

Wildfire disasters plague almost every county within Colorado and the cost to local governments and the communities we serve can be devastating. One single incident can cost millions of dollars and affect thousands of residents. In Colorado, the Sheriff of each county has a unique responsibility for wildfire disasters and for many Sheriffs this only becomes a realization when they are faced with a fire. Over the past 10-years we have seen a dramatic increase in the occurrence, size and damage caused by wildfire. The County Sheriffs of Colorado (CSOC) decided to look closer at this issue and developed a Wildfire Command Workshop for Sheriff's this past spring.

The May 2015 3-day Sheriff's Wildfire Command Workshop was the collaboration of a group of people, including Sheriff Joe Pelle, Sheriff Justin Smith and CSOC Executive Director Chris Johnson. The goal of the workshop was to "develop a general understanding of the statutory, political and social responsibilities of a county Sheriff during a wildfire emergency event." Our shared objective was to build a common understanding of a Sheriff's responsibilities during a wildfire incident using a combination of lecture, discussion and tabletop exercises.

Day one began with Boulder County Sheriff's Office legal advisor Dea Wheeler, who touched on the numerous statutory responsibilities and legal considerations of a Sheriff in regards to wildfire. The "Wildfire County and State Agreement" was the focus of much of the presentation as this newly drafted agreement has numerous implications for local government; most notably it confirms that the Sheriff has a seat at the table with unified command during a wildfire incident. Along with a discussion of the Emergency Firefighting Fund and CRS 30-10-512 (fire warden statute) many attending Sheriffs were moved from starting a potential morning snooze to becoming a curious participant. Many realized for the first time that their responsibilities during a wildfire were much more than evacuations and road blocks and others with experience wanted to share their lessons learned.

Sheriff Joe Pelle then shared an After Action Review (AAR) presentation of the Four Mile Fire. In 2010, this 5,000 acre fire was the most destructive with loss of homes in the history of the State of Colorado. The AAR began with many of the things done right. For example, having take-home vehicles for commissioned staff played a critical role in getting evacuations done early and quickly. Another positive was having a local type 3 incident management group available to help manage the fire when it exceeded the local fire department's capability and while we waited for the federal type 1 team. Sheriff Pelle shared that "Having something that is preplanned and able to mobilize locally to manage a growing incident is a critical part of a Sheriff's responsibility".

The late afternoon and into the next morning of the second day was focused on the documentation and processes for sizing up, delegating and determining incident typing and complexity of a wildfire. Each participant was given a workbook containing sample templates and examples along with a portable thumb drive with electronic versions of these. After lunch, Boulder County OEM Director Mike Chard presented a discussion on the disaster declaration

process and state mobilization plan. The main lesson learned during this discussion was for a Sheriff to be proactive and work with county commissioners, local and State OEM to get a disaster declaration going early. The benefits of this effort include potential funding and immediate additional resources mobilized to help. The second day continued with a panel discussion about incident transition to the state and the federal government. Panel members included Sheriff Pelle, Sheriff Smith, Undersheriff Nelson, the United States Forest Service and the Colorado Department of Fire Prevention and Control. The panel shared the importance of the Sheriff being present and available during these transitions and throughout the incident. It also highlighted the importance of the relationship between not only the state and federal wildfire partners but also the Sheriff's relationship with the commissioners and other elected officials and department heads. The Sheriff is the statutory assigned agency administrator and more or less represents the county as a whole, so having strong relationships with internal partners is critical.

The afternoon of the second day began with Boulder County Sheriff's Office Commander Scot Williams and Operations Administrative Assistant Carla Weinheimer presenting on evacuations and reentry planning. Lessons included were having pre-established evacuation routes and sheltering locations for effective evacuations. In addition, utilizing outside resources like the Colorado National Guard and other law enforcement agencies may be required. Lastly, they empathized having clear communication with the road closure staff to ensure the correct messaging is getting to the public evacuating and eventually trying to re-enter. They also shared that having a staggered and planned reentry is very important to efficiently get the public back home. Infrastructure repair was also discussed, as without electricity and water reentry would need to be delayed. The fire may be out and the public may see no obvious reason they cannot return but with rotting food in refrigerators, the inability to get in contact with folks and no power or gas for lights and cooking reentry may not be possible.

The second day closed with Sheriff Justin Smith and local and state government public information officers Laura McConnell and Micki Trost talking about the importance of public messaging and communications. Sheriff Smith outlined the many roles and responsibilities a Sheriff has in regards to public information and also agreed with Sheriff Pelle's recommendation that it should be the "Sheriff" in front of the public at community meetings and in front of camera during times of disasters and emergencies. There are many tasks that can be delegated but getting an important message to the community should come straight from the Sheriff. Laura and Micki shared information and ideas on how to collaboratively work with state and federal public information officers and the importance of a clear, concise, unified and consistent message from everyone involved.

The third day of the workshop began by dividing the participants into "teams". Each group would be responsible to manage a simulated wildfire incident as a Sheriff's Command Staff would. Team members took on the roles of command, agency administrator, agency representative, evacuation coordinator and public information officer. We had SimTable design a wild fire incident on a 3-dimensionsal sand table. This real time interactive computer based

training software allowed participants to see the fire growing in size, locate threatened homes, identify evacuation routes and plan for the incident command post location. After two hours the teams participated in an after action review sharing and discussing the challenges and successes while reflecting on the past two days of learning.

It is obvious that we had initiated a valuable training that many felt was not just important for Sheriff's to attend but also Undersheriff's and command staff. The reality is that being a Sheriff in Colorado means more than criminal justice, jail cells and civil orders. Although these responsibilities affect many of our constituents on a daily basis and cost hundreds of thousands of dollars, there is almost nothing that compares in impact to a local government like a large scale natural disaster. As many of us are looking at the rain falling and the green grass out our windows it's easy to feel like the wildfire threat is the least of our concerns. In reality, progressive, proactive and effective public safety agencies should be spending this time planning and training. Our hope is the workshop and this article helped move all of us closer to being ready for the next big disaster.

About the Author: Jay Stalnacker is the Boulder County Wild land Fire Management Officer, coordinating wild land fire management with the 23 Boulder County Fire Protection Districts/ Departments and planning and implementing forest restoration and prescribed fire project management across 70,000 acres of public managed lands. He started his 14 year career in Fire Management as a volunteer and has since worked for two different Colorado County Sheriff's, the State of Colorado and The United States Forest Service, focused on all-hazard and wild land fire management. He concluded his federal fire management career as a Smokejumper in Grangeville, Idaho on the Nez Perce National Forest. Some of Jay's current national fire management qualifications include; Type 3 Incident Commander (ICT3), Division Supervisor (DIVS) and Type 2 Burn Boss (RXB2). He is currently a Colorado State certified Type 3 Incident Commander. Jay is an Incident Commander for the Boulder County Type 3 Incident Management Team. Jay is a Colorado State P.O.S.T. certified Police Officer and Colorado Emergency Medical Technician and former SWAT Tactical Medic. He holds an Associate's Degree in Emergency Management and Planning and is currently finishing his Bachelor's Degree in Organization Leadership.