

# Behind the Scene With an Incident Information Officer

Maryjane Cavaioli

*Supervisory public information technician, USDA Forest Service,  
Inyo National Forest, Mt. Whitney Ranger District, Lone Pine, CA*



When the phone rings at 2 a.m. and the caller tells you to be at a fire 500 miles (805 km) away in 2 hours, the incident information officer, just like everyone else who battles a wilderness blaze, grabs a prepacked fire bag and a tent and heads for the door. But on the way out, the incident information officer also grabs a briefcase or two, crammed with everything past experience has taught is necessary, plus a still camera and a video camera, if available. Also taken is an extra fire bag stuffed with Forest Service uniforms to wear when working with the media, a battery-operated blow dryer guaranteed not to melt makeup, and whatever else is needed to be on-camera ready for television at any hour of the day or night.

Why? Because it is almost guaranteed the moment you arrive at the fire scene, someone from television news is going to thrust a camera in your face and start asking questions on a live, from-the-scene telecast before you have had time to glance at a map or an Incident Status Summary giving you current information on the fire.

## The Media and the Information Officer

My first experience with media relations on a fire was as a green incident information officer trainee, but I had been warned by more experienced friends in the field. So I managed to get through it without inserting my foot into my mouth or looking too camera shy. Actually, I didn't say much except that I had just arrived on the scene and, as soon as I had been briefed, I would get back to them. Fortunately, the fire was far from home, and the Action Newscast

was not the same one my family watches.

**Major Responsibilities.** The experience did make me immediately aware of the seriousness and responsibility an incident information officer position carries. Little jokes and asides are out of order here, because whatever you say goes out on the airwaves and you are going to have to live with it (maybe for the rest of your life and your children for generations to come). So are the Incident Commander and all the agencies involved with the fire. That is why you'll often hear, "I don't know, but I'll check it out and get back to you." Part of your responsibility is to make sure you do get back to the press, public, lawmakers, other agencies, or whoever else asks a question.

**Crucial Deadlines.** All media people have deadlines the incident information officer must consider if the officer is to maintain good working relationships with them. I recall sending a television newswoman to another location for some "good flame" footage. Right after she left, the fire blew up with "big flames" where I was with all the reporters who had been monitoring the radio. When she came back, all the excitement was over, and she screamed at me for spoiling her coverage and making her late for her deadline.

**"Burnout" Hazard.** To the uninitiated, the job sometimes looks glamorous. Your name gets in the newspapers, and your face appears on television. But in reality, there is a high burnout rate among incident information officers because of the demands. All public and media questions and concerns have to be

dealt with. Local lawmakers will want to know what's going on. You may have a congressional aide or even a member of Congress checking out the threat to his or her constituency. A wrong answer can create all kinds of problems.

**National Interest.** If a large fire threatens lives, structures, or popular landmarks, there will be public and media interest from outside the area. Often the incident information officer is asked to give live updates to radio stations by telephone. Much of what goes into the newspapers also comes from telephone interviews, and newspaper staff photographers seek your advice on good places to get shots. Television crews want action shots—lots of flames—and short, attention-getting quotes—the sound bites. You are expected to issue factual news releases that everyone in the media will want to develop into a story with a particular angle.

## Person to Person

Often when private property is at risk, the fire information center will be full of concerned citizens wanting to know if their homes or those of friends or relatives are at risk. Some people are going to be irate because of the danger, and others will be emotionally upset because everything they own is going up in smoke. The incident information officer has to deal with each individual sympathetically and in a professional way. During some fires causing severe damage to or even loss of private property, extra staff with counseling experience are brought in to help the public fill out insurance claim forms and deal with the over-

whelming emotions arising from the loss.

Morale of the firefighting staff is also a concern for the incident information officer. Often this involves producing an incident newsletter so crews can keep track of who's doing what on the fire, what's happening with the fire, current news events, and sports scores. Special cartooning talents are sought for the newsletter. Morale boosters and information sharing may also involve preparing bulletin board displays and handouts as well as making personal appearances in affected communities.

### Command Staff Duties

The incident information officer or an assistant attends planning and command staff meetings to get up-to-date information on the fire. Those facts are augmented by reports from field incident information officers who get updates frequently from the line and pass the information on. The Incident Commander has to give permission before any information can be given out to the media. The incident information officer's primary source of approved information is the Incident Status Summary (Incident Command System Form-209).

### Running Interference

Aside from getting the news out quickly and accurately and presenting the policies of the agency in control of the incident, an incident information officer's first priority is to run interference for the Incident Commander. For instance, the incident information officer must keep the media, the public, and elected officials

from distracting the Incident Commander. At the same time, an information avenue between the Incident Commander and these publics must be maintained. Being able to do this is the mark of an accomplished incident information officer.

Sometimes, incident information officers have to run interference with personnel on the fire who see the occasion of reporters interviewing them as a chance to air personal grievances. I was on a fire that was threatening a community inside a newly designated wilderness on one such occasion. The community members were upset because a large dozer firebreak had not been placed between their property and the wilderness. A newspaper reporter was interviewing fire personnel stationed in the area to protect structures. One employee used the occasion to start criticizing Federal fire suppression policies. It was not too long after the Yellowstone fires, so he got the reporter's full attention. I had to pick a moment I could break in and explain wilderness policies and the fact that a decision was currently being made on whether to construct the firebreak because of danger to the homes. Fortunately, my intervention defused the situation.

### Handling Disasters

**More Than Fire.** The information officer may perform duties at any incident involving the Incident Command System. An incident can be a fire, flood, hurricane, earthquake, hazardous material spill, serious traffic accident, or even a volcano. Since it is impossible for one individual to know

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everything the press or public is going to ask, the information officer's networking to build information sources for each type of event is an important part of preparation.

**View From the Trenches.** I asked several information officers to share experiences for this article. My favorite was a city fire department information officer who was on live television, his back to the fire, telling the interviewer that everything was under control. At the same time, the camera showed that the fire was building fast and was totally out of control. Indeed, a moment later, the information officer and the television crew had to run for it. The moral of the story is never turn your back on a fire when talking to the news media.

Another related "one of the funniest, most exciting things that happened" during one information officer's career. While serving on the Gorda-Rat Fire on the Los Padres National Forest near San Luis Obispo, CA, the incident information officer received a call from a Catholic monastery. The caller described the monastery's location, asked where the head of the fire was in relation to the monastery, and requested a recommendation on what to do. When the officer checked the incident map, he found that the monastery was in harm's way, directly in the path of a fast-moving 30,000-plus-acre (12,000 ha) fire. The officer's recommendation was to "get the hell out of there, not to

pack anything, not even a change of clothes but to leave immediately.”

He then called the Incident Commander and reported the monastery’s situation. The Incident Commander sent over a strike team of large city fire engines he had been unable to use on other areas of the fire but thought might work well for protecting the monastery. The strike team worked through the night, burning out around buildings and hosing down structures, and by daylight had saved the monastery.

Several days later, the incident information officer was approached at the fire information desk by a priest who told him he was the caller who

had been ordered to “get the hell out of the monastery.” Embarrassed, the officer apologized for swearing. The priest replied that he felt the officer was the hero who had saved the monastery. The incident information officer told the priest all he did was call the Incident Commander and the strike team of engines had done the rest.

The priest then asked the incident information officer if he was a Catholic, or if he would like to become a Catholic. The officer politely declined. The priest then asked if the officer would like the priest to bless him, and the officer figured—it couldn’t hurt.

## Impact on the Future

Humor aside, these stories reveal that the incident information officer plays a pivotal role in Incident Command and firefighting agencies’ operations. As David Hanson stated in his *Fire Management Notes* article, “Command Staff Helps ICS Work” (volume 51, no. 2), “The way public information is handled on an incident can affect ongoing incident operations and the agency’s ability to function in the future.”

We need to fully recognize the need for and abilities of our incident information officers and the important position they occupy. ■

## Elena Rios and Her Brush With Fire

**Art Exhibit in the Washington Office.** For 2 weeks in April, Elena Rios brought to the Washington Office—the walkway to the Chief’s Conference Room and to the Fire and Aviation Management and Public



Elena Rios explaining one of her drawings in the art exhibit brought to the Washington Office in April. Photo credit: Jill Bauermeister, USDA Forest Service Washington DC.

Affairs Office offices in the Auditors Building—an artist’s story of wildland firefighting told through an exhibit of her charcoal and mixed media drawings.

**The Artist, the Firefighter.** Rios, who received her Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in 1986 from the San Francisco Art Institute, is also a USDA Forest

Service firefighter who started in firefighting on the Sequoia National Forest after she had graduated from the institute. Currently, she is a member of the Los Padres Hotshots. At a fire, her sketchbook is never far away. She has participated in numerous art shows such as the 1990 La Hispana National Fine Arts Competition and Exhibition, Albuquerque, NM, where her entry was awarded first place.

Rios’s exhibit came to Washington through the encouragement and actions of many people: Mark Linane, her Hotshot super-

intendent, for suggesting she develop an art exhibit of firefighting; the many staff members in the Los Padres Supervisor’s Office in Goleta, CA, for helping in many ways, big and small; and former State and Private Forestry Deputy Chief Allan J. West for bringing the exhibit to Washington.

The usual details of wildland fire—the red and orange of wildfire, the equipment, and the people were there—yes—it was a fireline sense experience. But the exhibit offered something more—the fireline from a point of view: The ferocity of the flash and thunder of aircraft dropping retardant; the exhaustion of the resting firefighter whose large-booted foot looms forward toward the viewer; the strength in the eye of the female smokejumper. ■

**Doris N. Celarier**, writer-editor, USDA Forest Service, Public Affairs Office, Washington, DC