated under Level 3 (GO NOW!) orders from Elk, at the epicenter of the Oregon Road Fire. The extreme fire conditions and rapid spread necessitated urgent responses, leading to sometimes chaotic evacuations across multiple communities within a 24-hour period. With challenges such as misinformation from local news sources and uncertainty over sheltering options, key themes arose in this Analysis highlighting the critical need for clear communication, training, and robust evacuation protocols for future incidents. Those themes included establishing effective communication protocols with law enforcement officers and providing officers with adequate fire response training and equipment. In addition, increasing training for wildland response agencies on evacuation and WUI fire suppression tactics, especially in more urban areas, is identified as a learning opportunity. Improving training on how to recognize safe locations for finding temporary refuge during rapid fire progression, and clarifying protocols for prioritizing and communicating evacuation directives amidst evolving conditions are key issues that are identified.

INTERAGENCY COORDINATED EFFORT

The creation of state mobilization protocols following Firestorm 1991 in Spokane County marked a significant advancement in wildfire management in Washington State. That devastating fire exposed major gaps in the state's ability to handle large-scale wildfire incidents, highlighting the need for a coordinated and efficient response mechanism. State officials, in collaboration with local agencies and emergency responders, developed

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comprehensive state mobilization protocols to address these challenges. Key components of this system include centralized resource coordination, standardized incident command structures, formalized mutual aid agreements, and ongoing training and preparedness exercises for emergency responders. These measures significantly enhanced Washington State's capacity to respond to large-scale wildfires - as demonstrated during the Oregon Road and Gray Fires - to mitigate risks and protect lives and property, providing the groundwork for continuous improvement in wildfire management.

The introduction of State Mobilization pre-positioning in 2023 further enhanced wildfire response capabilities by strategically pre-positioning firefighting resources, allowing for swift and effective action. Duty officers and area coordinators provided essential support in overseeing operations and ensuring effective response efforts in coordination with Northeast Washington Interagency Communication Center (NEWICC) and the Spokane Regional Emergency Communications Center (SRECC) that played vital roles in managing communications and resource allocations. The integration of local resources and private landowners into Incident Management Teams facilitated rapid and robust responses to wildfires. These coordinated efforts underscore the importance of proactive measures, robust partnerships, and preparedness initiatives in enhancing resilience and response capabilities. The experiences from the Gray and Oregon Road Fires emphasize the need for continuous improvement in emergency response strategies to ensure safety and efficiency during wildfires and other emergencies.

Effective wildfire response depends on having responder and recovery entities adequately prepared and coordinated for wildfire response. Establishing and maintaining relationships among stakeholders before emergencies occur is crucial. These considerations underscore the importance of proactive measures, strong partnerships, and thorough preparedness initiatives to enhance resilience and response capabilities against escalating wildfire threats. Communication, collaboration, coordination, and relationships are essential for effective wildfire response.

WILDLAND URBAN INTERFACE (WUI) STRATEGIES

Firefighters operate in diverse landscapes, from wildlands to urban areas, each requiring distinct strategies and equipment. Effective response necessitates specialized training and may involve shifting incident objectives based on evolving situations and resources. For instance, in the Wildland-Urban Interface (WUI), where structures and infrastructure are at risk, efforts focus on creating defensible spaces and deploying resources for structure protection. Conversely, urban fires prioritize extinguishing flames and preventing spread to adjacent buildings. The increasing development in intermix (more dispersed development in wild areas) and WUI landscapes often stretches the limits of preparedness for both wildland and fire district response agencies.

The blurring boundary between wildland and urban areas presents unique challenges, such as increased fire risk, complexity in response strategies, and the need for community preparedness and recovery plans. Effective management of WUI areas requires collaboration among various stakeholders, including fire agencies, planners, and community members. Two key components to successful wildfire response are the integration of local resources into incident management teams and the strategic planning of ingress and egress routes for response and evacuation. Road network design had a dramatic effect on evacuation and deployment of firefighting resources and were different for each fire. The Oregon Road Fire road system provided more access with options for



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ingress and egress, whereas the Gray Fire road system posed a significant obstacle for evacuations and response efforts in some areas, underscoring the importance of proactive planning to support response capabilities in these increasingly complex environments.

Addressing the challenges of prioritizing resources during emergencies in the WUI requires preparedness to make difficult decisions about which homes or individuals to assist when time and resources are limited. Equipping responders with the necessary tools and training is essential for preparing them to make informed decisions and being able to execute them successfully in high-pressure situations. Enhancing the ability of wildland responders to assess and respond to evolving fire conditions in urban settings is crucial. Communities must also prepare for wildfires by evaluating and improving their current road systems to ensure safe and efficient ingress and egress routes.

WILDFIRE INTERACTIONS WITH FUELS REDUCTION TREATMENTS

Fuels reduction treatments, including forest thinning, other mechanical treatments, and prescribed burning, are critical for managing combustible materials in forests and shrub lands to decrease wildfire intensity and spread. Since 2017, Spokane County has implemented 12,750 acres of such treatments, which have interacted with over 125 treatments during the Oregon Road and Gray Fires. These efforts, guided by legislation like Washington's HB1784 and HB1168, focus on improving forest health and providing strategic fire suppression opportunities. The DNR managed Wildfire Interaction with Treatments and Suppression (WITS) survey captures insights on how these treatments influence fire behavior and aid suppression efforts, noting benefits like reduced fire intensity and safer working conditions for firefighters.

Survey findings indicate that well-maintained treatments positively affect fire behavior, reduce suppression efforts, and protect values at risk, including residences and resources. However, effectiveness can vary based on maintenance levels, treatment types, and extreme fire conditions. The insights underscore the importance of strategic forest management in wildfire mitigation, emphasizing the need to support prioritized treatments that offer dual benefits for ecological health and fire suppression. Additionally, homeowner actions like creating defensible space and home hardening are vital for enhancing structure survivability during wildfires.

FINDINGS

The Gray and Oregon Road Fires of August 2023 highlighted the critical importance of coordinated wildfire response in Spokane County, Washington. The swift and extensive evacuations, though challenging, underscored the need for clear communication and robust protocols. The interagency effort, facilitated by state mobilization protocols and pre-positioned firefighting resources, showcased the benefits of strategic planning and collaboration. It was seen in these fires that effective wildfire response in diverse landscapes, especially the Wildland-Urban Interface (WUI), requires specialized training, equipment, and strategic planning. It was also observed that fuels reduction treatments have the potential to aid suppression efforts, as evidenced by the Wildfire Interaction with Treatments and Suppression (WITS) survey findings. This highlights the need for strategic forest management and proactive homeowner actions like creating defensible space and home hardening. These combined efforts are crucial for reducing wildfire risks and enhancing community resilience in fire-prone regions. This FLA emphasizes the necessity of continuous improvement of comprehensive wildfire response while also recognizing the positive changes that have been implemented as a result of Firestorm 1991 and other learning opportunities.