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## Veldfire Suppression during the COVID-19 Pandemic

### Fire Protection Association: Response Plan & Guidelines

*“Corona Virus Burnout and Pandemic Fatigue amongst South Africans is a serious concern as it has a direct correlation to the Second Wave. Countries are now facing a secondary crisis, in the way of mental health, and an altered approach to managing the pandemic is needed.”*

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## Definitions

Term	Definition
Base Camp	A geographical site, within the general incident area, separate from the Incident, equipped, and staffed to provide sleeping, food, water, and sanitary services to incident personnel.
COVID-19	COVID-19 is an infectious disease caused by a newly discovered coronavirus. A respiratory illness that can spread from person to person mainly via respiratory droplets due to close contact
Fire Teams	
ICP	Incident Command Post (Fixed or mobile)
IMT	Incident Management Team
Isolation	The complete separation from others of a person suffering from a contagious or infectious disease
PPE	Personal Protective Equipment as prescribed in the relevant industry standards
Quarantine	Separation of a person reasonably believed to have been exposed to a communicable disease but not yet symptomatic, from others who have not been so exposed, to prevent the possible spread of the communicable disease
Screening	Screening is a way for an appointed person (Screener) to find out if you may have COVID-19 or not. The person will ask you questions and scan your forehead to take your temperature
Social distancing	Refers to various measures that reduce close contact between large groups of people, e.g. maintain a distance of 2,0m from others when possible
Staging Area	Locations set up at an incident where resources can be placed while awaiting a tactical assignment.
Symptoms	Any feeling of illness or physical mental change that is caused by a particular disease

## 1. Introduction

- **Veldfire COVID-19 Task Team**

This document is derived from the “*Veldfire Suppression During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Response Plan*” as developed by the Veldfire COVID-19 task team and was established under the Provincial Fire Work Group: Ground Operations Sub Committee.

A Veldfire suppression response plan was created by the team based on the 4 “Rs” of integrated veldfire management, with specific focus on response.

- Reduction
- Readiness
- Response
- Recovery

The team consisted of: M Rust (PDMC), P Prince (SANParks), D Nortje (Winelands Fire Protection Association), D Ferreira (Contractor), and Chair P Viljoen (CapeNature).

- **Aims and objectives of this guideline**

To provide effective guidelines that are easy to implement, in an attempt to prevent or minimize COVID-19 spread when fire fighters are at wildfires and en route to or from fires. The aim of this document, therefore, is to keep stakeholders, role-players, first responders and IMTs as safe as possible during incidents.

- **COVID-19 and veldfire suppression**

Firefighters, landowners and support personnel perform an essential service in the combatting of wildfires within the Western Cape and are in contact with various other organizations, as well as other private landowners and members of the public.

If any member of the various fire crews becomes infected with the COVID-19 virus, there is a high risk that the entire crew may become infected and must be quarantined.

### **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY OF THIS DOCUMENT**

During operations, teams and individuals are at risk of being exposed to infection. The longer an incident lasts, the more additional personnel are required, and the more likely it becomes that infection will spread, impacting on resources.

If symptoms occur within teams/individuals, it will have a major adverse effect on the availability of personnel during the season. Any persons involved in fire suppression operations will have to be regularly screened. This will have to be well structured and enforced to ensure the best possible safety

of the personnel. These screening protocols will need to be practical and effective, and supported by the responsibility of each person at a wildfire and/or delivering a service.

If contract teams, where an infection has occurred, are forced to self-isolate for 9 days at a time, it will negatively impact the amount of personnel available to respond.

Focus areas include the principles of COVID-19 hygiene practices, separation of fire teams, protocols for ICPs, staging-, camping areas and briefings that will have to be suitable in order to ensure compliance with restrictions.

We included two practical guidelines, as prepared by the US Forestry Team as good content to use to prepare for joining and/or use at an incident.

This document serves as a guideline for all personnel and stakeholders attending and/or providing any service to incidents.

## 2. Basic considerations

**Initial attack** should be the highest priority in committing resources with the purpose of containing fires during initial attack and preventing long-duration fires.

Initial attack response should align with direction to limit the risk of exposure and spread of COVID-19. This should involve strategies and tactics that minimize the number of people needed to respond and that reduce the incident duration while, at the same time, do not compromise firefighter safety and probability of success. The efforts to reduce overall exposure may require consideration to increased staffing, albeit for a shorter duration.

Emphasis should be on swift **containment** in order to minimize assignment time. Mop-up standards should be evaluated for all incidents and limited to minimize additional fire spread. Make decisions that will minimize the number of responders needed to meet the objectives.

Consider **zone and point protection** suppression strategies associated with protection of human life, communities, and critical infrastructure, where sufficient resources for perimeter control are not available.

Weigh the risk of responding in multiple vehicles; driving is still the one of our highest-risk activities.

### 3. Transport

The “70% vehicle capacity” rule will not apply to the fire services, including fire ground teams from various entities (FPAs, Private Contractor, CapeNature, SANParks, landowners etc.) **for the combat of fires or fire-related activities** (SAPS/Traffic will follow a common logic approach). It is, however, requested that when landowner fire resources drive to or from a fire incident, or fire-related activity:

- These vehicles are marked or easily recognizable as a firefighting resource.
- Members in vehicles wear facemasks, at all times, and that the necessary sanitation and hygiene protocols of vehicles are adhered to.
- Landowners responding to an incident must familiarize themselves with the hygiene and preventative measures of the Fire Services in charge of the incident.
- Should there be a conflict between a service provider, or landowner’s standards and those of the relevant IC and/or assigned safety officer at the incident, the standards of the IC and/or assigned safety officer will be the superseding standard to be adhered to while working on the incident.
- All agencies and contractors are to familiarize themselves and adjust their SOPs where relevant.

#### Responsibility

- Each agency, or organization responding to a veldfire, is responsible for the implementation of this SOP, during, and en route to an incident.
- The relevant Incident Commander is responsible for the implementation of these standards at their incident.
- Day-to-day transport standards are the responsibility of the relevant organization.

#### Personal Hygiene

- Drivers must ensure passengers wash/sanitize their hands before getting in the vehicle.
- No eating, drinking or smoking inside vehicles.
- For circulation of fresh air, ask the driver if you can keep the windows open as far as possible, or allow the windows to be opened every 30 minutes.

#### Vehicle Hygiene

Drivers **are** responsible for the cleaning of the vehicles on a daily basis, and after transporting fire fighters not part of your team (upon exiting the vehicle).

#### **4. Deployment Procedures**

- **Day-to-day operations and commuting to and from work**

All authorities and landowners will be responsible for the implementation of their own standards, and/or those of the entity they are providing the service for, as well as compliance during day-to-day operations and commuting to and from the incident.

- **Standards general and during deployment**

Due to the nature of this pandemic and the realities of suppressing wildfires, it is best that fire crews be kept separate. Fire teams should be made up of members from the same stations to minimise the risk of an infection and limit the possible spread of the infection.

- **Precautions**

All landowners should be encouraged to self-monitor for symptoms before they report to the fire. Daily screenings at the ICP, staging areas and camp sites, during incidents, should take place as frequently and extensively as possible, which will promote the health and well-being of all firefighters and support crews.

All firefighters, support personnel and landowners should have a basic understanding of COVID-19, including how the disease spreads, what the symptoms of the disease are and what measures can be taken to prevent, or minimize, the transmission of the virus that causes COVID-19.

**Those who have symptoms of COVID-19 should immediately notify their FMU Leader and goFPA and self-isolate.**

- **Hygiene protocols**

We must take responsibility for ourselves, and for our fellow firefighters, by following good COVID-19 hygiene protocols. Below are but a few of the most important protocols:

**Use of cloth face mask and social distancing.**

- It is mandatory that everyone must wear a facemask when in public.
- Landowners must ensure adequate cloth facemasks or similar approved face covers (flash hood, buff etc) are available.
- When commuting you should wear a facemask. When traveling in a vehicle outside your group you **MUST** wear a facemask.
- Wear facemasks when entering common areas e.g. ICP, collecting food and during briefings.
- All should be encouraged to self-monitor for symptoms before you report to an incident.
- Rest and proper hydration and nutrition should be prioritized and emphasised every workday.
- All landowners should practice social distancing, wear cloth facemasks and frequently clean and disinfect shared and high-touch surfaces.

## 5. Screening protocols

- **Responsibility**

It is the responsibility of each agency, organization and service provider to ensure that they have screening protocols and implement them as per the COVID-19 response plans.

- **Procedure**

- Testing and screening at Base Camps and/or designated area and before reaching/reporting to the Incident Command Posts.
- All resources accessing any entry point location will wash their hands with soap and water. Where soap and water is not available, then hand sanitiser may be used.

- **Precautions**

Any procedures or standards implemented relating to control and spread of COVID-19, must in no way interfere with the safety of personnel on the fire line.

- **Response**

- All relevant parties must designate a crew leader or person in charge of a resource as safety monitor for COVID-19 protocols and SOPs.
- Utilize virtual/remote briefings or brief only key personnel to minimize numbers and maintain separation distance.
- Teams and single resources are to be transported separately and deployed separately.
- Teams and single resources are always to avoid getting within 5 metres of each other and never integrate.
- Include COVID-19 prevention, mitigation, and concerns in daily crew briefs.
- Avoid unnecessary contact with other incident personnel and public.
- Limit the sharing of apparatus, supplies and equipment amongst adjoining resources.
- Decontamination is recommended prior to leaving the incident.
- During mobilization, discuss COVID-19 mitigation plans particular to the incident.

## 6. Exposure response

- **Symptom monitoring**

- General symptoms include fever (38° C or greater), cough, shortness of breath, and may also include fatigue, sore throat, aches, and a runny nose.
- Monitor firefighter temperature and watch for symptoms.
- Isolate and test employees if showing symptoms.
- Develop a contact plan that includes a medical evaluation for off-duty personnel that develop symptoms.
- If an employee feels ill, isolate and return to residence, or other designated area.
- Develop and/or designate facilities for isolating symptomatic employees at the incident.
- Use appropriate PPE and social distancing protocols before entering the environment of someone with respiratory symptoms.

- **In the event of a presumptive exposure**

- Landowners and firefighters should report symptoms or potential COVID-19 exposure to supervisor immediately and initiate onsite self-isolation/self-quarantine. For the good of the crew and all personnel assigned to the incident, do not hesitate to report suspected exposure or symptoms.
- Supervisor/FMU Leader will report through chain of command to IC.
- Incident staff will interview person affected to determine locations and other personnel that might have been exposed, using COVID-19 approved protocols.
- Decontaminate any equipment and locations before returning to service.
- Any infected person will be demobilized and sent home, if possible.
- Follow existing public health protocols for transportation arrangements back to home base.
- Incident staff/landowners will work to identify and inform others potentially exposed, check for symptoms and determine if there is a need for decontamination or further action.

## ANNEXURE 1 – Example of a COVID-19 Briefing Checklist

### Fire and COVID-19 Briefing Checklist

#### Self-Awareness / Screening

- Immediately separate yourself from others.
- Notify supervisor if you or others experience:
  - o Cough, more than expected
  - o Shortness of breath or difficulty breathing
  - o New loss of taste or smell
  - o Fever                      o Sore throat
  - o Chills                      o Muscle pain
- Review and follow crew and division plans to isolate, triage, and transport symptomatic personnel.

#### Hygiene on the Fireline

- Properly wash or sanitize your hands often, especially before and after eating or entering a public place, and after coughing or sneezing.
- Avoid handshakes and communal use items.
- Maintain a supply of hand sanitizer and hand wipes. Inform supervisor of needed resupply.
- Disinfect high touch surfaces often:
  - o Radios, phones, doors, pumps, fuel cans, etc.

#### Social Distancing and Protective Equipment

- Initiate, practice, and remind others of social distancing.
- Conduct briefings and conversations outdoors and at least 6 feet apart.
- Utilize face coverings as a tool when practical.
- Clean or replace dirty face coverings, equipment, and PPE.

#### Communications

- Face coverings and social distancing complicate communications. Ensure effective sender/receiver messaging.

#### Protect yourself, your crew, and your camp!

Find more information: <https://www.nwcc.gov/coronavirus>.

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## **ANNEXURE 2: Firefighter COVID-19 pocket guide (to be included in IAP)**

### **Wildfire response COVID-19 Checklist**

#### **Self-Awareness / Screening**

- Separate yourself from others.
- Notify supervisor if you or others experience:
  - Cough, more than expected
  - Shortness of breath or difficulty breathing
  - New loss of taste or smell
  - Fever
  - Chills
  - Sore throat
  - Muscle pain
- Review and follow crew and division plans to isolate, triage, and transport symptomatic personnel.

#### **Hygiene on the fireline**

- Properly wash or sanitize your hands often, especially before and after eating or entering a public place, and after coughing or sneezing.
- Avoid handshakes and communal use items.
- Maintain a supply of hand sanitizer and hand wipes. Inform supervisor of needed resupply.
- Disinfect high-touch surfaces often:
  - Radios, phones, doors, pumps, fuel cans, etc.

#### **Social Distancing and Protective Equipment**

- Initiate, practice, and remind others of social distancing.
- Conduct briefings and conversations outdoors and at least 2m apart.
- Utilize face coverings as a tool when practical.
- Clean or replace dirty face coverings, equipment, and PPE.

#### **Communications**

- Face coverings and social distancing complicate communications. Ensure effective sender/receiver messaging.

**Protect yourself, your crew, and your camp!**

## **Reference Documents**

NCC Environmental Services Internal Document: Standard Operating Procedure for COVID-19 NCC Firefighting Service (Revision 2) April 2020

Working on Fire Internal document: Policy: Prevention of Spreading of COVID-19 in the Workplace March 2020