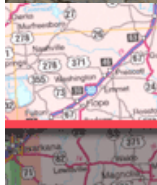


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Answer the Call: Interstate & Intrastate Mutual Aid Systems

National Initiatives Aim To Create Interstate & Intrastate Mutual Aid Systems

By BILL METCALF

Illustrations By SEAN O'DANIELS

Unless you work in one of our nation's largest fire departments or in the most remote part of the world, it's very likely you've worked with personnel and apparatus from neighboring departments at a significant incident, either in your jurisdiction or theirs.

Neighboring departments have helped each other manage major incidents since the origins of the fire service. In many cases, providing local assistance is simple and uncomplicated. This act of, "You help me, and I'll help you" is a classic example of mutual aid in its simplest form. There are many other technical terms to describe the concept, including automatic aid and assistance by hire. At its heart, mutual aid is about fire departments helping their brothers and sisters, whether they're next door or across the country.

Fire departments in the western part of the United States are accustomed to moving fire apparatus on a large scale to respond to major wildland fire incidents across the region. But last fall, when hurricanes Katrina and Rita devastated the Gulf Coast, all of us in the fire service witnessed mutual aid on a much larger scale, as fire departments sent their firefighters and apparatus thousands of miles across the country to provide assistance in the region. From the outside, it appeared we did an outstanding job. However, for those of us involved on the inside, we know that the effort to provide mutual aid did not go as smoothly or efficiently as we would like. And while countless people expended a lot of effort to pull it off, we know we can do better.

Intrastate Mutual Aid



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Currently, there are two separate but connected projects underway at the national level to improve our ability to provide mutual aid throughout the country. The first project is focused on developing a National Fire Service Intrastate (inside a state) Mutual Aid System (IMAS). Administered by the International Association of Fire Chiefs (IAFC), this project is funded by a grant from the National Incident Management System (NIMS) Integration Center within the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS). This project actually predates Hurricane Katrina; it was originally funded in early 2005 as part of a larger effort to improve fire service mutual aid systems.

As conceived, 10 pilot states will receive assistance in developing and testing comprehensive and effective intrastate mutual aid systems. These pilot states will work with fire service and emergency management stakeholders in their states in a collaborative effort to produce a formal, written plan.

In choosing these pilot states, it was important to focus efforts in areas of greatest need. The project staff assessed the current state of mutual aid systems in all 50 states with assistance from state fire chief associations and the IAFC Divisions and Sections. The assessment process included an examination of each state's risk level (the likelihood of an event requiring major mutual aid response) and their basic support base (including a strong state fire chiefs association). As a result of this process, two regions were selected for initial focus. In the Gulf Coast region, mutual aid systems will be developed and implemented in Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana and Texas. (For more on Louisiana's role in this system, see the sidebar on p. 132.) In the Rocky Mountain West, the following states will serve as pilot states: Idaho, Montana, Wyoming, Colorado and New Mexico.

The IMAS project is not intended to re-invent any wheels; rather, it is intended to draw on system components that may already exist in certain states. Specifically, the IMAS project draws on expertise from four "anchor" states — California, Florida, Ohio and Illinois — that operate existing, functional intrastate mutual aid systems that can serve as models. Further, a team of content area experts assembled from these anchor states will serve as advisors to the pilot states. These technical experts possess active fire service backgrounds with experience in mutual aid. They will guide the state's initial planning process, maintain contact with the state system organizers and encourage the integration of NIMS and mutual aid concepts.

The technical experts met with representatives of their respective states at an IAFC stakeholders meeting in Denver in early February. Each pilot state is starting at a different place. Some have already done a lot of work, and a few are without system components. Regardless, each state is currently working toward having a functional plan. The project goal: to complete the first set of pilot mutual aid plans by late 2006. If this first project year is successful, the effort will be expanded until all states have a complete and effective plan.

Interstate Mutual Aid

As we learned in the Hurricane Katrina response, we not only need the ability to move fire resources within states, but we also need to move fire resources across state boundaries. As a result of the IAFC experience during Hurricane Katrina, IAFC President Bill Killen convened a task force to begin work on the development and implementation of a functional and effective interstate (between states) mutual aid system.

This project is known by the name of the IAFC task force that is formulating recommendations on the subject: the Mutual Aid System Task Force (MASTF). Chief Jack Krakeel chairs this task force, which began work in October 2005. This initiative is currently supported by the IAFC and its Divisions and Sections, with no external funding. Nevertheless, the project faces an aggressive timetable and aims to deliver the model for an effective mutual aid system by the time the IAFC meets for its annual convention at Fire-Rescue

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system by the time the IAFC meets for its annual convention at the Rouse Ball Convention Center in Dallas this September.

The MASTF project draws heavily on the knowledge, expertise and manpower of the IAFC's Divisions and Sections. Initially, during late 2005, the Divisions and Sections canvassed their member states to collect examples of existing mutual aid plans and "best practices" that might apply nationwide. The task force then met at IAFC headquarters in Fairfax, Va., in early 2006.

At that meeting, MASTF members reviewed the assembled plans and best practices, and developed a basic outline of the components of a national fire service mutual aid system. The Divisions and Sections then began the task of performing more detailed work on each of the potential system components. At the next MASTF meeting later this month, the group will gather all the new information and begin the process of drafting a model interstate mutual aid plan.



Finding Common Ground

Although neighboring departments helping each other may be a relatively simple process, the business of sending people hundreds of miles across a state or thousands of miles across the country is much more complicated. If these mutual aid systems are to work, they should include certain preliminary components. Following is a list of such components I collected from discussions at the stakeholders meeting in Denver and the MASTF meetings held to date, as well as conference calls with project staff and Chief Krakeel.

- **Common Terminology & Definitions:** In some areas of the country, a tanker is a fire apparatus with a tank that carries water. In other areas, it is an airplane used for aerial fire-suppression activities. Everyone must use the same terminology.
- **Standardized Resource Typing:** All fire engines are not the same. Some are specifically configured for structural fire protection while others are designed for wildland firefighting. A set of common definitions/types of resources will be the core of the system.
- **Professional Training & Certification Requirements (Credentialing):** Just as fire apparatus capabilities must have a common set of descriptions and definitions, there should also be a common definition of professional credentials for the folks who arrive on the apparatus. The goal: to create just enough of a credentialing system to ensure folks can do the job, without creating too much of a bureaucracy that prevents qualified people from responding.
- **Resource Inventory/Tracking System:** Once apparatus, equipment and people are classified, we must know where they are and how to access

them. The wildland fire community already has a system called the Resource Ordering and Status System (ROSS) that seems to have a lot of the capabilities we will need.

- Standardized Methods for Requesting & Dispatching Resources: There are several existing systems for requesting and dispatching resources, including several operated by the federal government, the states' Emergency Management Assistance Compact (EMAC) and individual interstate agreements. The challenge is to identify a coordinated and effective method.
- Provision of Logistical Support to Resources While En route & After Arrival: One of the glaring failures of the Hurricane Katrina mutual aid response was the inability to provide basic logistical support to mutual aid resources en route and on the scene. If people don't have food, water and a place to shower and sleep, their effectiveness declines significantly. It's not enough just to get them there; we must also take care of them.
- Clarification of Issues Concerning Liability, Workers' Compensation & Other Legal Issues: It will be important to provide an appropriate legal foundation for the system as well as protection from tort liability. It should be determined in advance who is responsible for response-related injuries or illnesses.
- Compensation/Payment: Responsibility for expense reimbursement, including salaries, benefits and direct operating expenses, must be clearly defined.
- Documentation System: We will need a simple but effective documentation system to support the operation of the system. The basic documentation used in the incident command system/NIMS will hopefully serve as the basic foundation for this system.
- System Management & Oversight: Who (which agency or group of agencies) will be responsible for overall management and operation of this mutual aid system? When you need a resource, who will you call?

What It All Means

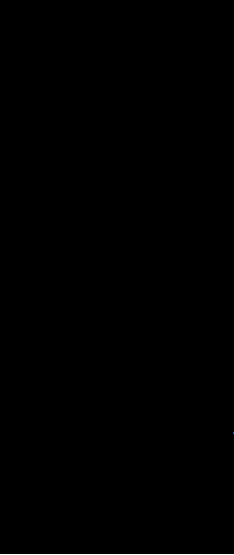


Obviously, people at the highest levels of the federal and state governments will be deeply involved in the strategy and negotiations required to create these intrastate and interstate mutual aid systems. But perhaps the most important question is this: "What will it mean to the firefighter or company officer on a fire engine?" If we assume your department is a participant in the state and national systems, it will mean you and your engine are part of something much, much bigger than your local fire department. You will likely receive additional training that focuses on how to fit in and operate effectively at incidents hundreds or thousands of miles from where you work. Your credentials and your engine's capabilities will be entered in a database, available for dispatch or response to any other jurisdiction participating in the system. You will likely carry some sort of standardized identification to identify not only who you are, but what your capabilities are. With that standard identification, you will be able to show up anywhere and be put to work, because the incident commanders will have clear evidence of your training and capabilities.

If these projects are successful, we could see additional Katrina-like mutual aid responses — but this time, we'll be better prepared. More and more of you may find yourselves sent far from home to work in these disaster-torn communities. The good news: When you get there, you will be fed, housed and provided shower facilities, and your health and welfare will be taken care of. There will be fuel and maintenance services for your engine, and your home department will receive reimbursement for the expenses incurred by your response.

Something To Think About

It is a near certainty that this country will again face a large-scale natural catastrophe like Katrina. Whether it's a hurricane, flood, earthquake, wildland fire or some as-yet-unimagined event, it will happen. When this occurs, the fire service will be called on to be America's first responders. It is our responsibility — and the historical calling of the fire service — to be ready when that event occurs. Of course, we must be more than just ready; we must be better prepared than we have ever been, because we paid attention, learned from our mistakes and built better response systems. Will you be ready and able to respond?



You can monitor the progress of these mutual aid projects and access many mutual aid related resources on the IAFC's mutual aid-related Web pages at www.iafc.org/mutualaid.

Bill Metcalf is the fire chief for the North County Fire Protection District in San Diego County. Chief Metcalf is the vice-chair of the Mutual Aid Systems Task Force and a technical expert with the Intrastate Mutual Aid System project.

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