

The Great Frontier Collaboration Exercise and Drill in Glasgow



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Does the frontier actually still exist in Montana? You're darn right it does and in Glasgow, Montana some of the challenges folks in rural Montanan's face routinely were exemplified during a large scale exercise and drill this past

Saturday. Firefighters from all corners of Montana, western North Dakota and Alberta, Canada gathered in Glasgow to simulate a large-scale disaster. The simulation was slightly hampered by real world flooding, washed out roads, severe weather and Mother Nature even provided some excitement during the drill by throwing another violent storm Glasgow's way. However, Montanan's demonstrated their resilience and showed up with tenders, engines, mobile command units, wildfire engines, and utility vehicles.



The exercise stretched the legs of the Montana Mutual Aid system and soon had the commitment of over 200 firefighters either responding or in preparation to roll down the road. The exercise simulated a 7.5 Richter scale earthquake that derailed an AMTRAK train with 400 passengers and caused a conflagration in downtown Glasgow involving one city block. Chief Brandon Brunelle served as the Incident Commander and as the Incident evolved Bob "Sparky" Hanson was the Rescue Group Supervisor.

Jason Jarrett from Gallatin County brought their posh and extremely well equipped mobile command unit from the mountains to the plains and it provided an excellent resource for the command center. The Mutual Aid System was initiated by Chief Brunelle, very early on upon his realization that their local resources would not be able to handle the magnitude or the duration of the event. The Wolf Point Rural VFD was called and Steve Harada and Shawn Eggar began localized calling to reach out to resources within an approximate 150 mile radius and to play the role of IC assistants for Chief Brunelle.

Within a short time approximately 85 local firefighters were deploying for Glasgow. As the event progressed and local responders were committed the evolution of the MMA system rounded up an additional 150 firefighters that would be on-scene

within an approximate 12 hour window. Ed Burlingame recruited firefighters from northwest MT, Brian Crandell secured folks from the southwest and many, many firefighters, captains, battalion chiefs and chiefs from across Montana were actively involved in quickly rounding up the total of 235 firefighters to come and lend a helping hand to their neighbor. Sue and Ken Mergenthaler provided so much before, during and after to the exercise and drill that will be forever appreciated and was essential in the success. Brian and Ed also worked tirelessly with the event and their devoted commitment to Montana Mutual Aid ensured that this event transformed from an idea into the real deal exercise & drill.

The exercise portion began at approximately 0915 and by 1130 the 200+ firefighters with a myriad of experience, expertise and resources were able to leave their home quarters to travel in excess of 500 miles to provide relief and aid in the rescue of savable lives. This drill honed the skills of local responders, reinforced the function of NIMS, and provided a unique opportunity for preparedness that will benefit responders for years to come with an immeasurable amount of value. It created new friendships, enhanced existing friendships, built relationships from folks not only from across Montana but all across the country.



Thanks to the International Association of Fire Chief's who provided fuel reimbursements, paid for the lunch and provided office and paper supplies. The exercise wouldn't have been possible without the IAFC contributions.

They also provided expertise and evaluators from as far away as Cape Cod, Massachusetts to analyze and assist with the overall exercise. A huge THANK YOU goes out to Ed Plaugher, Mitch Ross, Roy Jones, Veronique Nagle, John Prewer, Bill Shaw and Todd Clist who helped with the Frontier Collaboration.

Thanks to Patrick Gilcrist of the Fire Weather Program Manager from the Glasgow National Weather Service station for all of his expertise and tracking of the looming storms. His classic line will be remembered by many when he came to the command post and stated "there are some severe storms that have popped up" and quickly added "no I'm serious and some may be extremely violent"!

The afternoon drill brought together folks for a large scale fire at the high school and an AMTRAK train car rescue simulation. Several fire departments from across Montana participated in the drill and conducted a water shuttle operation and defensive exercise combined with an offensive fire attack in the vocational education building. The goal was to sustain 1000 gallons per minute and with the number of tenders firefighters were able to flow an estimated 1500 gpm with

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2 pumpers to far exceed the benchmark. The AMTRAK drill was a slightly smaller scaled event but fire crews were able to get some excellent hands-on and classroom training from Doug Osterhouse, AMTRAK's training specialist.

Here are the objectives that were established prior to the event that incidentally was strategically based out of the Valley Event center at the fairgrounds in Glasgow –

Exercise Objectives: The exercise was designed to assess Montana and its neighboring states/provinces ability to effectively mobilize fire service resources in response to a natural disaster and subsequent transportation accident within the state. The exercise objectives are the following:

1. To conduct a mutual aid exercise in a manner that is safe for the exercise participants and the members of the Glasgow community.
2. To exercise and assess the interstate and intrastate request and deployment processes of Montana Mutual Aid in response to an exercise in Glasgow, Montana
3. To exercise coordination between local and state emergency management systems in response to a simulated major incident in Glasgow, Montana
4. To exercise and assess the effectiveness of interoperable communications using the NIFOG and State of Montana Interoperable Communications plans.

5. To exercise and assess the capabilities of an NIMS compliant Incident Management Organization in response to a simulated Type 5 + 4 natural disaster with a large fire and mass casualty transportation incident, and prepare to dock and integrate effectively with State and National Type 3, 2, and 1 incident management organizations.

6. To exercise and assess the integration of fire, Law, EMS, emergency management, private sector leadership in a interstate mutual aid response, using a NIMS compliant unified command process.

So, to encapsulate the Frontier Collaboration exercise and drill with one word – WOW! The bringing together of firefighters and first responders from across Montana demonstrated how efficient the Montana Mutual Aid system functions and the strengths. As it washes out, it is anticipated to find some weaknesses, opportunities and threats as well and define some important “lessons learned”.

A big thank you goes out to all the participants both on-scene and those working from their own communities, that did the leg-work and correspondence that is of paramount importance in order to successfully complete an exercise and drill of this magnitude. One of the biggest things was the creation of new and strengthening of relationships that clearly depicts why Montana truly is the “last best place”, whether in the eastern plains or the Rocky Mountains in the west! Just neighbors helping neighbors...