



data points

Data Points is a publication produced by the Wildland Fire Lessons Learned Center to highlight a collection of similar events or lessons signaling a need for specific action. Data Points is published on an as needed basis as the result of ongoing analysis.

Recurring Lesson: Carry a Soft Stretcher

Five separate incidents identify the value of soft stretchers in the wildland fire environment.

"A crewmember arrives with a soft stretcher they carry in their line gear. This will turn out to be one of the great successes of this accident response."

East Evans Creek Tree Strike FLA

Incident	Year	Event	Key Point
Big Swamp Fire	2022	Tree Strike	Used soft stretcher to move patient to extraction site
KNP Complex	2021	Tree Strike	Used soft stretcher to move two patients out of hazard area
East Evans Creek	2019	Tree Strike	Used soft stretcher to move patient to a road
Gregg Creek Fire	2015	Fall	Had to build makeshift litter to move patient
Mountain Fire	2013	Fall	Had to build makeshift litter to move patient

A soft stretcher, also known as a carry-all, is a lightweight, flexible stretcher with nylon carry handles. A soft stretcher is stored folded up (like a space blanket) and is easily kept in a vehicle and/or carried in a pack on the fireline.

Recommended Action: Carry a purpose-built soft stretcher on the fireline.

While it is a valuable skill to be able to build a backcountry litter out of materials on hand, having one manufactured for this specific purpose saves precious time during emergency situations and reduces exposure by eliminating the process of building anything "makeshift" and ensuring the load capacity to support injured personnel. Soft stretchers are available from multiple vendors.



Training:

Once your unit has acquired soft stretchers—complete the following:

- Train using the new equipment. Existing medical incident training scenarios can be adapted to practice using soft stretchers.
- Determine where the soft stretcher will be stored in vehicles.
- Update inventory lists and check-sheets.
- Determine how it is best carried on your fire packs.
- Identify WHO will carry the soft stretcher in your unit.

Review the lessons on the next two pages captured from the five incidents mentioned above.

2022: [Big Swamp Fire](#) Hit by Tree Fatality

EMTs packaged Collin in a soft stretcher, while other crewmembers began cutting an extraction site for the short-haul.

Alpha IHC and Charlie IHC EMTs and crewmembers began carrying Collin, who was in and out of consciousness, with the soft stretcher.

Meanwhile, Bravo and Delta IHCs and a Rapid Access Team (RAT), consisting of an EMT and a registered nurse, began ascending the P-line.

RAT arrived on scene at 1300 and administered Advanced Life Support (ALS) care, then transferred him to a Sked.

2021: [KNP Complex](#) Tree Strike

Moving patients on the fireline in complex terrain is one of the biggest challenges to IWI incidents. A tool that all CAL FIRE resources carry on the line is a lightweight soft litter which is a portable patient transport unit “carry-all”. It is a lightweight, disposable, woven material with nylon carry handles.

This is a great tool to have where it is needed most with the crews. Several participants remarked on the utility of the carry-all and mentioned they would pursue getting them distributed out to their crews.

These carry-alls can be combined with immobilization devices such as splints or backboards and provide many more options for moving patients of all sizes.

“The carry-all came out of nowhere and was great when we had to move the first two patients out of the hazard area; that thing rocked.”

2019: [East Evans Creek](#) Tree Strike

A crewmember from Hand Crew 2, who had also been working farther up the hill, arrives with a soft stretcher that they carry in their line gear. This will turn out to be one of the great successes of this accident response.

Responders recognized the soft stretcher as a valuable extraction tool.

- What did the firefighters like about using the soft stretcher? It is very lightweight, folds down to a compact size, and can be carried in a line pack.
- The soft stretcher is not the correct tool for every extraction scenario, but in this instance, it proved to be valuable.
- In this incident, use of the soft stretcher did not significantly impact the overall extraction time because other stretchers were available in nearby vehicles. However, if a soft stretcher is carried in a line pack when a more remote medical incident occurs, it could allow an extraction to begin much sooner than other options.



Example of a soft stretcher similar to the one used in the East Evans Creek Tree Strike incident extraction.

2015: [Gregg Creek](#) Broken Leg/Extraction

During the waiting, they tested carrying Mica on their makeshift litter, shown to the right—made out of a space blanket, parachute cord, and trees. It was used to carry him on the 31-minute uphill hike to the extraction site.

Often times we utilize store-bought litters in training, but we spend most of our time far from them. You should practice building a litter in the woods with what you have on hand.

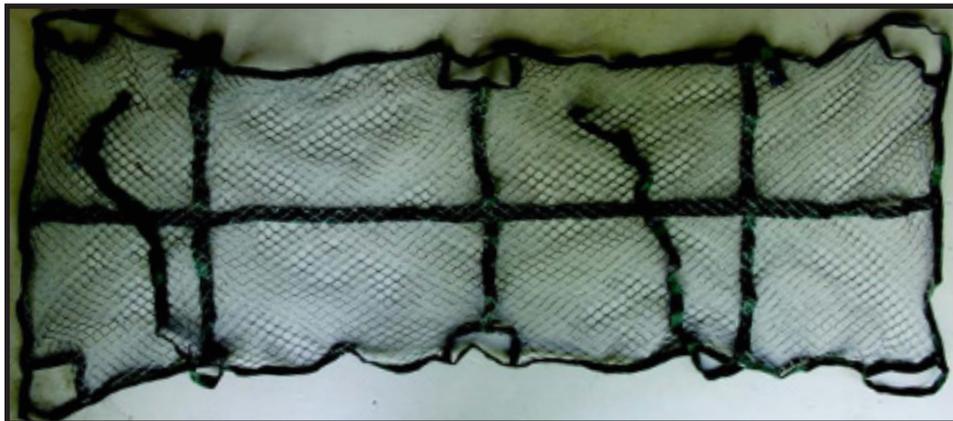
With the benefit of hindsight, this lesson could be altered to include the option of training with and carrying a soft stretcher.



2013: [IHC Packout](#) RLS

During critical training at the beginning of the season, the crew had practiced construction of makeshift litters out of available materials during remote fire operations (see video: [IHC Packout RLS](#)). Right away, the entire crew knew what they were making. Belts and chaps were shed while a saw team cut two 8-foot poles to be used as litter poles.

The crew took action and purchased a lightweight tactical stretcher similar to the one shown below.



Data Points is produced by the
Wildland Fire Lessons Learned Center

data points