2015 Fires
Emergency Communications
Colville Indian Reservation

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How the 2015 Fires Developed

- Multiple lightning strikes
- Large fires in multiple locations
- Resources limited
- Tribal fires low on priority list
- Too many fires, too close together
Plume Dominated Fires
One Bad Day--Friday, August 21
Where did our coms go?

• Wired phones failed in burned areas

• Cellular coverage affected
  – System damage?
  – Overloaded?

• Radio systems overloaded

• Power lost to com sites

• Potential loss of internet (microwave links)
A Tale of Two Repeaters
Were these sites fire-ready?
A Near Miss

• Refueling mission to Omak Mountain repeater site

• Four persons, two trucks, proper safety gear, fire-experienced staff, safety briefing

• Unable to get fire updates (OR return calls) from IMT

• Fire duty officer did not pass on information to supervisor in the field
• Not on incident radio network (IMT base ~40 miles away)

• Agency radio network saturated

• Unable to see fire

• Decided to evacuate

• Vehicle broke down, abandoned on site
• Refueling mission had 5 persons, not 4

• Learned AT & T dispatching staff without fire safety gear or training
Lessons Learned, or Not

• Ask: Is this mission necessary?
  – Could we have remained operational without internet access?
  – So what if cell service goes down?

• Ham radio works
  – Human failure may interfere

• Need backup coms
  – Ham with (or w/o) FLDIGI applications
  – Satellite?
• Need Unified Area Command NOT just an IMT
  – Our voices were not heard
  – Required state-level pressure to get attention
  – Fire IMTs have difficulty with ‘non-fire’ issues

• Tribal Issues:
  – IMTs do not understand their responsibility to work with Tribes
  – EO and Millennium Accord

• Humans still the largest coms problem
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