

# **National Fire Prevention Education Teams Oversight and Virtual Teams Concepts April 2020**

This document addresses oversight and virtual wildfire prevention education team operations. These concepts are being utilized during the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 however, they may also be applied to a regional, agency, or national assignment to provide assistance and support for wildfire prevention during periods of extreme wildfire prevention needs, special events, or other conditions that require virtual capacity.

For example, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, a National Fire Prevention Education Team (NFPET) was activated to assist the Washington Office – USDA Forest Service. The Team worked remotely to develop a virtual FPET strategy, collect wildfire prevention activity from all regions, develop and promote national messaging, and prepare to assist and support additional FPETs if deployed. At the beginning of the assignment several agencies had talked about deploying a wildfire prevention team and the NFPET was prepared to provide the assistance needed.

A virtual work environment can also be applied to a regional oversight team. A major event like the 2017 Eclipse or the 2016 Southeastern fire outbreak, utilized a regional team to manage, assist, and support numerous FPETs. This would essentially be an Area Command type structure.

The difficulty is applying safe operations at the ground level during a health crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic event. Ground operations and effectiveness may be reduced due to stay-at-home orders, social distancing recommendations, travel restrictions, and need for personal protection equipment. A virtual team at either the oversight or local team level will have to adjust their expectations and capacity to fit the current situation. Personal safety is the highest priority. Guidelines and recommendations are developed to maximize employee and public safety.

This document will cover: the composition of a virtual oversight NFPET, the flow of information externally and internally between the oversight NFPET, the suggested procedure for activating a virtual FPET, pre-assignment recommendations, assignment operations and considerations, and transitioning to on-sight FPETs when health restrictions are lifted.

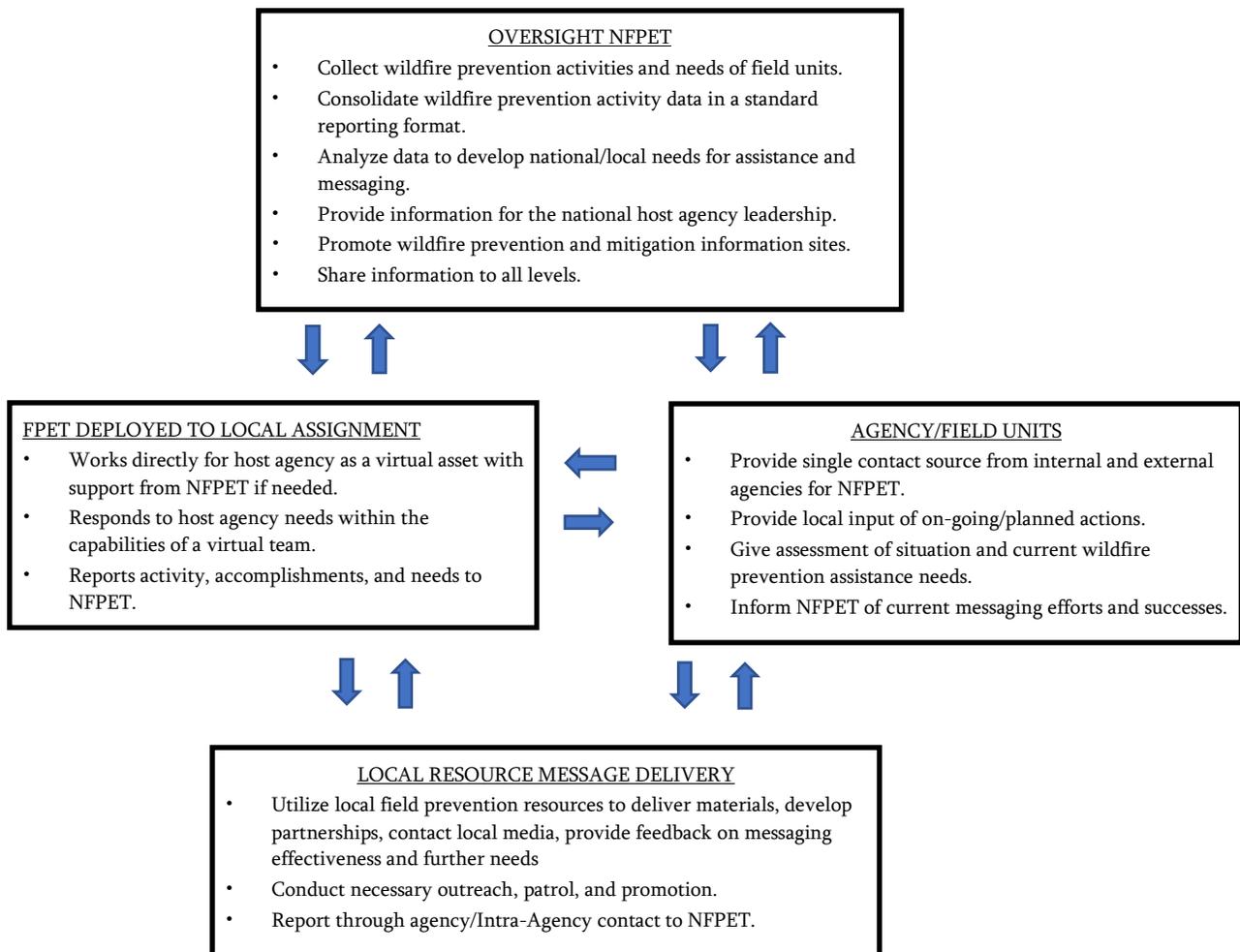
## **Composition for an NFPET Providing Virtual Oversight**

An NFPET is initially composed of a Prevention Education Team Leader (PETL) and special assistance as designated by the host agency. As the situation progresses and needs are determined a Public Information Officer (PIO), Prevention Education Team Member (PETM) or PIO with special skills in social media, and a Technical Specialist (THSP) Graphic Artist may be needed. In a virtual setting (sometimes under different time zones), providing one-on-one mentorship, close supervision, and learning experiences from a group setting are challenging, therefore trainees are not highly recommended for this type of assignment. The NFPET reports to a designated national liaison.

As with any wildfire prevention education team, the roles are dictated by the needs of the assignment and the Delegation of Authority. The team focus may be coordination of field teams, tracking of wildfire prevention activity, assistance with messaging, providing restriction and closure guidance or materials support.

The schedule of hours and days per week is to be determined based on the mission and needs of the assignment. An initial rotation of 2-4 weeks is recommended. Depending on continued health concerns, progress of the national messaging, and prevention resource demands, the rotation is adjustable. If

multiple members are assigned to the Team, members can be rotated out individually while leaving members in place that are familiar with the current team functions and responsibilities or a transition team can assume responsibility over a two- to three-day period.



**Proposed Information Flow – Virtual NFPET Oversight**

If an NFEPT is activated to provide oversight during critical or complex situations, information provided by the agency/field units is essential to their effectiveness. In a virtual deployment, coordination with local ground resources requires maximum teamwork and coordination.

**Procedure for Activating a Virtual Fire Prevention Education Team**

Pre-Assignment Recommendations:

The national FPET schedule is used for ordering teams in the field for national level assignments. Local teams at state and regional levels (closest available resources) should still be considered for use.

Teams should be rostered through IROC and shown as “AVAILABLE LOCAL”. All team personnel should verify they are in the IROC system prior to ordering.

Virtual teams should utilize qualified and experienced personnel. Due to the new concept of virtual teams and explanation given above, trainees are not recommended at this time.

Recommended team composition is Prevention Education Team Leader (PETL), Public Information Officer (PIO), Prevention Education Team Member (PETM) and/or an additional PIO. A Technical Specialist (THSP) with social media and/or graphic artist skills may be highly important. Team composition may vary based on assignment needs and available budget. In addition, local host-agency virtual resources can be under the direction of the virtual FPET as team members if agreed to by the host. Local resources are usually not paid as part of the Team budget unless specified by the host.

Request computer and mobile phone be included on the resource orders. All Team members need to have strong internet access and cell phone coverage. Host unit should consider ordering additional cellular Wi-Fi hotspots if needed to provide to the team if connectivity is an anticipated concern. No reimbursement for lodging, travel, or per diem is anticipated. A General Message is used for approval of necessary supplies allowed by the host unit for reimbursement.

#### Assignment Operations and Considerations:

All communications with the team, host agency, partners, and stakeholders are done through phone conversations, electronic communications, and teleconferencing/video channels. Only agency-approved programs and apps are allowed for use. Emphasis on security is required.

As Usual, the Team Leader is responsible for negotiating a Delegation of Authority with the host agency after initial briefings/meetings and procedures, restrictions, and objectives are agreed to for the assignment. Take into consideration the current capabilities of the host unit considering their health advisories, available resources, and ability to host a team.

The Team Leader is responsible for ensuring all team members are made aware of the current guidelines for personal protection against COVID-19 or whatever critical safety factors are driving the need for a virtual assignment. Stay abreast of individual member health status. Adjustment to team composition is made accordingly. Specific local guidelines for personal protection equipment, public interface, and assigned tasks is dictated by the agency liaison/host.

Work scheduling is based around the host agency time zone for availability of the team to address workload and concerns. The Team can be flexible with individual times as long as the host needs are met. Days and hours of work are determined by the need and the approval of the host agency. The basic assignment covers a 14-day period. All work/rest guidelines are followed.

Administrative responsibility and adherence to all legal standards is the same as with a normal FPET assignment. The Team reports activity, accomplishments, and needs to the host agency and to the agency contact for the region. Include challenges faced, tactics to overcome the barriers, and lessons learned in the final report. If NFPET or regional FPETs are in place to provide oversight, follow their guidance on reporting. All documentation is electronically filed and left with the host agency. Plans are for FPET creative materials to be on the FPET Digital Library on the NWCG Communications, Education, and Prevention Committee webpage. Prevention material uploads will be allowed from all agencies. Protocols are in development for the uploading of administrative FPET files.

Local prevention resources will need to be utilized for on-the-ground material distribution, patrol, local contacts, and special assignments of the host. At the local field unit, a trainee position may be an ideal consideration for utilizing personnel that aren't normally available and to help build local capacity.

If a team member is assigned to the incident with a resource order, the expectation is the same as if they are physically at a site with a team, and they would not be accomplishing collateral home-unit tasks. In some cases, getting local resources to fully commit to an official team assignment may be a challenge. The Team Leader and host agency will need to weigh the pros and cons of such an amended agreement of a person's part-time availability.

In the event one FPET is transitioning to another, it is suggested to do the transition with overlap. For example, Team 2 can be part of Team 1 for a day to see what the outgoing Team is working on, get familiar with the host contacts, and community outreach. Both teams would be communicating periodically through the day. The second day (third if needed) Team 2 would begin taking over the lead with oversight from Team 1 members. The objective is for a smooth transition for the host and community, while continuing to build on the successes of the first team.

**Virtual Team Summary Points for Consideration:**

A virtual prevention assignment is met with numerous challenges. Phone calls, emailing, and telecommunication/video conferencing is utilized in lieu of face-to-face contact. This applies to Team interaction as well as with the host, partners, stakeholders, and media. Coordination of times, availability of contacts, and timely decisions/approvals is a significant set of challenges. Frequent communication with team members is essential. Keeping on-task, tracking progress, and coordination of efforts requires the highest degree of teamwork.

Most elements of every assignment will likely be the same. Assessment of the situation, evaluating current wildfire prevention efforts, and listing expected outcomes is needed on all assignments. Teams use the information to match the needs of the assignment to the capabilities of the Team. From that point, the situations dictate the actions.

It is expected that most of the assignment needs will be messaging support. This may be in the form of developing a timely and effective message, graphic support, social media assistance, partnership building, and direct stakeholder contacts.

An essential task of a virtual FPET is to ensure all messaging is approved before release or use. The host dictates the approval authority and procedures. Decisions and approvals may pose significant challenges. Keep the host liaison fully informed of your actions, plans and progress on any tasks.

The virtual team can assist in a number of ways to include:

- Ensure targeted and effective messaging
- Assist with message development, printing, materials acquisition and distribution
- Develop social media messages
- Garner partnership support
- Establish direct contacts with agency, partnerships, stakeholder and media

Each virtual FPET assignment is an adventure into the unknown. Teams have to maintain an open mind, extreme patience, and a creative spirit. The objective is to assist the host agency with the best wildfire prevention efforts possible under the existing circumstances. Sharing of challenges, solutions, and ideas is extremely important as teams move through these difficult times.

**Considerations When Health Restrictions Are Eased:**

The Team Leader, in consultation with the host, will determine if safe workspace, lodging and meal accommodations, safe travel, and safety supplies and equipment are available.

A Team may decide to have a limited number of on-site members at the host site, with other members working virtually.

All on-site operations require strict observance of sanitation and social distancing requirements as prescribed by CDC and local health district COVID-19 recommendations.