



NATIONAL WILDFIRE COORDINATING GROUP
Public Information Officer Subcommittee

PIOSC Memo 23-001

July 11, 2023

TO: Wildland Fire Information and Technology (WFIT) Program Board
THROUGH: Sarah Lee, National Wildland Fire Coordinating Group (NWCG) Coordinator
FROM: Chris Barth, Public Information Officer Subcommittee (PIOSC) Chair
SUBJECT: InciWeb Oversight

Purpose: The purpose of this memorandum is to bring awareness to the issues and challenges faced by the public and information officers using the new InciWeb Drupal platform, and provide suggestions for both short- and long-term solutions.

Issue: In October 2022, InciWeb Legacy was transitioned to InciWeb Drupal. InciWeb Drupal is a significant departure from InciWeb Legacy; specifically, the terminology and processes are less intuitive and less efficient. When field personnel have issues with InciWeb Drupal, they are advised to call the helpdesk; however, responses often take an unreasonable amount of time for emergency notifications. Further, identified issues and solutions with InciWeb Drupal are not communicated corporately in a timely manner to the end users.

The PIOSC has attempted to solve these issues at the lowest level by working directly with the InciWeb Program Manager on the Operations & Maintenance side by providing feedback and suggestions for improvement, but PIOSC has not been satisfied with the actions or responses provided to date. This is why the subcommittee is raising the awareness to the WFIT Program Board.

As one example, on a recent wildland fire, Public Information Officers (PIOs) posting critical evacuation information on an incident with at least one known fatality found a blank screen when they clicked on the incident within InciWeb Drupal. After four hours and two phone calls to the help desk, they were able to see the information. While many of the reported issues have a fix, they are not easily discoverable even to experienced end users, and the help desk is not knowledgeable enough in the system to provide quick resolution. Further, PIOs have reported public concern that the look and feel is so different that citizens in wildfire affected areas are not sure where to get the critical information they have come to expect. Timeliness and consistency are critical to our external emergency communications, and we have neither currently.

Action: The PIOSC has received numerous reports of issues with InciWeb Drupal in the limited time since its release in October 2022. Some of these have been documented by the PIOSC. Within Geographic Areas, PIOs are developing their own communication channels to support end users with known issues and problems.

As the position steward of Public Information Officers (who are the end users of InciWeb Drupal), the PIOSC recognizes the critical need for strategic short- and long-term solutions to the new InciWeb Drupal site.

Short-Term Suggestions:

- Increase capacity and support for the InciWeb Help Desk. This could take the form of:
 - Additional intensive training and added capacity for the InciWeb Help Desk so the end users can get the assistance they need in a timely manner, or
 - Provide additional InciWeb Drupal-specific training to an InciWeb support group within the Remote Incident Support Team (RIST) to increase capacity and support to the field.
- Develop a Primary, Alternate, Contingency and Emergency (PACE) model for catastrophic failure of InciWeb Drupal as fire activity increases and the likelihood of issues increases commensurately. If this plan already exists, it needs to be communicated with the PIOSC, Public Information Officers, Public Affairs Officers, and InciWeb Superuser communities to ensure knowledge and adequate support of the plan.
- Implementation: Immediate.

Long-Term Suggestions:

- The PIOSC, as position stewards, were historically involved in an InciWeb Steering Committee that was reportedly developed by the previous USDA Forest Service InciWeb lead; but that committee has not existed for many years. With the launch of InciWeb Drupal and the ensuing issues, the PIOSC requests the establishment of a new InciWeb Oversight Committee that focuses on making sure a system exists that works for the end users and maintains its role as the trusted source of incident public information. This correlates with the FireNet Leadership Team which supports training and the helpdesk with time sensitive issues, which are similar to those being experienced by InciWeb.
- Consider new platforms that meet the needs of the public and PIOs. Other non-governmental platforms are outpacing what we are currently providing. If we want to provide timely, accurate, and transparent information to the public, we need to evaluate other alternatives that meet the stated business need outlined by PIOSC and supported by the re-established InciWeb Oversight Committee.
- Implementation: Established in conjunction with a post-season 2023 after-action review (AAR).

Background: InciWeb is an interagency, all-hazard incident web information management system provided by the USDA Forest Service that was released in 2004. It was originally developed for wildland fire emergencies but can be also used for other emergency incidents (natural disasters, such as earthquakes, floods, hurricanes, and tornadoes). It was developed with two primary missions:

- Provide the public a single source of incident related information.
- Provide a standardized reporting tool for the Public Information Officer community.

As demonstrated by a recent study “PIOs and the Public: How Wildfire Public Information Officers View and Interact with the Public as Street-Level Bureaucrats” (M.D. Terry, Oregon State University, 2023), “public information officers view...InciWeb as a valuable resource and hub of information between incident management officials and the public. Today, uploading information to InciWeb has become a requirement for many IMTs...”

Furthermore, as part of the Wildfire Crisis Strategy priority landscapes have been instructed to use InciWeb to distribute public information. The site is critical digital infrastructure for the public information mission.

Contact: For additional information or clarification, contact Chris Barth, cbarth@blm.gov or Sarah Lee, sjlee@blm.gov.

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