NWCG CURRICULUM MANAGEMENT ISSUE PAPER 43
Removal Of P-151 Wildfire Origin and Cause Determination From PMS

BACKGROUND

At the time of its original development, P-151 Wildfire Origin and Cause Determination was an excellent course for training fire investigators in basic origin and cause determination. It was last updated in 1992, and during the intervening 10 years, dramatic changes have occurred within the profession. (Specific information regarding these changes can be obtained on the NWCG web page, Fire Investigation Working Team link.) As it currently exists this course does not meet current user's needs for the following reasons:

1) The actual fire investigation methodology recommended in P-151would be viewed as sub-standard by today's courts. (This fact alone should be sufficient to justify the removal of this course.)
2) The unit on Fire Cause and Fire Direction Indicators contains significantly erroneous information, that if relied upon by the investigator, could result in their testimony being excluded and a case being dismissed.
3) There is a lack of emphasis on practical training exercises. In order to effectively teach fire investigation concepts and methodologies, hands-on experience in the form of field exercises is critical. P-151 recommends the use of "burn boxes" as a substitute for actual field exercises. This, at best, only exposes the students to a very limited variety of fire direction indicators and does nothing to teach origin determination methodology.
4) Under both the Daubert and Carmichael Supreme Court decisions, the ability of the investigator to effectively address NFPA 921 will likely be a critical component of the their investigation and ultimate testimony. This issue is not addressed at all in P-151, as the course was last updated prior to these court decisions and the subsequent development of NFPA 921.
5) The graphics, slides and other teaching aids are outdated, of poor quality and very limited in scope. This course does not reflect state-of-the-art instructional technology currently available.
6) The course falls short in a number of other key areas, including:
    a. Safety
    b. Fire forensics
    c. Fire behavior
    d. Fire investigation equipment
    e. Evidence
    f. Legal and ethical issues
    g. Science based interpretation of fire direction indicators
    h. Science based information on ignition factors and sequences
    i. Documentation and report writing
    j. Expert witness testimony

Continued distribution and instruction of this course is doing a disservice to prospective students. It will fall short of adequately preparing them to conduct professionally competent fire investigations. Because decisions that may literally affect a person's freedom and financial resources will be made on the merits of an investigator's findings, it is critical that we present only the best material available.

A second concern, (that appears to be occurring with a disturbing amount of regularity), is this course is being modified extensively by individual instructors. Unapproved, non-peer-reviewed course material is being added, depending upon the whims of each instructor cadre. While the intentions are probably good, there is evidence that at least some of the revisions contain erroneous information and do not conform to the latest court standards for relevance and reliability.

Perhaps even more problematic are those instances where course material is being deleted, with the result a course that is being shortened to 24 or even 12 hours, leaving the students with the impression that they have attended an NWCG approved course curriculum, when in fact they have not.

These factors all create a compelling argument to remove P-151 from the list of approved NWCG training courses. With the development of its replacement, FI-210, scheduled for completion this coming fall, there is no good reason to continue to allow this course to be distributed and instructed.

CURRENT STATUS

The Wildland Fire Investigation Working Team (WFIWT) was established to develop policies, methods and procedures, and other actions for systematic and science based wildland fire investigations to adequately support criminal prosecution and cost recovery.

The WFIWT has NWCG approval to develop three levels (types) of Wildland Fire Investigators and to develop a training curriculum to support wildland fire investigations.

The courses are as follows:

FI-110 Wildland Fire Cause Determination for First Responders (Replaces P-130)
FI-210 Wildland Fire Origin and Cause Determination (Replaces P-151)
FI-310 Wildland Fire Investigation: Case Development (New Course)
FI-410 Wildland Fire Investigation: Case Management (New Course)

FI-110 and FI-210 are scheduled for testing in the spring and summer of 2002 and will be completed in October, 2003.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The WFIWT and FI-210 course developers are recommending that no more copies of P-151 Wildfire Origin and Cause Determination be distributed and the current stock be removed from the National Interagency Fire Center, Great Basin Cache Supply.

ACTION REQUIRED

1. Cease distribution of P-151 Wildfire Origin and Cause Determination.

2. Approve the removal of the current supply of P-151 Wildfire Origin and Cause Determination from the National Interagency Fire Center, Great Basin Cache Supply.

APPROVED / DENIED
(circle one)

Logan Lee, Fire Training Working Team Chair — Date: 1/5/03

APPROVED / DENIED
(circle one)

Maureen Brooks, Wildland Fire Education Working Team Chair — Date: 1/2/03

cc: Incident Operations Standards Working Team
Publication Management System Working Team