

National Multi-Agency Coordinating Group

3833 South Development Avenue; Boise, ID 83705

NMAC Correspondence L2026-06

April 30, 2026

To: Geographic Area Coordinating Groups

From: National Multi-Agency Coordinating Group

Subject: Talking Points for NMAC Discussion with Incident Management Teams (IMTs) and Geographic Areas Topic: Updating Our Approach to Reporting Containment on Large, Complex Incidents

Opening

- We all share the same goal: protecting lives, property, and resources while being good stewards of public trust and taxpayer dollars.
- For many years we have used **containment** as the primary public and leadership-facing metric to show progress on large fires. Yet on many incidents, we often see costs rise sharply while containment percentages remain flat.
- This mismatch makes it hard for the public, elected officials, agency leadership, and our own fire managers to see the real operational picture.
- NMAC believes a modest but important shift in how we report containment can resolve this without compromising safety or tactical integrity.

The Current Cultural and Operational Challenge

- Early in our careers we were taught: “Do not show containment until you have boots on the ground and are 100% comfortable in the fireline.” That caution served us well for that time period.
- On today’s large, complex fires that caution can create a “hang-up” effect: a fire may sit safely and stably behind a creek, road, or ridge for days or weeks, yet we hold containment at the last verified line because no crew has physically walked it.
- The result is containment numbers stay artificially low or static, even when conditions clearly indicate the fire is not spreading.
- Operations Section Chiefs feel understandably exposed if they report containment without direct verification, but it does not fully reflect operational reality on complex, of today’s large, complex, and geographically dispersed incidents.

NMAC’s Desired Shift

- **Containment is a dynamic condition, not a permanent achievement.** It should rise and fall based on current fire behavior, fuels, weather, and natural barriers. This aligns fully with the NWCG definition, which emphasizes a completed barrier expected to stop spread rather than a declaration of permanent security. Containment is inherently conditional and may be adjusted as conditions evolve.
 - Example: If the fire has been held by a creek for three days with no spotting and no wind forecast to push it across, report the associated perimeter as contained.



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- If a wind event or spot fire later crosses that creek, immediately adjust containment downward. This transparency shows the public and leadership exactly what is happening.
- **Control remains the conservative line.** We are NOT suggesting any change to how we declare a fire “controlled.” Control still requires physical line, cold black, and verification. Containment can and should move more freely.

Why This Change Matters

- Realistic containment and appropriate adjustments give the public and decision-makers a clearer, more honest picture of suppression success compared to costs alone.
- It better aligns reported progress with actual operational conditions, improving trust in the IMSR.
- It reduces the artificial “flat-lining” of containment that currently makes operations on large fires look less successful than they often are.

Practical Guidance for Implementation

- When documenting containment in the ICS-209, use professional judgment based on observed fire behavior, weather forecasts, and natural barriers not solely on whether a crew has walked the line.
- Document the rationale briefly in the narrative (e.g., “Fire held by perennial creek with no spotting observed for 72 hours; containment increased to 65%”).
- If conditions change, update containment the same shift with no stigma attached to moving the number down.
- IMT’s: Operations Section Chiefs and Planning Section Chiefs should discuss this explicitly during the first operational period briefing and again in the 209 narrative. Public Information Officers should explain day-to-day changes in containment appropriately, just as they do changes in acreage due to weather events, application of indirect tactics, more accurate mapping, etc. Incident Commanders should ensure accurate and appropriate reporting and adjustments from their IMTs on all products.
- Geographic Area Coordination Centers: When reviewing daily 209s, reinforce this expectation and provide positive feedback when IMT’s show dynamic containment reporting.
- Geographic Area NMAC Associates: Brief Coordinating Groups on the shift. Ensure IMTs understand the intent and demonstrate dynamic reporting on incidents.

Closing

- NMAC is not asking anyone to take unsafe risks or to lower standards. We are asking for reporting that matches reality.
- Starting this fire season, we encourage every IMT and Geographic Area to lean into dynamic containment reporting.
- We will support you: if questions arise or you need examples from past incidents, reach out to your NMAC Representative.



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- By making this adjustment, we will better communicate our successes, maintain public confidence, and ensure the dollars spent on large fires are understood in context.

/s/ Chuck Russell
Chair, National Multi-Agency Coordinating Group

