

A unique solution to rural broadband: Pre-positioned Fire Camps



"The camp has internet, but only enough for the team members to do official work, and even that is not really enough. Firefighters want to reach out to their families."

Megan Hill

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Wildland Fires Spark a New Passion for Broadband

In 2015, the Carpenter Road fire destroyed 63,972 acres in Stevens County and on the Spokane Indian Tribe Reservation. The supporting fire camp was without any access to the internet for two weeks and had to drive GIS maps on a zip drive from the county office. This incident revived a long-term effort to improve broadband access and created this project.

What are Pre-positioned Fire Camps?

A **Pre-positioned Fire Camp (PPFC)** is a pre-identified site located in a remote area, is spatially adequate for emergency response, and has permanent broadband infrastructure. Sites are chosen and prioritized in partnership with the Department of Natural Resources and local fire districts. Once installed and operational, broadband will provide communications for responders during disaster events. The permanent build-out will result in broadband access for the community at large for public safety, education, telehealth and economic development. The focus of the project is only solving the communications component of a fire camp, not the full requirements, staffing and design of the emergency camp or incident command post. Our PPFC plans would identify existing assets for including permanent broadband infrastructure.

Common Questions

Why not bring in a Cellular on Wheels (COW) unit to provide emergency broadband? In Northeast Washington, they are often not available because they are already being used elsewhere in the western states; we tend to be the last region to be impacted by wildfires. We are also interested in the safety of our residents for all types of emergencies, so continual access to broadband is critical. It's critical that you have a COW that matches the cell service in that geographic area (ours was not.)

Why not use existing assets, like schools or community college campuses? Because of our late start date – which has been late August into September – we often cannot use schools as a fire camp.

How can you predict where a fire will be? We are strategically evaluating the existing possibilities and creating PPFC's where there are limited or no options. It's ideal to have the camps be within one hour of a disaster site, according to Steve Harris, DNR, *"driving to and from a fire camp after a long-day of firefighting is the most dangerous time."*

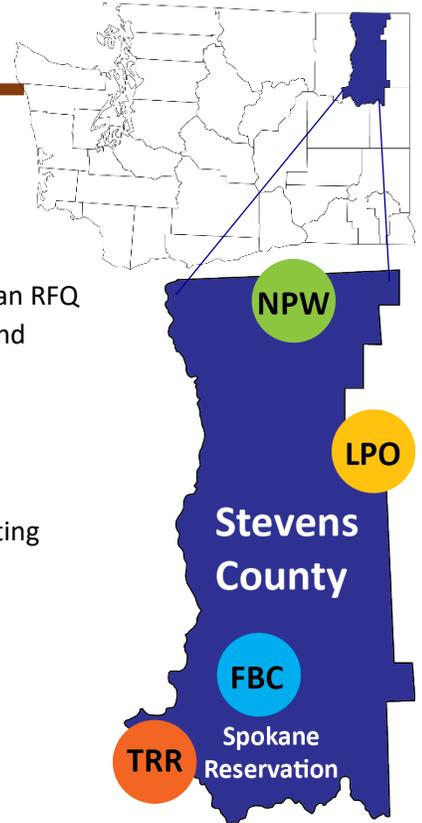
What needs to be in place for the fire camp activities? Preparing to house, feed and care for hundreds maybe thousands of firefighters is a well-honed skill. The Logistics folks on a fire team are responsible for finding a site near the fire that's big enough. Within 24 hours, they arrange for everything thousands of people need to live and work for weeks on end: tents or trailers for the administrative types; a food caterer, shower facilities, portable toilets by the truckload, and more. We are not changing this process, but are trying to help find a location and add broadband.



"Wildfires are fast-moving emergencies that often break out in some of Washington's most remote, least connected areas," said Commissioner of Public Lands Hilary Franz. "For the safety of our firefighters and our neighbors, we desperately need pre-positioned fire camps and communications infrastructure that gives our firefighters real-time information and provides alerts, as well as many other benefits, to surrounding residents."

DNR is a critical, supporting partner by providing funds and including it in the Rural Communities Partnership Initiative; projects that leverage their resources to spark economic development across Washington State.

Pre-positioned Fire Camp Projects



Stevens County work supporting all camps:

- Developing an Operations and Maintenance budget for post construction of the pilot projects in order to sustain the sites over the expected lifetime of the equipment.
- Soliciting vendors for quotes for the two pilot projects and will be releasing an RFQ for the selection of a qualified vendor to design the communication tower and estimate the construction budget.

1. Little Pend Oreille Lake (LPO) Complex has three components:

- Fire District 9 will serve for the main broadband tower (outside) and supporting electronics (inside).
- WSDOT gravel/rock pit will be used for an incident response fire camp.
- Princess Pines 4-H Camp will be used for housing the night crew and administration. This site will have a small repeater tower to be available to serve the camp and surrounding community with Internet and cell service.

2. Fruitland Bible Camp (FBC)

This camp will serve southern Stevens County and is located north of the Spokane Reservation border. We have started the process of drafting a long term lease in order to construct a communications room and mount a microwave dish on the Bible Camp's administration building. In 2018, the Stevens County Emergency Management Department updated the County Multi-Hazard Mitigation Plan which includes a needs and risk assessment. Stevens County will utilize the same wireless microwave technology that they have deployed throughout the rest of the county to extend their public safety network from Scoop Mountain to the Fruitland Bible Camp.

3. Northport and the "Wedge" (NPW)

This location will serve northern Stevens County and the area commonly known as the "wedge" all of the area is at need of additional, consistent communications support. In early discussion with DNR, they favor the Northport Airport as a camp location – work to identify assets and gaps is in beginning stages.

4. Two Rivers Resort on the Spokane Reservation (TRR)

This southwest corner of the Spokane Reservation location will also serve northern Lincoln County. We are currently funded to conduct a feasibility study on available service assets and gaps, working in partnership with the Spokane Tribe of Indians Planning and Economic Development Department and Spokane Tribe Telecom Exchange (STTX).

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