



Bureau of Indian Affairs Branch of Wildland Fire Management Guidance for Incident Information Officers



Working in Indian Country is a challenge. Not just because no two reservations are alike – or because computers and mobile devices are generally uncommon, or because cell service is spotty if available at all. It's a challenge because for some, it can feel like entering a foreign country, complete with its own language, cultural norms, and government.

Trust Responsibility: Indian Country is a legal term used to describe the reservations, fee lands and other land held in trust for native communities. This patchwork creates legal, social and political complexity for the BIA when it comes to upholding the wildland fire trust responsibilities.

Depending on the relationship tribes have with the Federal government, there are multiple ways this trust responsibility is upheld.

- BIA provides direct fire protection services for much of Indian country. (Direct Services).
- In some parts of Indian Country, some fire mgt. programs are contracted or compacted by tribal governments (referred to as Self-Governance or Public Law 638 tribes). This contract between the BIA and tribal government may minimize BIA's presence, but it does not excuse BIA's legal responsibilities to ensure fire protection services are provided.
- In some areas, the BIA has established agreements to have another Bureau provide fire protection services. When this occurs, the line officer for that Bureau is delegated the trust responsibility.

A Federal representative (or a tribe within the contract, which has been delegated the authority by the BIA) should serve as the Line Officer to a wildfire incident that takes place in Indian Country. ***Due to these complex relationships, use of BIA Rep/ tribal reps (some places have one of each) is very important.***

- If you find yourself in Indian Country without a contact, the BIA Regional Offices can help. A link to a BIA Map and the contacts for BIA's Regional Fire Management Officers is located in the PIO Bulletin Board under Agency Specific Information – BIA. (http://www.nifc.gov/PIO_bb/bia.html)

Incident Communication Guidance: The local unit is responsible for the content of fire communications during and after a fire. Incident Information Officers (IIO) must coordinate continually with the BIA and tribal reps. Delegations of Authority will stress the importance of line officer responsibility for all fire communications, regardless of medium.

IIOs can respond to questions from all news media, including national news media, *about the incident only*. IIOs will refer all news media questions that are broader in scope to the local Fire Management Officer or Line Officer, who will determine whether they can be addressed locally, or whether they should be referred to the BIA regional office.

When a national level VIP visit is scheduled or expected on an incident, or occurs by surprise, IIOs should coordinate with the Agency Administrator, and Tribal Reps.

For serious accidents or federal / tribal firefighter fatalities that occur during a wildland fire, Agency Administrators must follow the guidance outlined in Chapter 17 of the Wildland Fire and Aviation Program Management and Operations Guide. (<http://www.bia.gov/cs/groups/xnifc/documents/text/idc013077.pdf>)

Communication Strategy

Background: Much of Indian Country is without internet connectivity or reliable cell coverage. It is not uncommon for IMTs to set up their Incident Command Post off a reservation to have this connectivity. If this occurs, drive times will drastically increase, as will the dependence on hand held radios – texting to communicate with field PIOs will not be useful.

InciWeb is a critical resource to provide information. All BIA identifiers are populated in InciWeb. If help is needed to establish an incident that started on Trust land, but you do not know who the superuser is for the unit, contact the Help Desk by phone at (866) 224-7677 or by email at helpdesk@dms.nwcg.gov

Trapline/ Information Boards and Community Meetings are commonly the most effective methods to provide information to the more rural and isolated parts of Indian Country.

Radio Stations, if there is one, are one sure source native communities depend on for daily information. A word of caution: Not all radio stations keep regular business hours, or have an email address. A fax machine may be a useful resource.

Email is an important tool to establish quickly on an incident. When establishing an address, avoid using IMT-specific email/ social media accounts. It is preferable to establish incident specific accounts, such as GreenRiverFire2015@gmail.com.

Media: Usually, the Agency Superintendent/ FMO/ Federal Rep or BIA Prevention Specialist has a list of media contacts for your electronic trapline. It's not uncommon to have only one weekly newspaper.

Social Media is inconsistently used in Indian Country. Some tribal communities have an active social media audience (for example, Navajo Nation has a fairly robust social media presence), while other places such use of those devices are counter to their spiritual beliefs.

If there is a demand for social media, it is preferable to establish an Incident Facebook account (linked to your incident information email) and to leverage the existing twitter account InciWeb provides. A twitter handle you can include in your tweets is @BIA_DFWFM.

Learning Cultural Norms: Every tribe is different in their cultural beliefs; however, most tribes agree that the land belonged to their grandfathers and their forefathers before them, and that the land has ceremonial and holy purposes.

- For example: when it is said native people have a connection to the earth – it means that at one time when they were a babe – their parents rolled them on the soil in a ceremony to create this connection to Mother Earth. It is not just a spiritual metaphor.
- Taking care of tribal elders is a high priority for tribes. Smoke becomes problematic with many native communities. The Smoke Talking Points on the PIO Bulletin Board (Agency Specific Information - U.S. Forest Service can be very helpful. http://www.nifc.gov/PIO_bb/fs.html)
- Camp fires have important ceremonial uses. BIA encourages notification when they take place, but this is to ensure they are safely conducted, not to prevent the ceremony.
- Some tribes do not like the term “reservation, they refer to their land as “Nation”; other call it a “Rez” – work with your rep to learn what is acceptable.
- Be conscious about how you greet someone. Hard, firm handshakes are not polite.

Final Thoughts

- People not familiar with the daily hardships native communities can face will find working in Indian Country both exceptionally challenging, and very humbling. Despite these challenges, the generosity Indian Country expresses for the work being done to protect their sacred land is immense.
- While it may seem native people are shy, they appreciate recognition for their work and efforts. This recognition goes a long way in creating and maintaining good relationships. The people I've worked with in Indian Country love to tease, laugh and are amazing artisans. Use these skills to your advantage!