

Nakia Creek Fire Response After-Action Report



Photo: The Nakia Creek Fire burns on Tuesday, Oct. 11, 2022, near Larch Mountain. The fire grew to 250 acres as of Tuesday morning. (Taylor Balkom/The Columbian)

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Washington State responds to more than 800 wildfires each year. As one of the first large-scale wildfires in Clark County and the surrounding region, the Nakia Creek Fire response agencies, including Clark Regional Emergency Operations Center and multiple emergency management entities from across the state, demonstrated an understanding of mission objectives. This After-Action Report/Improvement Plan (AAR/IP) is consistent with the preparedness doctrine and related frameworks.

CRESA demonstrated the fortitude to adapt to the changes in the situation as information became available. Opportunities for improvement and lessons learned brought to the surface five key findings and takeaways: alerts and warnings, notification of key individuals and agencies, the emergency declaration process, the Fire Management Assistance Grant (FMAG) process, and ongoing incident communications. This report aims to analyze results, identify strengths to be maintained and built upon, identify potential areas of improvement, and support the development of corrective actions.

Overall, the response partners met their objectives and are eager to apply the report findings.

KEY FINDINGS AND TAKEAWAYS

The Nakia Creek Fire response identified areas of strengths and where there is an opportunity to make improvements. The five themes that rose to the top of the response are:

Alerts and Warnings

The Nakia Creek Fire reinforced that CRESA's alert and warning system was an operable and known resource for fire response. Rapid changes in fire behavior created challenges in creating timely, accurate, and actionable messaging. In addition to messaging, accurate and timely mapping was also a challenge in the initial period of the response. The early involvement of Clark County GIS allowed for the most accurate and timely mapping response possible. With GIS being involved in the response structure early, decision-makers could communicate real-time decisions. Partner feedback provided insight into the benefits of this type of engagement. The ability of CRESA staff to adapt and collect real-time feedback on message effectiveness allowed rapid changes in message style and content, which helped mitigate the confusion created in the initial messaging.

Notification of Key Individuals and Agencies

Though most key personnel received notifications during this event, timely notification to all stakeholders surfaced as an area of improvement. The primary area to address is the need to notify senior leadership at the response and policy level in real time and even before an incident occurs if high risk weather conditions ("Red Flag Warnings") are present in the area; this will allow both groups to form effective response partnerships.

Emergency Declaration Process

Accessible, pre-scripted declarations that all applicable partners have reviewed and approved, will allow for a more effective response to events outside regular hours.

FMAG Process

This focus area displayed how relationships within the response community support an efficient and effective FMAG process. An opportunity exists for fire services to share their knowledge, expanding the FMAG process understanding to multiple response partners.

Ongoing Incident Communications

Effective communication with response partners was a critical factor contributing to the successful operational coordination of the incident; this included internal and external communication.

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INCIDENT OVERVIEW

Incident Name	Nakia Creek Fire
Dates	October 09-24, 2022
Scope	This incident was an unplanned, human-caused wildfire that affected rural areas in the south/southeast of Clark County, Washington.
Mission Area(s)	Response and Recovery <i>Please see FEMA Mission Areas for more information.</i>
Focus Areas	Alerts and Warnings, Notification of Key Individuals and Agencies, Emergency Declaration Process, FMAG Process, and Ongoing Incident Communications
Threat or Hazard	Wildfire: A wildfire is an unplanned, unwanted fire burning in a natural area, such as a forest, grassland, or prairie. Wildfires can start from natural causes, such as lightning, but most are caused by humans, either accidentally or intentionally. Wildfires can damage natural resources, destroy homes, and threaten human lives and safety.
Scenario	Wildfire with Red Flag conditions
Sponsor	Washington State Emergency Management Division (EMD)
AAR Meeting Participating Organizations	Clark Regional Emergency Services Agency, WA State Department of Natural Resources, Clark County Fire District 3, Vancouver Fire Department, East County Fire and Rescue, Clark Cowlitz Fire Rescue, Clark County Fire District 6, Clark County GIS, Clark County Public Works, Clark County Manager's Office
Point of Contact	Annie Merritt, MSOD, C.Ed. Continuity Program Manager Washington State Emergency Management Division Annie.merritt@mil.wa.gov (253) 405-7119 Scott Johnson, MS, MEP Emergency Management Division Manager Clark Regional Emergency Services Agency scott.johnson@clark.wa.gov (360) 992-6286, office (360) 690-6922, mobile (360) 694-1954, FAX

METHODS AND APPROACH

The approach to this after-action review process includes the entirety of the response with a focus on the areas identified as most significant for the operational and strategic objectives of the incident.

We began capturing feedback for after-action review at the onset of the activation as is CRESA's standard practice for all incidents and exercises. Partners were asked to attend meetings to provide and discuss their feedback.

Several key groups were central to this response, including state agencies, county and city emergency agencies, fire and rescue, law enforcement, and personnel working at CRESA and specifically duty officers during the response. It was essential to gather feedback from these audiences.

LIMITATIONS

This after action process focused on specific timeframes and partner actions within the entirety of the incident. This was done intentionally in order to focus on those areas, for improvement and sustainment, of greatest interest to CRESA and the partners who participated in the after action process. These factors were considered in the analysis and development of this report, and the reader should consider them.

The opportunity to provide after-action review comments was available to all responders and partner agencies. However, not all partners were able to attend the after action listening session. As a result, the team captured only the most significant high-level strengths and areas for improvement relevant to the AAR discussion provided as appropriate.

ANALYSIS OF STRENGTHS AND AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT

Alerts and Warnings

Description:

Alerts and warnings include timely, accurate, and actionable information to responders and the community. It provides the necessary information to warn the public and effect the necessary actions that support safety, and it delivers messages to populations most at risk of imminent threats. Alert and warning maximize the probability that people take protective actions and minimize the delay in taking those actions.

Strengths

Strength – Messaging went out

During the Nakia Creek Fire, using the Everbridge system, EM staff were able to regularly and promptly communicate notifications of new and updated information to the public and responders. Use of the Wireless Emergency Alert (WEA) system provided timely notifications with short messages and links that guided message recipient to reference mapping for evacuation zones. In addition to Everbridge and WEA other social media communication methods, such as Facebook, were used to reach the community. Partners provided feedback indicating an appreciation for timely information and structured information calls with time for questions and answers.

Responsible to the community for sending alerts out, CRESA demonstrated the ability to adapt and modify notification procedures in real-time in response to feedback from those who received alerts.

Recommendation: Continue to include Duty Officer, GIS, and agency PIOs to support information dissemination

Communicating early and often was a success for this response. To ensure this continues in the future, partners should update operational procedures annually and after a response to ensure information dissemination opportunities benefit all partners. These updates should focus on reducing information overload, streamlining information flow, and emphasizing the need for information sharing with response partners, including GIS partners.

Areas for Improvement

Area for Improvement – Lack of clarity regarding the evacuation zones due to multiple notifications

The public alerting system used by CRESA allows recipients to link multiple locations of interest (ex: home, work, school) to a single phone number. CRESA has used this feature to encourage community members to register for public alerts so that they can be informed of emergencies any location of importance to them. However, this feature led to points of confusion during the Nakia Creek Fire due multiple evacuation levels across a significant portion of the populated east county. CRESA received complaints from community members who received evacuation notices for all three levels at the same time. The confusion arose because the messages are of limited size, due to system limitation and federal guidelines, and cannot tell the recipient which location of interest was in what zone. As a result, many recipients delayed evacuation, did not

evacuation when they should have, or went to non-official social media for guidance. It was several hours into the incident before CRESA was able, in partnership with Clark County GIS to develop a GIS map that allowed community members to search for their addresses of interest in relationship to an evacuation map overlay.

Recommendation 1: Predetermine best ways to display and disseminate GIS mapping of evacuation zones

GIS partners have an extreme wealth of knowledge, and they have a particular skill set that can display usable, understandable data in a short amount of time. Prior to wildfire season, the GIS office should partner with CRESA and other response partners to settle on an agreed-upon way of displaying geospatial data on a map. Examples could include circular, point-to-point, or a heat map. The agreed-upon methodology should be shared with response partners prior to an event, and where possible, pre-loaded data should be located for reference/use.

Recommendation 2: Educate the community regarding evacuation levels (Ready, Set, Go/1,2,3)

Consider partnering CRESA's public education and outreach team with county fire departments or districts to share the Ready, Set, Go nomenclature with community partners. The Six P's of evacuation, which includes people/pets, papers, prescriptions, pictures, personal computers, and plastic, could also be shared. An outreach campaign could include mailers, timely community meetings, presentations, or a booth at local fairs, the mall, or farmers' markets. It is possible the Community Emergency Response Teams could support this effort.

Recommendation 3: Include applicable response partners in evacuation conversations

The lack of understanding among some response partners of the evacuation zones caused confusion, which reduced the capacity to evacuate efficiently and effectively those living within each zone. To address this gap, when a mapping structure is agreed-upon (Recommendation 1) it should be disseminated quickly to response partners who are physically working the response in an evacuation zone. Additionally, agreed-upon communication channels for the dissemination of information should be identified prior to the response.

Notification of Key Individuals and Agencies

Description:

During a response, key individuals and stakeholders are needed for information sharing and gathering input for making decisions.

Strengths

Strength 1 – Initial notification to primary stakeholders/partners was successful

Throughout the response, CRESA coordinated the notification with response partners. Concurrent with the initial notification of an active fire in the county, the CRESA EM Manager and Duty Officer activated the EOC to an enhanced monitoring level and began sending out regular situation reports.

Recommendation 1: Expand methods of communication

Continue using a tiered EOC activation structure and an expanded Situation Report distribution list to establish situational awareness throughout the CRESA partnership.

Areas for Improvement

Area for Improvement – Notifications to key personnel could have been more focused

Recommendation 1: Establish a tiered notification framework for policy and operational-level decision makers

As early as possible in a “no notice” incident, or as a preparation notice for adverse weather (Red Flag Warning) condition in the area. CRESA establishes a process to notify and set up a policy-level working group at the same time they are setting up and notifying an operational-level working group. As CRESA serves eight different jurisdictions, the process would be based on a list of key personnel, at both levels, for all eight jurisdictions. Then EOC staff will follow a process to create the two groups quickly in the moment.

Recommendation 2: Regularly exercise alerts and notifications

Repetition of response capabilities will support an active response. Prior to the next response, CRESA should update its yearly exercise plan to include tests and drills of its alert notification systems. As the exercise plan is updated, it should include external partners and the specific jurisdictions CRESA serves.

Recommendation 3: Implement Public Information Officer Training (PIO)

PIO disaster response training can be a valuable resource to agency PIOs and those with a key position in response. Creating a cadre of PIOs will support a community Joint Information System (JIS). Organizations should support 16-20 hours of PIO disaster response training for their employees each year. CRESA should review and update current training requirements and recommendations for all entities that may have a role in the response.

Emergency Declaration Process

Description:

Local jurisdiction emergency declarations are a key part of an effective response. Having the correct partners and tools in place helps the process to go smoothly.

Strengths

Strength – Draft declaration was completed quickly

Based on the situation the need for a declaration to support the response became clear early on in the incident. A team from the county quickly generated a draft which included the Red Flag updates. This quick action helped eliminate any wait time when the FMAG process was needed.

Recommendation 1: Strengthen the clearinghouse of templates with pre-scripted draft declarations

CRESA should foster ongoing conversations with the city and county offices as the coordinating agency for declarations. Collaboratively the agencies involved can prepare, coordinate, and be ready to disseminate pre-scripted declaration language.

Areas for Improvement

Area for Improvement – Improve awareness of standard operating procedures

Due to the quick change in the fire behavior, it was difficult to communicate the need for a declaration to all response partners. The exchange of information to support the declaration process needs to be updated to include orders of succession when appointing authorities are unavailable and appropriate contact information.

Recommendation 1: Establish and maintain standard operating procedures for notification

In partnership with all jurisdictions/response partners CRESA should lead a review of the current procedures for a declaration, making updates to the process that are agreed upon by the signature authority. Procedures should include current contact details outlined by the above orders of succession.

FMAG Process

Description:

Fire Management Assistance Grant (FMAG) is a declaration process when a state submits a request for assistance to FEMA due to a threat or a major disaster. The state initiates the fire declaration process when an authorized representative submits a request for a federal fire declaration to the FEMA Regional Administrator. For the Nakia Creek Fire, the FMAG application was submitted by Washington State Emergency Management at the request of Clark County Fire Officials.

Strengths

Strength – FMAG process is familiar to Fire Service leadership.

The experience of Clark County Fire Service officers built prior to the Nakia Creek Fire expedited the FMAG request process. All the required participants from the state and local levels were available when specific details were requested to submit the FMAG application.

Recommendation 1: Continue to keep the FMAG partner contact list current and available

The number of FMAG partners, both at the state and the local level, are limited. is small due to the nature of the requesting process. This limitation is positive in that when a request is needed response partners know who to contact, but this can become difficult when staffing shortages or limitations result in fewer people who understand the application submittal process. To support the FMAG application process it is in CRESA's best interest to keep contact information current, which will help during real-time communication.

Areas for Improvement

Area for Improvement – Update and disseminate FMAG operational procedures

FMAG request procedures is well known to Fire Service officials but less familiar to others in Clark County such as law enforcement, public works, and Emergency Management. All Clark County response partners would benefit from education and training on the FMAG process and each partner's role in the FMAG process.

Recommendation 1: Educate individuals and stakeholders on FMAG process

Clark County response partners should work to develop an FMAG Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) that educates key partners on the process as well as helps facilitate the flow of critical information to the requesting entity. To accomplish the task, CRESA should convene a working group of state and local partners who support the creation of operational procedures.

Recommendation 2: Communicate the FMAG process to response partners

Periodic updates on the status of the FMAG, potentially even during the daily briefing, could be beneficial. This reminds partners of their need to take actions that support the FMAG.

Ongoing Incident Communication

Description:

Ongoing incident communications are those used to update the public regarding fire behavior, evacuation zones, and general awareness of the situation. As a response is scalable, incident communication, regardless of who has authority, needs to match the level of the response.

Strengths

Strength 1 – Wide understanding for communication needs

Apparent to all stakeholders, as the Nakia Creek Fire evolved, so did the communication needs. Stakeholders could quickly understand communication needs and adapt with adequate speed for providing daily briefings.

Recommendation 1: Increase the frequency of briefing and or information sharing

The Nakia Creek Fire burned closer to the greater Clark County community than in previous years; this led to individuals wanting real-time information frequently. When response partners shared information via social media or news outlets, it received multiple views, and overall, it was value added. The community just wanted more. To support the request for information sharing response partners could increase the number of briefings provided during a response. Though Washington State has media laws that preclude access to an active incident, CRESA and response partners should leverage news media in future responses by providing them with a briefing and access to the Joint Information Center at pre-set times during the incident.

Recommendation 2: Continue to support response staff training and development

The CREOC adhered to the ICS response structure with little to no challenge. CRESA should continue to provide training and exercise opportunities for all response partners including all jurisdictions within CRESA's reach.

Areas for Improvement

Area for Improvement – Reduce inconsistent messages within the community

To reduce inconsistent messaging in the community response partners must be in front of the narrative community members will create if they don't have adequate information. Response partners could arrange community briefings/meetings during an event to alleviate this; this will help to foster consistent and timely messaging. An effective tactic is to have an all-hands, whole community approach forging partnerships before a response is needed. The whole community

includes individuals, families, households, NGOs, private sectors, local government, tribes, and federal partners.

Recommendation 1: Draft operational procedure for community meetings

Community meetings before, during, and after a response are valuable. CRESA should lead in drafting community meeting procedures; including agendas, scripted talking points, interpreter needs, potential meeting locations, and contact information.

Recommendation 2: Include media in preseason fire briefings

Media can enhance messaging. As a precursor to fire season response partners should invite news media to meet and help become a voice for prevention and preparedness. Filming in the field could be used as B roll footage during a response. Additionally, providing media with pre-scripted talking points will help communicate the right message during a response.

Recommendation 3: Work with stakeholders to increase education and outreach during non-incident times

The more prepared the community is for a response the better it will be able to respond to messaging during a crisis. Working with all response partners CRESA should lead local efforts to continue to educate the community during non-incident times. Education can take the form of being an active participant at community events, distributing direct mailings, a social media campaign, or communicating fire mitigation efforts.

NEXT STEPS

Continuous Improvement Planning

Continuous Improvement Planning is a process by which the areas for improvement from the response turn into measurable corrective actions that strengthen capabilities. In this way, improvement-planning activities can help shape a jurisdiction's/organization's preparedness priorities and support continuous improvement.

Activities identified in this after-action report will integrate into CRESA's Corrective Action Program. CRESA and subject matter experts will review recommendations and the context and develop specific corrective actions. Stakeholders involved in the After-Action Review will be informed as policies, plans, or procedures are updated. Once scoped and prioritized, corrective actions and improvements will occur, and personnel will be trained to validate improvements through exercise.

IMPROVEMENT PLAN

Issue/Area for Improvement	Corrective Action	Primary Responsible Organization	Organization POC	Start Date	Completion Date
<u>1 Lack of clarity regarding the evacuation zones due to multiple notifications</u>	Predetermine best ways to display and disseminate GIS mapping of evacuation zones	CRESA	OPS Coordinator	Q2 2023	Q3 2023
	Educate the community regarding evacuation levels (Ready, Set, Go/1,2,3)	CRESA	PIO	On Going	On Going
	Include applicable response partners in evacuation conversations	CRESA	EM Manager	Q2 2023	Q3 2023
<u>2 Notifications to key personnel could have been more focused</u>	Establish a tiered notification framework for policy and operational-level decision makers	CRESA	EM Manager	Q3 2023	Q4 2023
	Regularly exercise alerts and notifications	CRESA	OPS Coordinator	Q3 2023	Q3 2023
	Implement Public Information Officer Training (PIO)	CRESA	PIO	Q3 2024	On Going
<u>3 Improve awareness of standard operating procedures</u>	Establish and maintain standard operating procedures for notification	CRESA	EM Manager	Q1 2024	Q2 2024

<u>4. Update and disseminate FMAG operational procedures</u>	Educate individuals and stakeholders on FMAG process	WAEMD	FMAG Coordinator	Q3 2023	On Going
	Communicate the FMAG process to response partners	WAEMD	FMAG Coordinator	Q23 2023	On Going
<u>5. Reduce inconsistent messages within the community</u>	Draft operational procedure for community meetings	CRESA	PIO	Q3 2024	On Going
	Include media in preseason fire briefings	CRESA	PIO	Q3 2024	On Going
	Work with stakeholders to increase education and outreach during non-incident times	CRESA	PIO	Q3 2024	On Going