

**WHITE PAPER**  
**September 15, 2012**



**Interaction Between  
Agency Administrators  
and  
Area Command Teams**

within the

**Intermountain Region  
USDA Forest Service**

## **I. INTRODUCTION**

The purpose of this white paper is to provide the Intermountain Region (R4) of the USDA Forest Service and the national AC/IC group with:

1. Feedback regarding how Area Command Teams (ACT) interacted with “Advanced Level Agency Administrators”.
2. Suggestions for refining the program including an incident-specific approach for clarifying the roles and responsibilities of the participants.

This paper may also be applicable for use interagency and nation wide.

*For clarification purposes, this paper will refer to the:*

- *Regional Forester Duty Officer as the **Regional Foresters Representative (RFR.)***
- *Forest Supervisor as the **Agency Administrator (AA)**.*
- *Advanced Agency Administrator as the **Agency Administrator Representative (AAR)**.*
- *Area Command Teams as **ACT**.*

## **II. BACKGROUND**

Region 4 adopted a new emphasis for AA oversight of wildland fires which began in 2010 and has continued to mature. This emphasis requires that all fire organizations be provided on-the-ground oversight by an appropriately qualified AAR. A training and qualifications system has been established and certifies employees to serve as this AAR at the following levels:

- Working level (type 4 and 5 fires)
- Journey level (type 3 fires)
- Advanced level (type 1 and 2 fires)

In late August 2012 the complexity of the Halstead and Mustang Complex fires on the Salmon-Challis National Forests triggered the Forest’s decision to order an Area Command Team which was delegated authority on September 1 (**ACT#3**, Jim Loach, Area Commander).

The Forests provided a thorough in-briefing to ACT3 which included an organization chart displaying the *Interaction with Area Command Organization* (see Graphic 1).

While all ACT’s strongly support the concept of greater involvement of qualified agency administrators interacting with IMT’s, the new emphasis raised questions of roles, responsibilities and communication channels. The ACT’s’ embrace and welcome change; this paper attempts to clarify and take advantage of those changes.

### **III. METHODOLOGY**

Interviews were held with both IC's and their deputies, the Forest Supervisor, previous and assigned AAR's, a R4 "Duty Officer", and ACT3 personnel. This paper was then shared with some of these individuals in draft form and completed by the author based on their input.

### **IV. HISTORIC ROLE OF AGENCY ADMINISTRATOR OVERSIGHT**

Throughout the history of the Forest Service, and up until the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the local District Ranger was held accountable for oversight of fires on their unit. They provided the strategy and direction as well as the resource and socio-political input into the suppression effort. "The Ranger is in charge" is a reasonable statement that reflected management oversight.

Towards the end of the century, things gradually changed. Those changes were brought about by many factors, not the least being the size and intensity of fires, public scrutiny and legal challenges. Some of the results were national fire policy changes, increased competence of incident management teams, and an elevation of oversight and shared risk management to Forest Supervisor, Regional Office, and Washington Office levels.

Unfortunately, a by-product of this change had unintended consequences; across the country, local line officers became less involved in fire management and valuable skills were lost.

The recent emphasis in R4 to certify personnel is a noteworthy effort to reverse these unintended consequences.

### **V. HISTORIC ROLE OF AREA COMMAND**

**Area Command (AC)** evolved over time in the 1990's from the "General Headquarters (GHQ)" organization which was modeled after the World War II military model. As with all new organizational structures, AC matured over time.

The primary purpose of AC is to reduce the span of control for the affected agency administrators. AC is meant to supplement and provide "value-added" management to large, chaotic situations and to ensure local unit policy is implemented, provide national level policy guidance, and assist and mentor units with limited fire management experience. AC does not staff an operations section in order to avoid involvement in IMT tactics.

Area Command focuses on strategy, organizational integrity, and relationships.
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In a traditional wildland fire scenario, AC can be viewed as a small group of highly experienced fire managers who serve as temporary primary staff for the involved AA's, thus allowing the unit and its regular staff to continue with business-as-usual including new starts and other non-fire issues.

Considering incidents among all agencies across the nation, ACT's have often been assigned where the local unit managers have been minimally experienced and qualified in fire management. Being pragmatic in nature, AC has often filled that role by providing management oversight that was more appropriately the role of the AA. Examples include preparing their own delegations of authority and assuring the preparation and daily validation of strategic plans (i.e. WFDSS).

Awareness of increased proficiency of AA involvement, while highly desired, has the potential (when AC is assigned) to create confusion, duplication of effort, and misunderstanding of roles and responsibilities.

## **VI. QUESTIONS**

The following questions surfaced during interviews:

1. What is the role of the RFR and what is the expected working relationship with AC?
2. Do the IC's clearly understand who they work for? Since they work for the AC, how much direction do they take from the AAR? Is there duplication and/or confusion in the chain of command?
3. What is the proper relationship between the AAR and Area Command?
4. Do the IC and AAR understand the roles of AC and take advantage of AC's skills and capabilities to help resolve problems?
5. During AAR training and certification has there been an effort to inform the participants of the roles and responsibilities of AC and the appropriate interaction between the AAR, AA, IC and AC?
6. Do the roles and responsibilities of AC change to assure success of the AAR concept?
7. Does AC acknowledge that their emphasis (and maybe even roles and responsibilities) may change as they are assigned across the country to units with varying degrees of AA proficiency and involvement?
8. Can R4's assertive program be accepted and adopted nation-wide on an interagency basis, or not?

## **VII. OBSERVATIONS**

Nothing that follows is a criticism or meant to imply that individuals were not performing well. They are observations from those interviewed that reflect their perceptions and are offered to help refine and improve an already good model.

1. All parties interviewed strongly supported having a "live-in" AAR on site 24/7.
2. Although R4 personnel clearly understood the roles and responsibilities of the AA and AAR, IC's and AC did not share that clarity with AC in place. The *Interaction with Area Command Organization* (Graphic 1) raised questions, especially regarding the various titles (Duty Officer, RFD, Advanced AA). While seemingly insignificant on the surface,

the titles caused confusion, especially “Advanced Agency Administrator” as well as the thickness of the arrows on the organization chart.

3. One IC admitted not studying the organization chart and not understanding who the “Advanced AA” was on their incident or exactly what their role was.
4. One AAR admitted to not understanding the roles and responsibilities of AC.
5. One IC said that it did not matter, that he was used to working for several bosses in his day job.
6. The AC and staff were enthused about the increased oversight by the R4 AAR program but were uncertain exactly how they were to interact with the AAR (as opposed to a more traditional role of working with the AA).
7. It appears that when the AAR process was developed in R4 that AC involvement was not considered.

## **VIII. REFINEMENTS**

Following are some suggestions for consideration to refine the process:

1. Recognize the importance of position titles and:
  - a. Change the title of the “Advanced Agency Administrator” to” Agency Administrator Representative (AAR)”. This will conform to the national ICS interagency standards found in many policy documents and almost every ICS and DHS training course. It is not necessary to include the certification level in the title (working, journey, advanced); R4 knows what level is necessary but incoming IMT and AC teams don’t need to know.
  - b. Change the title of what is currently referred to as “Agency Administrator Representative” to “Agency Administrator Representative-Trainee”.
  - c. Change the title of “RF Duty Officer” to “RF Representative”. The term “Duty Officer” implies many things including “hands-on” operational control.
  - d. Consistently use the term “trainee” and “trainee assignment” and discontinue using the term “shadow”.
  - e. Display “Resource Advisors” on the organization chart as reporting to the AAR, as appropriate.

Graphic 2 (attached) displays the organization with these suggested title changes. Note that a “communication and coordination” arrow has been added between AC and expanded dispatch and that assisting agencies have been placed under direct control of the IMT.

2. Develop a simple list or narrative of roles and responsibilities for the RF Representative for inclusion in the in-briefing package for fires that require this position.
3. Develop and utilize an incident-specific *Roles and Responsibilities Checklist* that displays responsibilities by position. This checklist would serve as a valuable tool to bring the AA, AAR’s, IC’s, and AC together at the in-briefing to establish expectations and ensure up-front communications.

An example of a completed sample checklist is attached for information and a blank example to use as a framework for future incidents.

Utilization of this checklist at the in-briefing would also serve as a prompt (from the AA) for the IC and AC to appropriately utilize and communicate with the incident AAR's. While not working for AC, the AAR's can serve as the AC's "eyes and ears" and improve communications and coordination, especially when time and distance separate AC from the ICP.

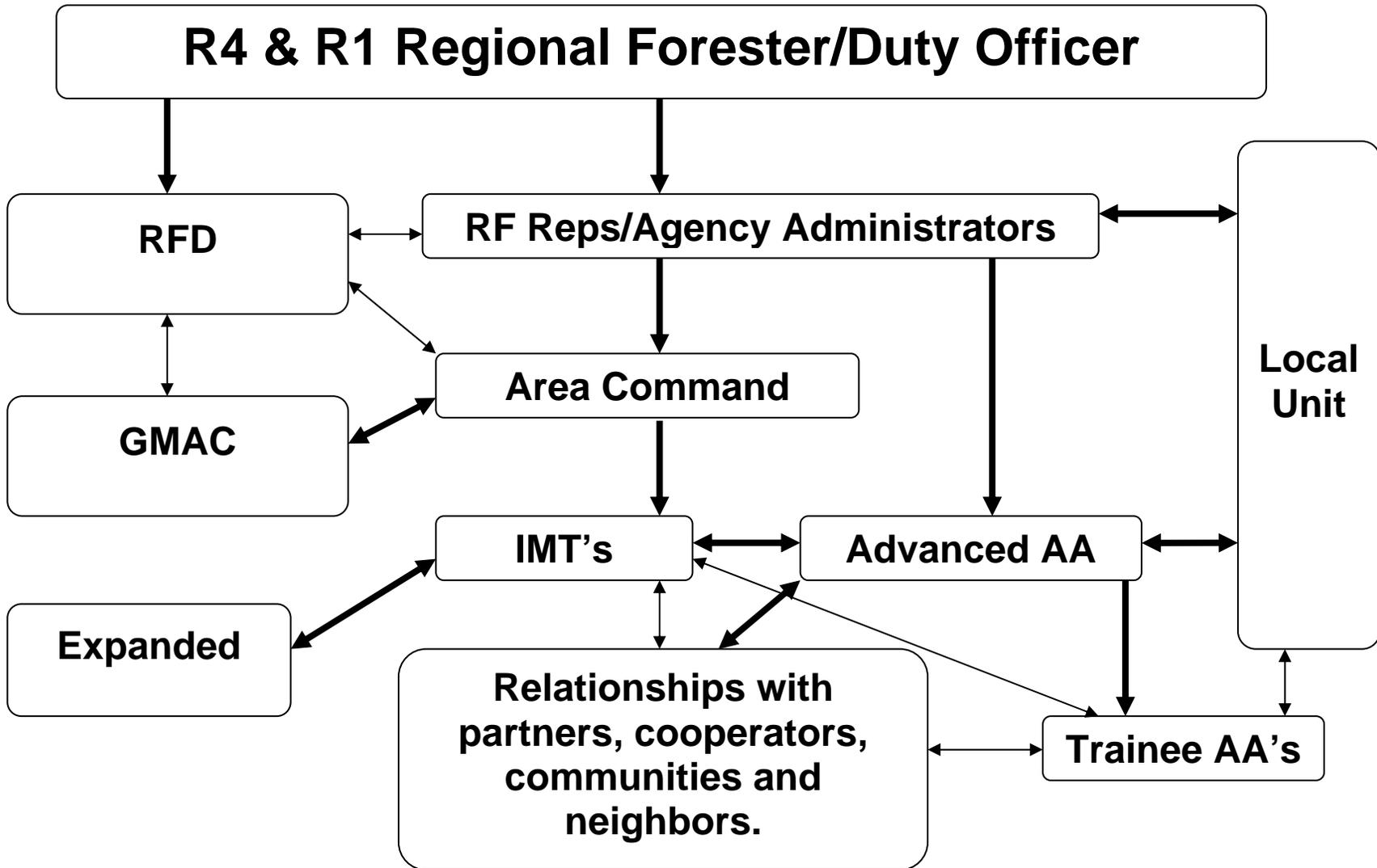
4. Include a module in the R4 AAR Training Program regarding the roles and responsibilities of AC and how the AAR can take advantage of AC.
5. Through this white paper and other means, educate the AC/IC community regarding the AAR process.

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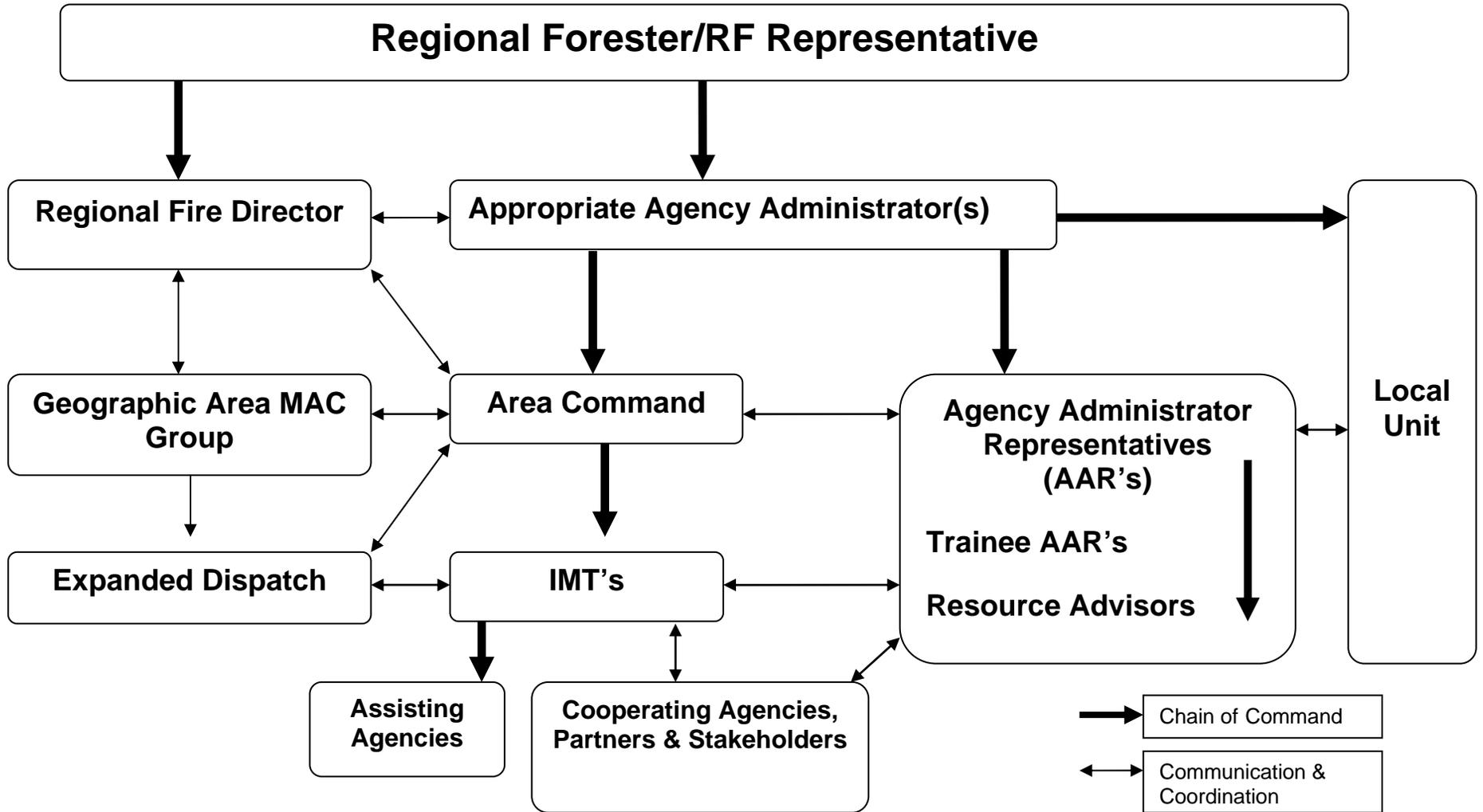
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Graphic 1:  
**Interaction with Area Command Organization**



**Graphic 2:  
Interaction with Area Command Organization (revised)**



**(sample) ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES CHECKLIST**

(Area Command Assigned)

*(To be completed during the in-briefing of Area Command)*

Incident Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_.

Agency Administrator (AA): \_\_\_\_\_.

Agency Administrator’s Representative (AAR): \_\_\_\_\_.

Area Commander (AC): \_\_\_\_\_.

***Primary Responsibility (P): Concurrence (C:) Provide Input (I): Optional Attendance (O)***

Duty/Responsibility	AC	AAR	AA	Comments
Prioritize incidents	P	I	C	
Allocate critical resources	P	I		
Provide IC’s with Delegation of Authority	P			
Assure compatible strategies between incidents	P	I		
Order, replace existing IMT’s	P		C	
Prepare IC/IMT Evaluations	P	I	C	
Aircraft and airspace coordination between incidents	P			
Resolve logistical supply issues with dispatch	P			
Interact with IBA, Buying Teams	P			
Approve Demob of critical resources	P	I		
Reconcile differences between AA’s	P		I	
Participate/conduct VIP Tours & political briefings	I,O	I, O	P	AA determines involvement
Initial WFDSS development and approval		I	P	
Daily WFDSS validation		P		
Participate in all IMT strategy and planning meetings	O	P		
Confirm that tactics adhere to strategies and objectives and risk management	O	P		
Cost share negotiations	P	O	O	Appropriate IBA level
Resource management decisions		P	C	
Daily AC/IC conference calls	P	I	O	
Daily Geographic MAC Calls	P	O	O	
Provide local socio-political advice & direction to IC		P		
Develop mop-up and turn-back standards		P		
Attend/participate in most operational briefings		P		

Provide a copy of this completed checklist to the IC’s for information.

*A “blank” form follows to be completed by the participants for each incident*

## ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES CHECKLIST

(Area Command Assigned)

*(To be completed during the in-briefing of Area Command)*

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Approve Demob of critical resources				
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