



A39 Outside Agency Response to the California Camp Fire

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Learning Overview: After attending this presentation, attendees will understand the ways in which anthropologists from agencies outside the state of California responded to offer assistance in the search and recovery efforts in the aftermath of the Camp Fire in northern California.

Impact on the Forensic Science Community: This presentation will impact the forensic science community by offering insight into the logistical, financial, and ethical considerations faced by outside agency responders and offer recommendations for other anthropologists who may one day serve as responders from outside agencies to mass fatality incidents.

On the morning of November 8, 2018, a wildfire started in Butte County in northern California and began to spread. Termed the Camp Fire, it quickly grew to become the most destructive and deadliest wildfire in California history. By the evening of November 10, anthropologists responding to the incident from California State University, Chico recognized the need for additional anthropological resources and requested assistance from forensic anthropologists in northern and southern Nevada. Data for this presentation comes from the experiences of these forensic anthropologists. Similarities and differences will be noted and discussed.

Anthropologists responding from northern Nevada were primarily affiliated with the Department of Anthropology with the University of Nevada, Reno (UNR), including 2 faculty members and 15 graduate students. Due to their proximity to the camp fire, UNR anthropologists were able to begin assisting with recovery efforts on Sunday, November 11. They were also able to return to Reno to fulfill academic obligations during the week and return to assist as available. In total, UNR anthropologists deployed three times throughout the month of November to provide support over approximately nine days. The large number of individuals displaced by the wildfire resulted in no vacancies in local hotels in Chico and all UNR anthropologists stayed in personal residences of Chico State anthropologists. Financially, efforts from UNR anthropologists were initially self-financed, though students and faculty were eventually reimbursed for gasoline and some food expenses through UNR using funds received from local forensic anthropological casework.

Anthropologists responding from southern Nevada were affiliated with the University of Nevada, Las Vegas (UNLV), including one faculty member and three graduate students. However, in their response to the Camp Fire, these anthropologists were considered primarily affiliated with the Clark County Office of the Coroner/Medical Examiner (CCOCME), where they served as the forensic supervisor, two of the graduate students were part-time forensic staff, and one graduate student was a forensic anthropology intern. Because of their affiliation with a government agency, anthropologists from the CCOCME were subject to an Emergency Management Assistance Compact (EMAC) agreement between California and Nevada, which delayed deployment to the Camp Fire response. As such, CCOCME anthropologists were unable to respond as quickly as those from UNR and began assisting with recovery efforts on Monday, November 12, and stayed until November 17. Similarly to the anthropologists from UNR, CCOCME anthropologists also relied on Chico State anthropologists for lodging, and efforts were also initially self-funded. Although the EMAC initially delayed CCOCME response, it did allow for those anthropologists to be paid for their time and efforts in the field, as well as reimbursement for travel expenses by Clark County, which was later reimbursed by the state of California. Further conversations after the event with EMAC coordinators revealed that while EMAC does not have provisions for academics per se, if anthropologists are employed by a public university, accommodations could be made to ensure reimbursement for those individuals. It is recommended that anthropologists housed in academic units begin a dialogue with Emergency Management coordinators in their state prior to a mass fatality event, to establish a framework for reimbursement.

The response by anthropologists from both UNR and the CCOCME offered not only an important professional service to the affected communities, but also allowed for hands-on training and professionalization of students in the field. This ranged from practical experience of field operations in a series of changing environments to building skills of professional interaction with various law enforcement and responder agencies.

Camp Fire Response, Search and Recovery, Mass Fatality Response