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Findings From the Wildland Firefighters Human Factors Workshop

*Improving Wildland Firefighter Performance
Under Stressful, Risky Conditions: Toward
Better Decisions on the Fireline and More
Resilient Organizations*



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It has become increasingly clear that wildland firefighters are experiencing collapses in decisionmaking and organizational structure when conditions on the fireline become life-threatening. Since 1990 wildland fire agencies have lost 23

people who might have survived had they simply dropped their tools and equipment for greater speed escaping fires. We are averaging more than 30 entrapments each year now. And during the 1994 fire season, 34 people died, 14 on the South Canyon Fire alone.

These facts tell us that firefighting organizations, crews, and individuals need to be much more proficient at decisionmaking under stressful, risky conditions. Improving proficiency will require new training and attitude changes. And this in turn requires a thorough examination of the human dimensions of wildland firefighting. This examination is not limited to firefighting crews and teams (i.e., smokechasers, engines, helitack, incident management, type I, and type II) but extends to fire management officers, dispatchers, fire support, managers with fire and resource responsibilities, up to Agency heads. These people encompass a fire community. Fire community implies an awareness that we are interconnected and interdependent and should approach firefighting from the point of view that we are all in this together.

To begin to address some of the human factors questions, experts in psychology, sociology, organizations, fire safety, and wildland firefighting attended a 5-day workshop in June 1995 to discuss ways of improving firefighter safety.

Workshop participants explored firefighter psychology, interactions among firefighters and among fire crews, and better ways to organize. After several days of discussions, they developed a series of recommendations for beginning to implement changes that would improve the fire organization and firefighter safety.

This paper outlines the workshop's findings and recommendations. The workshop represents a first step in what will be a long journey toward a better understanding of the human side of wildland firefighting.

Ted Putnam
Workshop Organizer



The main entrapment site at the South Canyon Fire where 12 firefighters lost their lives on July 6, 1994.