

REPORT OF INVESTIGATION

Subjects: Various personnel on the Okanogan and Wenatchee National Forests.
Fire management program on the Okanogan and Wenatchee National Forests.

Unit: Okanogan and Wenatchee National Forests.
Region 6, USDA Forest Service

Dates of Investigation: November 16, 2001 to April 28, 2002

Administrative Investigation Team:

[REDACTED]

BASIS FOR INVESTIGATION

In a memorandum dated October 2, 2001, to the Regional Forester for Region 6, Forest Service Chief Dale Bosworth accepted the recommendation of the Chief's Review Board to initiate an administrative review to consider performance and accountability issues related to the actions taken to suppress the Thirtymile Fire. Exhibit 1. Chief Bosworth delegated to the Regional Forester the responsibility for initiating the administrative investigation. Id.

By memorandum of November 16, 2001, to the investigation team, the Regional Forester outlined the scope of the investigation as follows:

- (1) Examine the performance of employees in positions in the fire organization, including qualifications and training,
- (2) Examine the performance of the firefighting organization as it relates to this fire, and,
- (3) Review, and validate, as appropriate findings of the Thirtymile Fire safety investigation report as they pertain to individual and organizational performance and accountability.

ALLEGATIONS

Through witness interviews and examination of documents the team identified and focused on the following allegations¹ in analyzing Item (1), "Examine the performance of employees in positions in the fire organization, including qualifications and training:

1. Whether the [REDACTED] gave the Entiat Interagency Hotshot Crew (Entiat Hotshots or Hotshots) an appropriate briefing before the crew began an initial attack on the Thirtymile Fire.
2. Whether the [REDACTED] release of district resources from the Thirtymile Fire in the early morning hours of July 10, 2001, violated any of the standard fire orders or watchout situations.

¹ The team did not identify as full-fledged allegations some of the early leads that witnesses gave. For example, some witnesses informed the team that they had heard rumors that personality conflicts among the [REDACTED] was a contributing factor in the events of July 10, 2001. After exploring this issue with several witnesses the team found that it was not a factor and declined to identify it as an allegation. See, e.g., Exhibits 45 and 46. The team also did not pursue allegations surrounding treatment of employees after they returned to work following the Thirtymile Fire, concluding that it was outside the scope of the investigation and that time and space limitations precluded a thorough look at these issues. Finally, allegations that came up late in the process that were only tangentially related to the scope of the investigation were not looked into beyond noting them in witnesses' declarations and, as appropriate, in footnotes to this report.

3. Whether an unqualified individual was [REDACTED]
4. Whether the [REDACTED] gave the NWR#6 crew an appropriate briefing either at the Methow Valley Ranger District office in Twisp or at the Thirtymile Fire.
5. Whether the [REDACTED] gave the NWR#6 crew an adequate safety briefing at the Thirtymile Fire.
6. Whether the [REDACTED] gave the NWR#6 [REDACTED] an accurate assessment of the fire and a clear set of instructions concerning the crew's assignment.
7. Whether the [REDACTED] established and communicated who the Incident Commander of the Thirtymile Fire was once the NWR#6 crew took the fire over from the Entiat Hotshots.
8. Whether the [REDACTED] was communicating with Okanogan Dispatch as the IC.
9. Whether the [REDACTED] for the NWR#6 crew was placed in an unsafe location.
10. Whether weather was taken at appropriate intervals and a spot weather forecast was ordered.
11. Whether the helicopter's arrival on the Thirtymile Fire was inappropriately delayed.
12. Whether the [REDACTED] adequately took problems with the pump strategy, equipment breaking, unavailability of the helicopter and evolving weather conditions into account and incorporated them into appropriate strategy and tactics.
13. Whether the [REDACTED] failed to adequately take into account watchout situations prior to leaving the fire to go to the lunch spot.
14. Whether [REDACTED] ordered ground resources for the Thirtymile Fire without the prior approval of the IC.
15. Whether [REDACTED] checked in with the IC upon their arrival at the Thirtymile Fire.
16. Whether the [REDACTED] told the truth in [REDACTED] sworn declaration.

17. Whether [REDACTED] disregarded watchout situations in the suppression actions they took the afternoon of July 10 on the Thirtymile Fire.
18. Whether the [REDACTED] disregarded watchout situations in taking [REDACTED] to assist in suppressing spot fires.
19. Whether crewmembers of the NWR#6 crew were adequately briefed prior to being sent to assist in suppressing spot fires.
20. Whether the [REDACTED] briefed entrapped crewmembers and adequately prepared them for the deployment.
21. Whether the [REDACTED] told the truth in [REDACTED] sworn declaration.
22. Whether Okanogan Dispatch was notified of the entrapment prior to the deployment.
23. Whether the [REDACTED] properly carried out [REDACTED] duties as the [REDACTED] to the Thirtymile Fire.

Concerning Item (2), Examine the performance of the firefighting organization as it relates to this fire, the team identified areas of concern that are set forth in the Summary of Findings and further discussed in part two of the Details of the Investigation.

With regard to Item (3), review, and validate, as appropriate findings of the Thirtymile Fire safety investigation report as they pertain to individual and organizational performance and accountability, the team determined that rather than focusing on the findings of the original report it would review the events of July 9 and 10 as they relate to performance of individuals and the fire fighting organization and make findings based on the record it gathered as well as materials collected in the safety investigation. A complete statement of facts is included in the Details of the Investigations. The List of Exhibits includes all of the material the team gathered as well as some of the background material the safety investigation team collected and generated.

BACKGROUND

The administrative investigation team was formed in November 2001 and given its assignment on November 16, 2001. Exhibit 1. After reviewing background material, including the Thirtymile Fire Investigation Report and supporting documentation, the team on January 15, 2002, visited the site of the Thirtymile Fire's origin and the site where 14 crewmembers and two civilians deployed on July 10, 2001. The team used [REDACTED], as a guide on the site visit. Prior to and after the site visit the team interviewed 40 individuals with first-hand information of the suppression efforts on the Thirtymile Fire on July 9 and 10,

2001, and information concerning the performance of the fire fighting organization as it related to the Thirtymile Fire. The team obtained sworn statements from 37 of the 40 witnesses contacted and documented its contacts of the other three individuals. Those who provided sworn statements had the opportunity to review and edit their statements before signing them.

Among the documentary materials the team examined was the dispatch log for the Thirtymile Fire on July 9 and 10, 2001. Under normal circumstances there also would have been a recording of radio communications to Okanogan Dispatch that day; however, [REDACTED] states that the connector on the back of the Teac disc recorder used to make the recording was dislodged on July 9, 2001, when radio technicians were in the newly remodeled dispatch offices reconnecting equipment that had been moved. Exhibit 10, para. 8 and att. 3. It is standard procedure to also keep a paper log and, according to [REDACTED], the dispatchers "... log most of the stuff people call in." Exhibit 14, para. 8. Keeping a paper log assists Okanogan Dispatch in keeping track of the status of people on the district and the resource orders dispatch receives [REDACTED] states. *Id.* While the team found the dispatch log to be a helpful resource, for reasons discussed in various parts of the report, it also found that standing alone the dispatch log was insufficient to establish key points. For accuracy and ease of reference, the report includes a copy of the handwritten dispatch log and a typewritten copy. Exhibit 10, att. 2 and Exhibit 12, att. 1.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Part one – Examine the performance of employees in positions in the fire organization, including qualifications and training.

1. **Whether the Methow Valley Ranger District [REDACTED] gave the Entiat Interagency Hotshot Crew (Entiat Hotshots or Hotshots) an appropriate briefing before the crew began an initial attack on the Thirtymile Fire.**

The team found that the briefing given the Entiat Hotshots was inadequate. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] Districts are responsible for briefing all incoming resources appropriately. An appropriate briefing includes at least the information set out in the Safety Briefing card used by the Okanogan and Wenatchee National Forests. The briefing cards lists the following items: (1) Incident Organization, (2) Safety Information (lookouts, communications, escape routes and safety zones), (3) Objectives and Operational Plan, (4) Weather, (5) Fire Behavior/Danger, (6) Fuels, (7) Topography, (8) Downhill/Indirect Attack and (9) Aviation Safety. In addition, following the South Canyon Fire, the direction given was that all incoming fireline personnel would be briefed on the weather forecast, seasonal drying, danger rating information and special conditions.

While district personnel on the fire spoke with the [REDACTED] when the crew arrived on the fire, the evidence does not establish that they went over any of these safety briefing items, except for incident organization, in more than a cursory way. That, coupled with the fact that the [REDACTED]

2. Whether the [REDACTED] release of district resources from the Thirtymile Fire in the early morning hours of July 10, 2001, violated any of the standard fire orders or watchout situations.

After reviewing the [REDACTED], the team concludes [REDACTED] was in accordance with the standard fire orders and watchout situations. [REDACTED]

3. Whether an unqualified individual was assigned to be a [REDACTED] of the Northwest Regular Number 6 (NWR#6) crew.

The team concludes that an unqualified individual was assigned [REDACTED]

The team further points out that [REDACTED] and that either of these individuals could have been assigned to be [REDACTED]

4. Whether the Methow Valley Ranger District [REDACTED] gave the NWR#6 crew an appropriate briefing either at the Methow Valley Ranger District office in Twisp or at the Thirtymile Fire.

The evidence establishes that at neither the district office nor the fire did anyone in the [REDACTED] give the NWR#6 crew an appropriate briefing. This conclusion is based on the fact that neither [REDACTED] provided the crew with information or maps showing that they were on a dead end road. In addition, the evidence establishes that [REDACTED] did not participate in briefing the [REDACTED] nor did [REDACTED] hear anything but the very end of the briefing the [REDACTED] was giving the crew. Further, the evidence establishes that many of the crewmembers and at least two of the squad bosses did not receive information about who the IC would be. Finally, the briefing did not cover the fact that the crew was on a dead end road.

As set forth in allegation (1) the district has the obligation to ensure that incoming resources receive an appropriate briefing. The team concludes that the [REDACTED] failed to ensure an appropriate briefing occurred because crewmembers were not given information concerning who the IC was and information that they were on a dead end road.

5. Whether the [REDACTED] gave the NWR#6 crew an adequate safety briefing at the Thirtymile Fire.

[REDACTED]

f [REDACTED] The finding on this issue [REDACTED]

6. Whether the [REDACTED] gave the [REDACTED] an accurate assessment of the fire and a clear set of instructions concerning the crew's assignment.

After reviewing the characteristics of a fire requiring Type 4 and Type 3 resources the team concluded that the [REDACTED] both inaccurately assessed the Thirtymile Fire as an incident requiring only Type 4 resources on the morning of July 10. In particular, the team relied for its conclusion on the time needed to control both types of incidents and the type of resources needed. For a Type 4 incident, the Forest Service Handbook states that one operational period is needed to get the fire to the control stage although mop up may extend into multiple periods. In addition, resources for a Type 4 incident may vary from a single fire fighter to several single resources or a single task force or strike team. In contrast, a Type 3 incident may involve several operational periods to control and resources may vary from several single resources to several task forces/strike team leaders.

[REDACTED]

In addition, the team found that after touring part of the fire, the [REDACTED] did not give the [REDACTED] assessment of the fire or a clear set of instructions concerning the crew's assignment.

7. Whether the [REDACTED] established and communicated who the Incident Commander of the Thirtymile Fire was once the [REDACTED] took the fire over from the Entiat Hotshots.

occurred. The finding on this issue is that [REDACTED] should have clarified before the season began that all wildfires are considered emergency situations, at least until they are controlled, and that the proper procedure under the Endangered Species Act is to dip first and consult after the fact. The team also notes that the [REDACTED] moved quickly to address this issue after the fire.

12. Whether the [REDACTED] adequately took problems with the pump strategy, equipment breaking, unavailability of the helicopter and evolving weather conditions into account and incorporated them into appropriate strategy and tactics.

Safety checklists for initial and extended attacks require the IC to reanalyze his strategy and tactics when there is a significant change in conditions. [REDACTED]

13. Whether the [REDACTED] failed to adequately take into account watchout situations prior to leaving the fire to go to the lunch spot.

During the time period prior to leaving the fire to go to the lunch spot, the evidence establishes that the weather was getting hotter and drier, tactics had been changed but the entire crew had not been [REDACTED] was attempting a frontal assault on the fire and the squads were getting frequent spots across the hand lines. In addition, the evidence establishes that [REDACTED] made one or two radio calls to the [REDACTED] stating his concern that they were losing the fire. All of these events implicated at least one of the watchout situations and the team identified five watchout situations that were disregarded during this time period. The finding on this issue therefore is that the [REDACTED] failed to adequately take into account five of the watchout situations prior to leaving the fire to go to the lunch spot.

14. Whether [REDACTED] ordered ground resources for the Thirtymile Fire without the prior approval of the IC.

The Fireline Handbook states that the IC is responsible for approving all resource orders. The evidence on this allegation establishes that [REDACTED] ordered [REDACTED] for the Thirtymile Fire without the prior approval of the IC and that [REDACTED] further told either the IC or [REDACTED] that the purpose of the engines was to keep the fire east of the road. The evidence further establishes, however, that the IC did not object to [REDACTED] ordering of the [REDACTED]

15. Whether [REDACTED] checked in with the IC upon their arrival at the Thirtymile Fire.

[REDACTED]

The team's finding on this issue [REDACTED]

16. Whether the [REDACTED] told the truth in [REDACTED] sworn declaration.

The evidence establishes that by stating in his declaration that he checked in with the IC, the [REDACTED]

17. Whether the [REDACTED] and the [REDACTED] disregarded watchout situations in the suppression actions they took the afternoon of July 10 on the Thirtymile Fire.

By virtue of the fact [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]. The team found [REDACTED]

18. Whether the [REDACTED] disregarded watchout situations in taking crewmembers to assist in suppressing spot fires.

By the time the [REDACTED] called for help in assisting with suppression of spot fires above the main fire the evidence establishes that the dynamics of the fire had changed since that morning. It was therefore necessary for the [REDACTED] to reevaluate the fire and ensure that the crew was adequately briefed prior to taking crewmembers to assist in suppressing spot fires.

[REDACTED]

19. Whether crewmembers of the [REDACTED] were adequately briefed prior to being sent to assist in suppressing spot fires.

[REDACTED]

By that time the dynamics of the fire had changed. Therefore, standards fire orders and the Initial and Extended Attack safety checklists required that the crew be briefed before they were ordered to re-engage the fire.

20. Whether the [REDACTED] adequately briefed entrapped crewmembers and adequately prepared them for the deployment.

The Fireline Handbook requires the supervisor to decide when and where to deploy shelters. It also states that the supervisor is responsible for identifying where to deploy shelters and that the crew must stay together. To communicate this information to the entrapped crewmembers it was necessary for the [REDACTED] to brief them. The evidence establishes [REDACTED]

21. Whether the NWR#6 [REDACTED] told the truth in his sworn declaration.

[REDACTED] The evidence establishes that [REDACTED]

22. Whether Okanogan Dispatch was notified of the entrapment prior to the deployment.

The evidence on this issue supports a finding that Okanogan Dispatch was not notified of the entrapment prior to the deployment. [REDACTED]

23. Whether the [REDACTED] properly carried out [REDACTED] duties as the [REDACTED] or the [REDACTED] to the Thirtymile Fire.

The team concludes [REDACTED] After determining [REDACTED]

Part (2) – Examine the performance of the firefighting organization as it relates to this fire.

In its investigation, the team identified the following areas where it had concerns about the performance of the firefighting organization as it relates to the Thirtymile Fire:

1. There was an inconsistent application of fire qualifications on the Okanogan and Wenatchee National Forests with some believing the Wildland and Prescribed Fire Qualification Systems Guide, PMS 310-1 governed fire qualifications and others believing qualifications were governed by the Forest Service Handbook – Fire and Aviation Management Qualifications, FSH 5109.17. In addition, the Central Washington Incident Command Center (CWICC), the dispatch center serving the Wenatchee National Forest, did not keep records of those qualified for the positions of Squad Boss or lower.
2. The [REDACTED] did not respond adequately to information that the 2001 fire season would be extreme due to drought.
3. The role of a crew boss trainer and crew boss trainee lacks sufficient written standards for determining the roles and responsibilities of the trainer and trainee on an incident.
4. There was confusion after the combining of the Okanogan and Wenatchee National Forests over whether crews from within the boundaries of the Wenatchee National Forests that were sent to the Okanogan National Forest were considered an on- or off-forest resource.

5. Briefings given the Entiat Hotshots and NWR#6 crew were inadequate in view of the lessons learned from the South Canyon Fire on the importance of giving a briefing to the development of strategy and tactics. Further, there was a lack of recognition of the role of a local representative on a district fire and a failure by [REDACTED].
6. There was no clear set of written standards concerning the timing for closing roads during an initial or extended attack fire.
7. Too much is expected of the [REDACTED], who under the Okanogan and Wenatchee National Forests guidelines for district fire duty officers basically is performing duties that should be done by the district fire management officer or assistant fire management officer, at least during normal business hours.
8. The Fire Management Plans for the Okanogan and Wenatchee National Forests were not updated to reflect the combining of the two forests prior to the 2001 fire season.
9. Radio communications and radio protocols on the Okanogan and Wenatchee National Forests were not consistent with the incident command system functional positions.
10. Standard organization of Type 2 crews for off-unit assignments does not ensure an adequately skilled crew will be dispatched.
11. Type 2 crew vehicles are not required to carry extra fire shelters or personal protective equipment.
12. [REDACTED] did not provide adequately for the effects of fatigue on staff members.
13. The [REDACTED] program attempted to make informal policy addressing helicopter dipping and the Endangered Species Act.
14. Fire shelter deployment training was not clearly communicated as to the best deployment sites when escape routes and safety zones were compromised or inadequate. Training should discuss situations where there are more than a few minutes between entrapment and deployment.