WILDLAND FIRE COMMUNICATIONS: LESSONS LEARNED

Dave Anderson
Public Works Director
City of The Dalles
Levels of Communications

Before and during a fire, there are several levels of communications that will likely need to occur.

- Mutual sharing of information between water utility and fire responders.
  - Fire status
  - Critical infrastructure
  - Potential impacts
  - Advance warnings, trigger points
  - Protection measures
  - Utilization of ICS
Levels of Communications

- Communications within the utility organization.
  - Employee safety
  - Water supply contingencies
  - Assignment of roles
  - Fire information: relayed from daily briefings
  - Keeping elected officials informed

- Communications with water customers.
  - Water supply availability and safety
  - Water supply contingencies – both utility and citizens
Levels of Communications

- Communications with regulatory agencies.
  - Water quality standards violations, or potential violations
  - Public notifications
  - Water supply availability
Get to know your neighbors.

Understanding adjacent land ownership will guide your relationship building.
  • Federal ownership, fire response will likely be led US Forest Service or BLM
  • State or private ownership, fire response will be from ODF (wildland), State Fire Marshal (structural), local fire department or district, mutual aid responders

Developing relationships as part of pre-emergency planning will greatly facilitate emergency response communications.

Be familiar with Incident Command System (ICS).
Existing relationships for City of The Dalles.

- 1912 Agreement with US Secretary of Ag
- 1972 MOU with USFS
- Close working relationships with local ODF, SWCD, NRCS, fire district
- Maintain open communications with OHA and DEQ
- Member of local Watershed Council
- Agreements with industrial forest and private landowners
2013 Initial Attack

First notice of lightning strike fire start in Watershed from ODF to utility.

- Cell phone call from on-scene ODF fire commander to Public Works Director (have numbers of partners in phones)
- Site-specific information shared by radio comms during initial attack (vehicle or portable radios with responding agency channels)
Joint ODF and State Fire Marshal Incident Management Team responded.  
City staff introduced to IC; received ICS contact info (Ops Section).
  •  Shared water system info/concerns  
City attended daily/twice-daily IMT briefings.  
Information from briefings shared with affected City staff and elected officials.  
Advisory contact with OHA Drinking Water Program  
Shared fire status updates regularly with water treatment plant staff (evacuation concerns)
Water Supply Concerns

During the fire:

- **WTP operation or evacuation** –
  - Plan for back-up water supply if needed (City)

- **Retardant** –
  - Coordination with IC Aerial Attack planners (IC)
  - Field observation of retardant use (IMT/City)
  - Monitored raw water quality at WTP 3x/day during fire – visual, cyanide (City)

- **Ash/smoke** –
  - After a couple days of high-intensity burning and heavy smoke, received “smoky taste/odor” complaints
  - Conducted WTP and dist’n system sampling, increased blending with groundwater, added PAC at WTP (City)

- **Fuel/lubricants from fire fighting equipment**
  - Minimize creek crossings (IMT/City)
  - Secondary containment and spill pads for all pumps (IMT)
Public Outreach

- Issued press releases related to water supply/safety
  - Smoky water issue
  - Temporary water fill sites for affected residences
  - Messaging was limited to water supply issues, not fire status as that was the role of the IMT PIO

- Emailed regular updates to elected officials.

- Presented water supply information in Public Information Meetings conducted by IMT
About 1 week into the fire, City began discussing watershed rehabilitation options with USFS.

Convened Watershed Rehab Working Group immediately after the fire was contained; relied on existing relationships to facilitate outreach.
Lessons Learned

- Develop contacts and form relationships early, before they are needed in an event!!
- Maintain enough communication over time so that contact information is current – contact names, cell phone numbers, radio frequencies.
- Make communications within the organization as high of a priority as outside communications.
- Honor the public’s need for information, especially as it relates to the safety of their drinking water.
Wildland Fire Communications: Lessons Learned

Questions

Contact information:
Dave Anderson
tel: 541-506-2008
danderson@ci.the-dalles.or.us