
SECTION IV

Questioning Authority:

Asking Critical Questions of Government Fire Officials

Reporters take great personal and professional pride in asking tough questions of government officials, but when it comes to reporting on wildfires, they routinely fail to ask the important, critical questions about the land management objectives, and the strategies and tactics of fire suppression operations.

News media often fail to recognize that the specific decisions of fire incident commanders are not simply neutral reactions to natural events, but instead, reflect personal choices, cultural biases and institutional motives that can be laden with the influence of wider social, political and economic interests.

The majority of wildfire news stories differ little in style from a typical sports story or battle report: The focus on “acres burned” or “structures lost” is analogous to *box scores* or *body counts*, and reveals little about the real human drama of risk-taking and decision-making underlying the actual events in the field. Asking the *hard questions* of agency officials will not only lead to greater public awareness of the risks, costs and impacts of various firefighting strategies and tactics, but may also lead to greater government accountability for managers’ decisions and actions.

Reporters need to start challenging the unspoken assumptions held by fire managers that no economic expense or environmental impact should be spared in putting wildfires out because wildfires are such terrible “catastrophic” disasters. **Reporters need to ask *why* certain suppression strategies or tactics are being selected, and *what* are the firefighter and public safety risks, taxpayer costs and environmental impacts associated with them.**

Below are some examples of specific questions arranged by topic to ask fire officials in order to get the full story:

Firelines

Official spokespersons will disclose the location and length of firelines and how many firefighters are working, but may not reveal much else.

Critical questions to ask:

- * How much fireline has been constructed by handcrews versus heavy equipment?
- * What kinds of heavy equipment are being used (e.g. bulldozers, fellerbunchers)?
- * Have dozerlines been constructed in unroaded or inventoried roadless areas?
- * Are firelines going through sensitive natural areas (e.g. old-growth stands, endangered species habitats, fragile soils, heritage sites, scenic areas)?
- * Are mature or old-growth trees being felled for firelines, and if so, are they being cut-to-length and decked for commercial removal?
- * What are some of the environmental impacts caused by the firelines?
- * How many secondary and contingency firelines are being constructed? How far are these located from the wildfire perimeter?
- * If firelines are located for “indirect attack,” then are managers planning to create a large-scale wildfire by design?

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- * How many interior firelines have been breached by the fire and abandoned?
 - * What are the costs per linear mile of firelines constructed to date?

Chemical Fire Retardants

Retardant drops by airtankers and helicopters make dramatic film footage, but official spokespersons may not disclose information on the environmental effects or operational ineffectiveness of many retardant drops.

Critical questions to ask:

- * What kinds of retardant chemicals are being used? (e.g. Fire Trol versus Phos Chek. These brand names contain different kinds of toxic chemicals)
- * What parts of the fire have received retardant drops (e.g. head, flanks, hotspots)?
- * What have been the effects of retardant drops on the fire's intensity and rate of spread?
- * Are there ground crews in position to take advantage of retardant drops?
- * What might be the effects of retardants on water quality, soil chemistry and vegetation?
- * Have retardants fallen into any fish-bearing streams? (Retardant chemicals are highly toxic to aquatic wildlife)
- * Were the aircraft used to deliver water and/or retardant during the mop-up stage of the fire?
- * What are the costs per gallon/per load of retardant? What are the total costs to date of retardant use?
- * What percentage of the total fire cost is because of aircraft use?

Suppression Firing Operations (Burnouts and Backfires)

It is routine for firefighters to start fires as a means of suppressing wildfires, but spokespersons will rarely explain the purpose, locations and methods for firing operations which, in several instances, plays a major factor in the growing size and severity of recent wildfires.

Critical questions to ask:

- * Are firefighters starting backfires or burnouts (be specific)?
- * What is the purpose of firing operations?
- * Where are the locations of firing operations in relation to firelines and the edge of the wildfire?
- * Have all firing operations merged with the main fire, or have they started separate spotfires?
- * How many acres have been added to the total fire size because of backfiring or burnout operations?
- * What are the ignition devices being used (e.g. driptorches, fusees, helitorches, ping-pong balls)?
- * What times have the firing operations been conducted (e.g. morning, afternoon, evening)?
- * What are the expected behavior of firing operations (e.g. what will be the intensity, flame length and rate of spread of backfires/burnouts)?
- * Are firing operations occurring within sensitive natural areas (e.g. old-growth stands, endangered species habitats, heritage sites, scenic/recreational areas)?
- * What are the expected environmental effects of firing operations (e.g. what will be the severity, impacts on soils, mortality of overstory trees)?
- * Have there been any "near misses" of firefighters getting entrapped or burned over during firing operations?

Fire Costs

Spokespersons may occasionally reveal total cumulative suppression costs, but there's more to the story.

Critical questions to ask:

- * What have been the actual and predicted costs of suppression operations?
- * What was the cost per acre of suppression operations?
- * How much money is going to private contractors?
- * What is the hourly/daily rate for contractors to provide such things as handcrews, engines, water tenders, dozers, helicopters, aircraft?
- * What is the loss rate of non-consumable property and supplies? (The "Redbook" fire management manual 14-8 defines acceptable losses to be no more than 15%.)

Suppression Strategy and Rationale

It is time to stop assuming that all fires in all places must always be aggressively suppressed. In fact, forest and fire managers have many options available for implementing the Appropriate Management Response, provided they have done the necessary pre-planning and preparation.

Critical questions to ask:

- * Does the Forest/Park unit have a current approved Fire Management Plan (FMP)?
- * Does the FMP fully comply with the Federal Wildland Fire Management Policy?
- * Is the FMP being used and implemented during the suppression incident?
- * What is the natural fire ecology and historical fire regime of the wildfire area (i.e. what is the relationship of the native vegetation to wildland fire, and what is the expected frequency and severity of wildland fires)?
- * What plant or animal species might benefit from the effects of the fire?
- * What kinds of fuels reduction and forest restoration goals have been accomplished by the wildfire?
- * Is the wildfire having any beneficial effects on the ecosystem?
- * Is the suppression strategy and tactics based on direct attack or indirect attack?
- * If indirect attack, how far away from the wildfire's perimeter edge are the firelines being constructed? What is the expected size of the wildfire going to be given the location of indirect firelines?
- * Were suppression actions taken in designated wilderness or inventoried roadless areas? If so, why?
- * Are minimum impact suppression tactics being used? If so, where?
- * Did the Wildland Fire Situation Analysis (WFSa) examine alternative management scenarios for the fire? What were the predicted sizes and costs of the wildfire in these alternatives? What was the decision maker's rationale for the selected alternative?

Post-Fire Rehabilitation

After a wildfire is contained and controlled, post-fire rehabilitation actions begin using money from emergency suppression funds to pay for mitigating the damage caused by suppression. The more damage that is caused by firefighting, the more funding the agency receives for rehabilitation projects.

Critical questions to ask:

- * What kinds of impacts and damage was caused by fire suppression activities?
- * Is there a rehab plan for the area affected by the fire?
- * Does it include firelines, helispots and camp areas?

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- * Is the agency using certified “weed free” straw and native grass seed for slope stabilization efforts?
 - * Are there suppression damages that cannot be fully rehabilitated?

Asking the above critical questions of government fire officials and spokespersons will help reporters get the *whole* story.

