

# Wildland Fire Decision Support System and the Role of Incident Management Teams

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March 15, 2012

**Issue:** What is the role of the Incident Management Team (IMT) in managing decisions within the Wildland Fire Decision Support System (WFDSS)?

The Unit Line Officer has the overall responsibility for the incident and publishing the WFDSS Decision. However, when an IMT has been delegated authority to manage an incident, it is important that the team and the local unit work together to outline the course of action to be taken to successfully manage that incident. If the incident is multi-jurisdictional, the issue of responsibility could be further compounded between agencies. On some incidents, the Line Officer(s) may choose to delegate some WFDSS tasks to the IMT. The purpose of this paper is to clarify the role of IMTs in the WFDSS Decision process.

**Background:** WFDSS has been operational for about three (3) years. During this time, units have been offered numerous training and exercise opportunities, but fire season complexity has been variable so assignment of responsibility for publishing decisions has been inconsistent, particularly in relation to identifying the role of the IMT in the WFDSS process. Both Unit Line Officers and IMTs desire clarification on the role of the IMT. This will allow IMTs to prepare prior to a fire assignment to meet the objectives of the Unit Line Officer.

**Key Findings:** The role of an IMT in supporting WFDSS Decision development will vary with the complexity of the fire situation, the capability of the IMT, and the capability of the local unit. Although the decision is the Unit Line Officer's responsibility, the following list identifies some of the issues surrounding WFDSS and IMTs.

1. *What portions of the WFDSS process may be delegated to the IMT?*

The Line Officer should negotiate with the IMT regarding the type of WFDSS involvement desired and clearly document it, e.g., in the Delegation of Authority or Leader's Intent as directed by the agency. Local unit capability may be exceeded by the activity or complexity level on the unit. In those situations, the Line Officer may decide to delegate some WFDSS tasks to the IMT through coordination with local fire personnel, interagency partners, and IMT agreement. The Incident Commander (IC) should ask questions to fully understand the Line Officer's expectations before signing the delegation.

All decision documentation functions can be performed by the IMT through a delegation of authority with the exception of the responsibilities of the Line Officer which includes:

- Approving a decision.
- Writing the rationale for the decision.
- Initiating a new decision process during the periodic assessment. However, working together, the IMT usually provides recommendations about changing conditions, needed tactics, and implementation strategies that might initiate a new decision within WFDSS.

- Entering or editing objectives or requirements for the local unit from local unit planning documents. However, the team has the responsibility to clarify local unit objectives and requirements with that unit.

Incident management tasks that are best performed through the cooperation of the local unit and the IMT might include:

- Updating (uploading) fire perimeters.
- Ordering and managing staff to run fire models and/or complete a long-term assessment.
- Drafting updates for inclusion in the Periodic Assessment that describe the current incident status and key events. The Periodic Assessment should be completed by the Line Officer, who is responsible to ensure the WFDSS Decision is still representative of the actions being taken on the fire, but the IMT should provide input for the Line Officer's consideration.
- Updating strategic tactical responses to the incident such as MAP development and revision, outlining and modifying the course of action, estimates, and updates of incident costs.

2. *What understanding and skills do IMT personnel need if assisting with WFDSS decisions?*

Incident Management Teams should work to know and understand WFDSS within their current organization and build capacity according to the incident complexity and need.

- a) The WFDSS Decision describes a Line Officer's expectations and plan for managing an incident. The WFDSS application allows dynamic documentation and is likely to be updated (with "new" decisions) throughout the life of an incident. The IMT needs to know how to find, review, and (if requested) edit the decision.
- b) WFDSS offers numerous tools, including multiple fire behavior models and geospatial viewing capabilities. These tools, while not required for a WFDSS decision, are valuable in providing additional information to the Unit Line Officer(s) on potential fire behavior characteristics. The IMT needs to be able to access and interpret this information both in the WFDSS application and Google™ Earth, which may require uploading or downloading of GIS and KMZ files. The following IMT positions could fill these needs:
  - Long Term Fire Behavior Analyst (LTAN) – run and interpret the fire behavior models within WFDSS. Provide input to the decision document updates as appropriate.
  - Fire Behavior Analyst (FBAN) – run and interpret the fire behavior models that aid in the primary FBAN role to provide daily operational fire behavior analysis to support operations and safety.
  - Geospatial Analyst (GSAN) – run and interpret the fire behavior models but has oversight by a qualified LTAN or FBAN.
  - Strategic Operational Planner (SOPL) – assist with developing and updating near-term and long-term strategies by considering current fire behavior, model outputs, and decision parameters.
  - GIS Specialist (GISS) - upload GIS files and download GIS and KMZ files within the WFDSS application.

3. *Where can the Line Officer or IMT obtain help with the application?*

Geographic Area Editors (GA Editors) and the Wildland Fire Management Research Development and Application (WFM RDA) personnel have developed training and can provide assistance. For help:

- Visit the WFDSS web site at ([http://wfdss.usgs.gov/wfdss/WFDSS\\_Home.shtml](http://wfdss.usgs.gov/wfdss/WFDSS_Home.shtml)) to access tools and help guides, which are continuously updated.
- Contact the local GA Editor (ask the local unit for contact information) or your own home unit GA Editor. This individual may be able to support on-incident personnel, suggest additional personnel for critical tasks, assess the need to mobilize a Regional Support Center, or work with the WFM RDA program to request additional assistance.
- Call the WFM RDA (208-473-8107) directly. Help could be provided on-site or virtual (off-site), depending on the need.

**Recommendation:** The Unit Line Officer(s) may delegate specific WFDSS process responsibilities to an IMT, recognizing it is the Unit Line Officer(s) overall responsibility to make decisions for and provide management oversight for the incident. In delegating WFDSS responsibilities, Line Officers must also recognize the impacts to the IMT and on the other aspects of incident operations, and realize the potential for additional personnel needs and the associated costs.