Recognition of Prior Learning Phase II Pilot Study Briefing

Findings and Recommendations for the National Wildfire Coordinating Group

Introduction

The Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) Phase II Study is a cooperative project conducted through partnership between the US Department of the Interior Bureau of Land Management (BLM), the International Association of Fire Chiefs (IAFC) and the New South Wales Rural Fire Service. The BLM sought to investigate the potential viability of RPL as a tool to facilitate NWCG position certification of structural firefighters.

This briefing will provide an overview of the Phase II study, to include processes and structure, attributes of the study cohort, and findings of our analysis.

Background

The RPL process has been utilized throughout Australia and New Zealand for over 20 years. BLM initiated an interagency RPL workshop in 2006 to assess interest in study of the methodology as a way to facilitate NWCG position certification of structural firefighters. Representatives from the New South Wales Rural Fire Service (NSWRFS) provided an overview of the RPL process. Representatives in attendance from NWCG agencies, the International Association of Fire Chiefs, the National Volunteer Fire Council, the North American State Fire Training Directors, and NWCG training development group personnel agreed RPL should be studied for potential application in the U.S. fire service

The Phase I RPL study was conducted in Florida and Montana. Volunteer and career firefighters from a diverse range of small rural and large metropolitan departments participated in the competency assessment process. Of the seventy-four participants assessed, almost half were judged as competent. Others were deficient in only a few areas, and could likely attain competency with training in focused areas. However, to validate these preliminary findings, a larger and more diverse study cohort was indicated. In addition, refinements to assessment tools, assessment methodology, and related pre-assessment student instructional materials were needed. A second Phase was initiated.

RPL Phase II Study

The Phase II study was conducted in February and March, 2009. Kelly Hawk was project manager; Brett Storey, Training Specialist, New South Wales Rural Fire Service, served as technical consultant; Derek Yeager, Billings, Montana BLM Range Technician, was lead assessor.

The team conducted assessments in eight States: Montana, Texas, California, New Mexico, Georgia, N. Carolina, Idaho, and Washington. One-hundred forty- five participants representing 28 fire departments were assessed.

Statistics Department, Composition, Population Served

State	Department Name	Composition
Washington	Spokane Valley	Combination
	Spokane City	Career
California	Ventura County	Career
New Mexico	Santa Fe County	Career
	Santa Fe City	Career
	Los Alamos	Combination
Texas	Nacogdoches	Combination
Montana	Red Lodge	Combination
Georgia	Savannah	Career
	Statesborough	Combination
	Forsythe	Volunteer
	Bulloch County	Volunteer
	Monroe County	Volunteer
	Henry County	Volunteer
	Bryan County	Combination
	McDonough	Volunteer
	Cherokee County	Volunteer
	Houston County	Volunteer
	Effingham County	Volunteer
	Putnam County	Volunteer
	Covington County	Volunteer
	Pickens County	Volunteer
	Cumming	Volunteer
North Carolina	Jacksonville	Combination
	Apex FD	Volunteer
	Walton County	Volunteer
	Nashville	Combination
Idaho	Boise	Career
	Weiser	Volunteer

Participant Affiliation

Classification	Total # Participated
Volunteer	20
Career	125

Participant Rank/Position

Rank	Total # Participated
Firefighter	74
Lieutenant	26
Captain	21
Battalion Chief	4
Division Chief	1
Assistant Chief	4
Chief	3
Training Officers	5
Other – State Personnel	7

Participant Assessment Outcomes and Findings

Assessment Outcome Past/ Present Quals. Repeated Training	Number of Participants/Comments
# Assessed as Competent - C	**63**
# Assessed as Not Yet Competent- NYC	**67**
# completed several NWCG courses	**78**
# With duplicate training	**57**
# With Duplicate Training – PTB Expiration	**8**
#Already qualified	**7**
# Former Fed w/ Lapsed qualifications	**11 (7 FFT 1 /above; 4 smokejumpers)**

Participant Skill Mix

Phase II participants documented a diverse and substantive mix of skills and experience in addition to structure firefighting. Nearly a third had military experience; several had served in Special Forces operations, HALO operations, flew as combat pilots, or were field medics. Four had served as firefighters on military or merchant ships. More than a third of the candidates held specialty qualifications in performing and instructing high-angle, trench/enclosed space, structure collapse, and swift water rescue. Close to a third held paramedic or advanced EMT certifications. Two served as medics on law enforcement SWAT units. Sixty-one were qualified

fire service instructors; 53 held fire investigator credentials; one had attended ATF's fire investigation academy. Six taught advanced level ICS courses at the National Fire Academy. Eleven participants were former federal employees with NWCG qualifications that had lapsed; seven held positions of FFI or higher; four were smokejumpers. More than a third had earned college degrees; one had a PhD.

Findings, Discussion and Recommendations Specific to RPL

As we had predicted, assessing a larger study cohort across a more varied geographic and organizational context was a productive exercise. Findings from the Phase II study reinforced our findings from the Phase I Study:

The competencies acquired by structure firefighters through structural operations, rescue, and EMS are directly or indirectly applicable to those competencies necessary for wildland firefighting.

With proper oversight and administration, well-developed job competencies, and consistent assessment protocols, RPL has utility as an accurate, defensible, and easily replicated competency assessment methodology and vehicle for certification and training.

Proper oversight includes a comprehensive design of system guidelines and sideboards to ensure consistency in administration and development of comprehensive training for assessors and administrators. Checks and balances, such as multi level independent review of assessment findings would be necessary in order to ensure quality control, provide for equity, minimize potential for assessor bias, and protect system credibility.

Participants need more guidance in the process. Portfolio quality significantly improved in Phase II due to our revisions in the candidate instruction materials. However we found participants would greatly benefit from a higher degree of assistance as they review job competencies, assemble portfolio documentation, and prepare for assessment exercises.

Phase II also further validated the utility and accuracy of the USFA/ NWCG Skills Crosswalk. Close to half the participants assessed as "not yet competent" were ideal candidates for the Crosswalk tool. Others could address most, but not all Crosswalk elements, and could benefit by utilizing only those modules necessary to address minor skills deficiencies, perhaps with augmentation through focused practical experience.

We recommend RPL be considered for application as an avenue for NWCG position certification. A detailed proposal will follow.

Comments and Conclusion

Over the course of RPL Phase I and Phase II, we have interviewed over 200 firefighters and fire officers around the country. They have all demonstrated a desire to earn NWCG certifications and participate in wildland fire operations. However, as previously reported by NASF and others, certification is difficult to achieve for a number of reasons that are mostly attributable to NWCG process requirements, or additional rules imposed by state governments. We have found certification is indeed difficult for structural fire personnel, but it is not for lack of ability to demonstrate competency. Compliance with the system of procedures and rules designed for state and federal wildland firefighters is difficult for structural firefighters and fire officers. For many, the NWCG standard is not attainable because the while the competencies can be demonstrated, and met, the process requirements cannot.

Firefighters graciously donated their time and effort to compile portfolios and participate in the interviews – often on their own time. They expressed a desire to take part in a study that may lead to development of systems providing an avenue to obtain NWCG certification. Overwhelmingly, they acknowledged NWCG is the foremost technical standard for wildland fire operations and is recognized throughout the world, and seek to obtain qualifications to fight wildland fire safely and effectively, protect their communities, engage in state level teams, and take part in national mobilization if they are needed to do so.