



## 2024 USDA Forest Service Region 5 ISAP Engagement Sessions Summary

### Overview

The Incident Strategic Alignment Process (ISAP) is an emerging framework for considering risk and developing strategy during wildland fire management and all-hazard response (see [ISAP Storymap](#)). During the ISAP, Incident Management Team (IMT) members, Agency Administrators (AAs), and other response partners identify and prioritize critical values at risk (CVAR), develop strategic actions to protect CVAR, evaluate the risk to responders, and determine the probability of success. The intent of the ISAP is to co-construct durable incident strategy to minimize risks to communities, landscapes, and fire responders. Still, little is known about how ground resources utilize and understand the ISAP.

In partnership with the USDA Forest Service Region 5 Safety First Committee and the ISAP developers, the Colorado Forest Restoration Institute (CFRI) helped conduct ten engagement sessions with Forest Service Region 5 operations groups, line officers, fuels and prevention personnel, and regional safety representatives from April 23rd - July 2nd, 2024 (Table 1). The purpose of the engagement sessions was to: 1) communicate the purpose and application of the ISAP and related analytics, including Risk Management Assistance (RMA); 2) provide an opportunity for participants to ask questions to the ISAP subject matter experts; 3) learn how firefighters have used the ISAP and how they perceive the utility of the ISAP and RMA within fire response; and 4) identify recommendations for improving the integration of these tools within incident management. In this brief report, we summarize feedback from these engagement sessions, which we have organized into three categories including: 1) process standardization; 2) vertical and horizontal alignment on incidents; and 3) curriculum, training, and exposure. The ISAP developers and others may benefit from considering this feedback and recommendations as the ISAP is operationalized and socialized with field-level resources and others in the fire management community.

Table 1. Overview of sessions, dates, and participants for each.

Session	Date	Participant Type	No. of Participants
1	23-Apr-24	Interagency Hotshot Crews	17
2	7-May-24	Fuels Technicians and Planners	12
3	8-May-24	Smokejumpers	16
4	9-May-24	Helitack	28
5	14-May-24	Fixed Wing/Air Attack	14
6	23-May-24	Prevention Specialists	8
7	11-Jun-24	Safety Representatives	8
8	12-Jun-24	Division Chiefs/Training Officers	27
9	13-Jun-24	Engines	6
10	26-Jun-24	Line Officers	19

## Process standardization

- **The ISAP may represent an opportunity to standardize risk management and strategy development.** Participants said that many of the tools (e.g., RMA, Potential Operational Delineations [PODs]) and processes (e.g., identifying CVAR, evaluating risk to responders) that go into the ISAP are already frequently used on fires. The ISAP framework could serve to integrate existing tools and standardize risk and strategy dialogues within fire management. Still, some participants felt efforts to standardize the ISAP posed a potential risk that the framework may become another box to check and may be used to justify existing decisions, rather than a structured framework to stimulate critical thought and multi-party dialogue about alternative actions, risks, and the probability of success. Some participants were unclear how the ISAP could be implemented during evolving and dynamic incidents when time and capacity were limited. Thus, additional consideration may be needed to balance the desire to standardize the ISAP with ample flexibility to situate the ISAP within the unique processes and frameworks teams currently use, which may be addressed through formal training and experiential learning.
- **There is a need for greater clarification on how the ISAP integrates with the Wildland Fire Decision Support System (WFDDSS).** There are many processes and procedures required to develop, document, and communicate strategy and decision rationale in fire management and often under time constraints. Line officers indicated a need for clarification on how the ISAP can inform and integrate with the WFDDSS NextGen, which may help streamline workflows and reduce perceived redundancies.

## Vertical and horizontal alignment on incidents

- **Ground resources should be included in strategy meetings when possible.** While many participants recommended this, some qualified that there were barriers in the fire management system for some groups to be included in risk and strategy dialogues. Notably, Smokejumpers, Helitack, and other aerial resources discussed how being included in strategy meetings would be challenging as they are often assigned to and operating from locations away from the Incident Command Post (ICP).
- **Two-way dialogue between leadership and ground resources outside of strategy meetings should be a standard component of the ISAP.** Participants said there has long been a need for AAs and IMTs to better communicate the rationale behind strategies to ground resources. Conversely, there is also a need for venues where ground resources can ask the appropriate questions of leadership, when they are unsure of the decision rationale or question the efficacy of the strategies employed. Groups such as IHC, Engines, Helitack, Smokejumpers, and Air Attack strongly emphasized that all resources asked to directly assume risk should be able to communicate with leadership using a common language and provide feedback to decision-makers. They said that resources charged with implementing strategies are frequently the most familiar with the necessary tactics, their effectiveness, and associated risks, and that ground resources could therefore provide valuable insights to decision makers that may improve the strategies employed on an incident.
- **Daily briefings and other communications should routinely incorporate the ISAP language to facilitate a common language and operating picture for understanding, interpreting, and implementing risk and strategy.** Participants said using the ISAP language during daily briefings can facilitate a better understanding of rationale behind why strategic actions were chosen and bridge the knowledge gap concerning overall strategy that frequently exists between IMTs/AAs and the ground resources under their command. Importantly, participants emphasized that daily operational briefings should not be the only time where the ISAP language is used, and that IMTs should use the common language of the ISAP to communicate about risks and strategy whenever they interact with ground resources to better support a common operating picture.
- **Clarification is needed on how IMTs, AAs, and land management unit leadership and fire staff should work together to operationalize the ISAP.** Many participants were curious about how involved AAs should be with IMTs during strategy development and how much they should advocate for certain strategic choices and tactical actions, versus deferring to the judgement and recommendations of the IMT. Additionally, some line officers experienced in using the ISAP recommended that it should be standard

practice to bring in a local unit's lead Resource Advisor to the ISAP risk and strategy dialogues because of the perspective they bring that can help identify, prioritize, and protect critical values.

- **The ISAP can be difficult when a fire crosses jurisdictional boundaries because of the different organizational values and jurisdictional requirements.** Participants said this was not limited to federal and non-federal jurisdictions and interactions but also boundaries between land management units of the same agency. Line officers requested greater clarification on how to navigate the ISAP when different policy requirements and mandates affect risk and strategy dialogues.

## Curriculum, training, and further exposure

- **Most in the engagement sessions were unfamiliar with the ISAP, or had used it infrequently.** We observed that line officers and participants attached to Complex IMTs were the only individuals consistently aware of the ISAP and RMA. Among the limited number of participants familiar with the ISAP and RMA, there was high variability in knowledge of, and experience with, utilizing the process and tools. This suggests that comprehensive knowledge and standardization of practices for the ISAP and RMA have not yet been established within the groups targeted for these engagement sessions. Further outreach and coaching efforts will likely be necessary to build an understanding of the ISAP throughout the fire management system.
- **Principles of risk management, RMA, and the ISAP need to be incorporated into NWCG curriculum early and often.** Participants emphasized that if RMA and the ISAP are to be institutionalized, these topics need to be included throughout the NWCG curriculum, from complex incident management team qualifications down to early career firefighter coursework.
- **AA engagement will likely be critical to the ISAP's success.** AAs have management authority on incidents, and thus inherently hold a key role in developing strategy and setting intent. In particular, AAs are responsible for advocating for land management needs, current and long-term objectives, and determining critical values at risk. AA training and engagement can help build the knowledge and skills to participate in the ISAP with IMTs. Training may need to be agency-specific given different organization missions and policies in fire management.
- **Venues beyond NWCG should be used to socialize the ISAP.** Participants recommended Incident Management Response Roundtable calls, regional risk meetings, annual AA refresher meetings, regional prevention reports, and Forest Leadership Team meetings as excellent opportunities to continue to socialize the ISAP with diverse audiences.
- **Pre-fire planning activities provide opportunities to integrate the ISAP risk and strategy dialogues with cooperators.** Sound strategy and intent should be developed long before a fire occurs. Participants said that participating in cross-boundary Potential Operational Delineations ([PODs](#)) workshops, risk and [value mapping](#), and scenario exercises using the ISAP and RMA can establish a common operating picture, help local units and their cooperators learn and become comfortable with the process, and advocate for actions that protect critical resources. Preseason exercises to collaboratively identify, prioritize, and map critical values at risk can help ensure cooperator input into the ISAP and speed up the process during incidents.

## Conclusion

The 2024 USDA Forest Service Region 5 ISAP Engagement Sessions were a first step to socialize and solicit feedback on the ISAP amongst ground level firefighters and other operational resources. Participants identified recommendations and considerations to standardize the ISAP, to improve the vertical and horizontal alignment of fire response organizations to better communicate risk and develop strategy, and to provide formal and experiential training opportunities in risk-informed decision making and the ISAP. These engagement sessions highlighted needs and recommendations across operational groups and levels of authority, which may help inform future ISAP engagement, application, and research. Specifically, future efforts should focus on exploring 1) how to craft appropriate standards that support risk and strategy conversations at different scales and across jurisdictions, 2) how to create alignment during rapidly evolving incidents, and 3) how to navigate different organizational fire response cultures that influence risk perception, strategy development, and decision-making.

# Appendix

## Engagement Session Questions

1. What questions do you have about ISAP/how have you engaged with it before?
2. What components of the Incident Strategic Alignment Process are working well, and which need work, are less understood, or are less effective?
3. What factors facilitate or frustrate the development, deployment, and application of risk-based analytics and the strategic planning model embedded within ISAP?
4. How can the Incident Strategic Alignment Process and associated tools be improved to enhance use in incident management and for end users?
5. In what ways can Incident Strategic Alignment Process and the Risk Management Assistance Dashboard positively impact the way risk and strategy are assessed, developed, contested, and communicated for end users?
6. What can be done to further engage with end-users to understand the purpose of ISAP and determine its efficacy?
7. At what levels should the Incident Strategic Alignment Process be integrated into NWCG curriculum?

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