COLORADO FOREST RESTORATION INSTITUTE
COLORADO STATE UNIVERSITY

PLPG Public Lands Policy Group

Implementing the Incident Strategic Alignment Process on the 2023 Elkhorn Fire

What is the Incident Strategic Alignment Process?

The Incident Strategic Alignment Process (ISAP) is an emerging framework for considering risk and developing strategy during wildland fire management. It is an iterative, collaborative, risk-based dialogue informed by advanced spatial and fire behavior analytics that takes place among Incident Management Team (IMT) members, Agency Administrators (AAs), and external partners. Throughout these conversations, those engaged with ISAP focus on four "pillars": critical values at risk (CVAR), strategic actions, risks to responders, and probability of success (see the ISAP Story Map) to co-construct durable incident-level strategy to minimize risks to communities, landscapes, and fire responders.

Approach

In partnership with ISAP developers and the United States Forest Service (USFS) Rocky Mountain Research Station, the Colorado Forest Restoration Institute and the Public Lands Policy Group at Colorado State University deployed a mixed-methods study that explored the ISAP on three incidents during the 2023 fire season. Field observations of, and in-depth interviews with, ISAP coaches, IMTs, AAs, and external partners who engaged with the ISAP on the 2023 Elkhorn Fire (Figure 1) in Central Idaho revealed factors that facilitate and frustrate the implementation of the ISAP during wildfire response and offered valuable lessons to the wildfire community.

Case Study 1/3: The Elkhorn Fire

The Elkhorn Fire was discovered on July 24, 2023 along the Salmon River corridor in the Payette National Forest (NF) near the border of the Nez Perce-Clearwater NF (Figure 1). On July 30th, the fire grew substantially, expanding 20,000 acres and crossing over to the Nez Perce-Clearwater NF. Extreme fire behavior threatened private inholdings and closed sections of the Salmon River to recreation activity. This rapid expansion of the fire prompted the Payette NF to request a Type 1 IMT to manage the incident. The incoming team, in partnership with the Payette and Nez Perce-Clearwater NFs, requested two ISAP coaches to help facilitate the ISAP. The Salmon-Challis and Bitterroot National Forests were also included in the ISAP due to the potential for the Elkhorn Fire to enter these areas in the coming weeks.

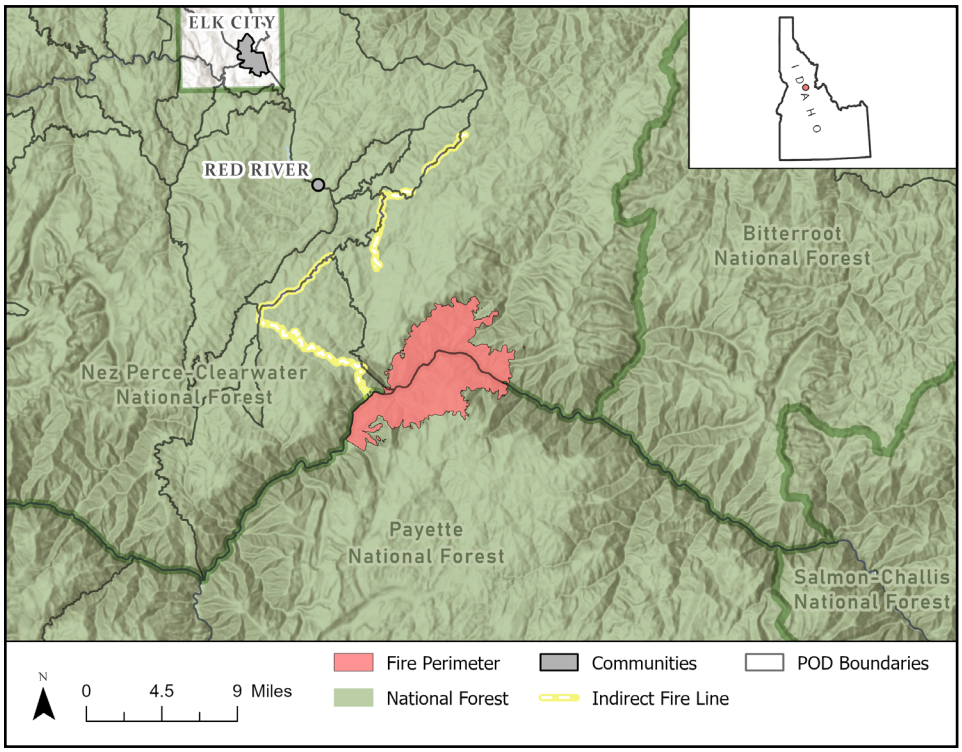

Figure 1. Map of the Elkhorn Fire's location in central Idaho. Highlighted in yellow are the indirect fire lines completed during the first IMTs tenure to protect communities to the west of the fire. As conditions moderated, this line was deemed no longer necessary and efforts to link the lines together ceased.

Between August 5 and August 8, the IMT, AAs, and two ISAP coaches conducted a series of risk and strategy conversations using the ISAP. These conversations centered around protecting communities to the west of the fire. A suite of structure protection actions, continued observations, and the construction of an indirect fuel break to the west of the fire were used to protect identified CVAR, in anticipation of additional extreme fire behavior. On August 17th, a new IMT assumed control of the Elkhorn Fire. The incoming team and AAs used the ISAP to re-evaluate the situation and deemed it appropriate to shift strategies. Specifically, the decision was made to cease construction of the indirect fuel break to the northwest of the fire area due to moderating weather and fuel moisture conditions that reduced the threat of extreme fire behavior (Figure 1). The new team retained the structure protection and observational activities implemented by the previous IMT. This strategy remained in place until precipitation extinguished the fire in the fall at 26,048 acres.

1. The timeline for this fire was developed from our observations (which took place from August 5 – 8), interviews, and documentation located on the website "inciweb.wildfire.gov".

Facilitating and Frustrating Factors Impacting ISAP Implementation

Facilitating Factors

Most participants said that the formalized, structured decision-making workflow embedded within the four pillars of the ISAP helped facilitate a common operating picture of critical risks relative to fire behavior on the Elkhorn Fire. As one participant said,

> *"The value I see in the ISAP is a framework that we're all using consistently. We're looking at [a fire] in a similar fashion through the same lens."*

Many participants also said having a consistent method, that still maintains flexibility, to align AAs and IMTs in complex environments was a critical benefit that supported ISAP's adoption. As one participant stated,

> *"I think it'll help inform better decisions along the way... the ISAP is a more refined process to work through the development of strategy, as it relates to critical values at risk, risk to the responders, and probability of success."*

Having the capacity to facilitate conversations and run fire behavior analytics facilitated the ISAP implementation. ISAP coaches and IMT members who were knowledgeable about and capable of facilitating the ISAP helped steer conversations and promote alignment. Additionally, the team had access to a fire behavior analyst and Strategic Operational Planner to develop fire weather and behavior predictions, interpret Risk Management Assistance analytics, and develop a course of action for the fire, all of which were important in discussing which actions might warrant additional consideration. Said one IMT member,

> *"We had the capacity with an LTAN and a SOPL trainee at the time who were able to produce the near-term fire behavior and the FS Pro runs... [It helped us] potentially identify whether the lines we were constructing were viable or not. We don't always have the people that have the skill sets, from an analytical standpoint, with the strategic mindset to be able to develop that as an incident is unfolding."*

Frustrating Factors

The Elkhorn Fire threatened multiple communities, private inholdings, and vital economic and recreational values. Some participants felt a challenge was prioritizing and describing why certain values were "critical" values, especially in the context of this complicated multi-jurisdictional incident. Both AAs and IMT members also said they felt there was room for improving transparency and dialogue on social and political factors that drive CVAR and strategy discussions. As another participant put it,

> *"I think it would be good to be more transparent about whether a value is driven by political or social pressure. I feel like we're not doing that because it's not spelled out in the tool, and I think we could do that. I personally feel like that would be the right thing to do."*

Many participants also revealed that different understandings of fire policy terminology challenged the ISAP implementation and contributed to some misalignment. For example, some participants indicated that AAs and IMTs had different conceptions of what a "full suppression" strategy should entail. They said this inhibited a smooth discussion of viable strategic alternatives. While some individuals were comfortable employing indirect tactics on "full suppression" fires, others were less so. For example, one participant said,

> *"The terminology was really getting in our way. 'Full Suppression' means something whether we like it or not – it is a bias for more aggressive action...I don't know if the ISAP could help that, but I really hope it can."*

Conclusion

The ISAP was used to build a common operating picture of CVAR between IMTs and AAs and was used to develop and re-evaluate strategies to minimize risk to fire responders and protect nearby communities. Overall, participants indicated broad support for the ISAP and cited the formalized and structured, yet flexible decision-making workflow, combined with sufficient capacity to run fire behavior analytics and facilitate dialogues supported the use of the ISAP. However, participants noted difficulty in prioritizing CVAR, particularly when nuanced social and political concerns were involved, as well as divergent understandings of fire policy terminology frustrated the ISAP.

Elkhorn Fire Lesson Learned - Using The ISAP To Shift Strategy As Conditions Change

The initial strategy for the Elkhorn Fire was created when there was a perceived threat to communities. However, by the time the new team assumed command, representatives from the Forests confirmed that the fire did not significantly move as expected, and thus no longer posed a threat to adjacent communities. As such, the second team and AAs decided to cease construction of the indirect fuel break on the western edge of the fire. One member of this team said they shifted strategies because the team believed the risk to responders was no longer commensurate with the CVAR the initial strategic action was designed to protect. Although one of the goals of the ISAP is to develop durable longer-term strategy, the dynamic context the Elkhorn Fire demonstrated how conversations centered around the four pillars can identify appropriate opportunities to adjust course.

> *"Anytime you do a transition with another team, it takes a couple days to say, 'This is where that team's trajectory was going. Does that make sense to us? Is it still valid as the conditions change?'... All those little checkpoints, having a values conversation, having these conversations about risk to responders fed to that phone call between the AAs and the IC [where the strategy changed]."*

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