

Canyon Creek Complex Malheur National Forest Overview and Frequently Asked Questions



Report Purpose

This report provides a narrative timeline of key events that occurred during the Canyon Creek Complex Fire as well as answer to the most frequently asked questions about the incident. Also included is an overview of the 2015 wildfire season across the U.S. Forest Service's Pacific Northwest Region. Regional context is provided to explain when and why firefighting resources were limited—as well as the impacts of those limitations.

The Pacific Northwest Region Experiences the Most Severe Fire Season in Modern History

The 2015 fire season in the Pacific Northwest was the most severe in modern history from a variety of standpoints. Oregon and Washington experienced more than 3,800 wildfires (almost 2,300 in Oregon and more than 1,500 in Washington) that burned more than 1,600,000 acres (more than 630,000 acres in Oregon and more than 1,000,000 acres in Washington)—including 1,325 fires representing 507,000 acres on U.S. Forest Service lands (information as of September 30, 2015). Initial Attack was successful in rapidly containing all but about 119 of these fires. This response represents an almost 97 percent Initial Attack success rate.

Approximately 50 of these fires occurred during a ten-day period in mid-August when numerous Large Fires (a wildfire of 100 acres or more in timber or 300 acres or more in grass/sage) were already burning in the Pacific Northwest. During this time, the Northern Rockies and Northern California were also experiencing unusually high numbers of wildfires. This situation limited the ability to rapidly obtain Initial Attack reinforcements as well as almost all types of firefighting resources needed for Large Fires. During this severe fire season, approximately 675 structures were lost.

The Pacific Northwest Region was listed as the first or second priority for national resources on the National Interagency Coordination Center's Situation Report for 82 days (of 122) between June 1 and September 30. During the entire month of August, the Pacific Northwest Region was ranked Number #1 (18 days) or Number #2 (13 days) in the National Priority.

At the peak of the season's fire activity, the following resources were assigned to wildfires burning in the Region: 1 Area Command, 21 Incident Management Teams, and more than 11,450 personnel. Firefighters were mobilized to attack the Pacific Northwest Region's fires from most of the 50 states as well as Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. In addition, the Oregon National Guard, Washington National Guard, and the United States Army were all dispatched to help with suppression efforts.



The Canyon Creek Complex Overview

The Berry Creek and Mason Springs fires were two of 12 fires ignited by lightning on August 12 on the Malheur National Forest. Pushed by strong winds, the Berry Creek and Mason Springs fires merged together to become the Canyon Creek Complex on August 14.

On August 13 a Type 3 Incident Commander (IC) was assigned to and assumed command of both fires.

On August 14, prior to merging, the Berry Creek and Mason Springs fires were encircled by retardant lines prior to the strong winds causing the fires to escape containment. An Initial Attack response from the volunteer fire departments in Grant County included 12 Engines and 32 Firefighters with structure protection the highest priority for all resources. The National Interagency Situation Report stated that the growth of the Berry Creek and Mason Springs fires was reported to be in excess of 34,143 acres; with 39 residences destroyed. A Type 1 Incident Management Team was ordered to establish a Unified Command with the Oregon State Fire Marshal.

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On August 17, the Canyon Creek Complex became the Number 1 priority fire in the nation and was receiving critical resources as they became available in the resource mobilization system.

The complex remained active for the next three weeks, with runs of 20,000 acres to the southeast, 11,600 acres down Pine Creek and 17,600 acres down Indian Creek toward Prairie City. By September 4, the fire had increased to more than 110,000 acres and destroyed 43 primary residences. The Fire was declared controlled on November 5, 2015; suppression costs to this point are approximately \$31 Million.

Frequently Asked Questions: Canyon Creek Complex

What Kind of Fire activity was the Malheur National Forest experiencing on August 12?

Beginning at 4 a.m. on Wednesday, August 12, a new lightning storm passes over the Malheur National Forest.

By the afternoon of August 12, local firefighting resources have responded to 12 new fire starts across the Malheur National Forest—stretching from south of Seneca to Indian Rock, located on the Forest’s north side.

The Mason Springs Fire, located north of the community of Seneca, and the Berry Creek Fire, located south of the town of John Day in the Strawberry Mountain Wilderness near private lands, are two of these 12 new fire starts that receive aggressive Initial Attack response.

With the predictions for winds and hot weather, why didn't the Forest have more equipment and personnel ready prior to the Mason Springs and Berry Creek Fires starting?

- On August 12, both the Pacific Northwest Region and National Fire Preparedness Levels are Level 4—the second highest severity level. In Oregon and Washington, 15 Large Fires (a wildfire of 100 acres or more in timber or 300 acres or more in grass/sage) are active with 5,947 firefighters assigned. Across the nation, 62 active Large Fires are burning with 20,747 firefighting resources assigned. The severe lightning storm that impacted the Malheur National Forest area on August 12, also establishes new fire starts throughout the region—creating an additional draw of firefighting resources.

No forest is able to staff for the worst case scenario. Our staffing levels are based on our budget and augmented with severity funding from the regional office when fire danger is very high. The interagency wildland fire community shares resources across the country by sending available firefighting personnel and equipment from the slower areas to the region that is experiencing the most severe fire conditions. This includes all Malheur National Forest fire resources (Rappellers, engines, crews, aircraft, helicopters, etc.)

What were all the competing priorities/incidents for additional resources?

In July the Forest was fortunate in getting agency engines from out of the Region, but in August, we could not find any agency engines available for standby because of the demand for resources for the ongoing fires across the western U.S. Our local pool of contracting engines and crews was assigned to the many large fires across Oregon and Washington.

What equipment and personnel were available locally for Initial Attack on August 12?

- 8 - Malheur NF engines
- 1 - Malheur NF 20 person handcrew assigned to the West Fork Fire, near Aldrich Mountain
- 2 - Malheur NF contract engines
- 1 - Malheur NF contract Water Tender
- 1 - Malheur NF contract dozer
- 1 - Type 3 Incident Management Team
- 2 - Task Force leaders
- 4 - Malheur NF contract engines- West Fork Fire
- 2 - Malheur NF contract water tenders- West Fork Fire
- 1 - Malheur NF contract faller- West Fork Fire
- 5 - ODF engines
- 1 - ODF 5 person handcrew
- 2 – Malheur NF contracted 20 person crews on short term loan to Burns Fire Zone

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What was the response to the Berry Creek and Mason Springs fires on August 12?

Immediate initial suppression response to the Berry Creek and Mason Springs fires included both aerial and ground resources:

- **Berry Creek Resources**
1 Heavy Airtanker, 5 Smokejumpers, 6 Rappellers, 3 Single Air Tankers (SEATS)*, 2 Helicopters*, 1 20-Person Hand Crew (contract)
 - **Mason Springs Resources**
2 FS Engines, 1 20-Person Hand Crew, 3 SEATS*, 2 Helicopters*, 1 Dozer, 1 Contract Engine
- *These air resources were shared between the two fires.

Why did it take so long to get firefighters to the Berry Creek Fire and the Mason Springs Fire on August 12?

Early morning lightning storms are unusual, making a quick response challenging because our crews, engines and aircraft are not on duty. The normal work schedule for fire crews during fire season is from 9:30 a.m. to 6 p.m. so they are on during the time period when most fires start. Fire Staff had plans in place to have staff and crews come on duty an hour earlier than normal on the morning of August 12. The lightning storm became very active over the forest that morning, between 4:00 and 4:30 a.m.

Firefighters, pilots, dispatchers and duty officers reported to work as quickly as possible once notified of the lightning and subsequent fires on the morning of August 12. As soon as firefighters reported into their duty station and engines could be staffed, they were dispatched to fires. As quickly as dispatchers could get into the office and received requests from the duty officers they ordered ground resources, aircraft and aerial delivered firefighters.

- The Berry Creek Fire was reported to Dispatch at 7:22 a.m. Knowing the approximate location of the fire, the Forest opted to use aerial delivered firefighter as the first response. We ordered smoke jumpers and rappellers. The orders were placed at 7:30 a.m. The rappellers coming out of La Grande were staffed up and ready to deploy at 7:30 a.m. but by the time the order came in, there was a thunderstorm over head that delayed their departure until 9 a.m. The aircraft coming out of Central Oregon was staffed and ready to depart by 9 a.m. The smokejumpers out of Redmond, Oregon were the first resources over the fire, followed quickly by the rappellers from Central Oregon and the rappellers coming from La Grande, Oregon.



- For the Mason Springs fire, we opted for using ground resources. The fire was reported to dispatch at 7:18 a.m. Three engines were initially dispatched to the incident once the firefighters arrived at the station in John Day at 8 a.m. It took approximately 1 hour and 45 minutes for the engine crews to travel to the general area and locate the fire. Crews were on scene at 9:45 a.m.

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Why did the USFS take the crews off the Mason Springs Fire the first night?

Engine 610, Engine 613 (both local MNF engines) and Engine 22 (a contract engine) **stayed overnight** on the Mason Springs Fire. By 9:30 p.m., the fire was lined with retardant and dozer line. The crews had a hose lay around the fire and had started mopping up the hot areas along the perimeter. The fire was looking very secure. They bedded down at 9:36 p.m. at their camp, which was very close to the fire. Two water tenders and the hand crew returned to town for the night. The next morning, crews arrived on scene at 9:30 a.m., the fire was still looking very secure. The crews and engines were put back to work mopping up the fire.

Why weren't firefighters aggressively putting the fires out?

The Mason Springs and Berry Creek fires were full suppression efforts. The Mason Springs Fire was 100 percent contained on the morning of August 13, meaning that fireline was constructed with a bulldozer and reinforced with retardant and a hose lay around 100 percent of the fire and the fire spread had been stopped. Crews were also working very aggressively on the Berry Creek Fire during the daylight hours. Crews hiked off of the Berry Creek Fire at 8:45 p.m. once it became dark due to the high probability of being hit by the multiple snags (dead trees that come down unexpectedly), and the potential for rolling rocks coming off the very steep slopes. Crews didn't stay on the fireline of the Berry Creek fire overnight because of those hazards to the firefighters and the fact that no aviation resources would be available to evacuate a firefighter if one were to be hit by a snag or rolling rock. Crews were hiking out a firefighter who was suffering from a heat-related illness when a snag fell across the line on the right (west) flank of the fire causing fire to spread upslope and to the west. The Incident Commander reported the snag and fire spread to dispatch and requested that a Type 2 helicopter respond as soon as they were able to fly the next morning; national fire policy does not allow for helicopter bucket work or airtanker drops after dark. Temperatures remained abnormally high and humidity remained abnormally low into the night and well into the next morning.

Why were the engines and firefighters not accepted from Burns when they were offered on August 12 for the Mason Springs Fire?

Engines were not able to drive to the fire edge of the Mason Springs Fire because of the terrain, brush and fuels around the fire. The IC didn't want to tie up engines by parking them below the fire when there was still a demand for engines on other fires. The IC was in need of and ordered 2 - 20 person ground crews.

Why does the USFS place inexperienced personnel (trainees) in positions as Incident Commanders on these difficult fires?

Trainees are common on all fires and they are always paired with an experienced trainer who is qualified as an incident commander. This is not unique to the incident commander position - the National Wildfire Coordinating Group (NWCG) sets the standard qualifications for all positions in incident management. Trainees take required classes and then serve as trainees until they have completed a position taskbook that is signed by a qualified person in that position. The NWCG training system allows individuals to learn by experience, which is essential in a dynamic field like wildfire management.

Why wasn't the Mason Springs Fire fully extinguished and mopped up after the dozer line was put around it?

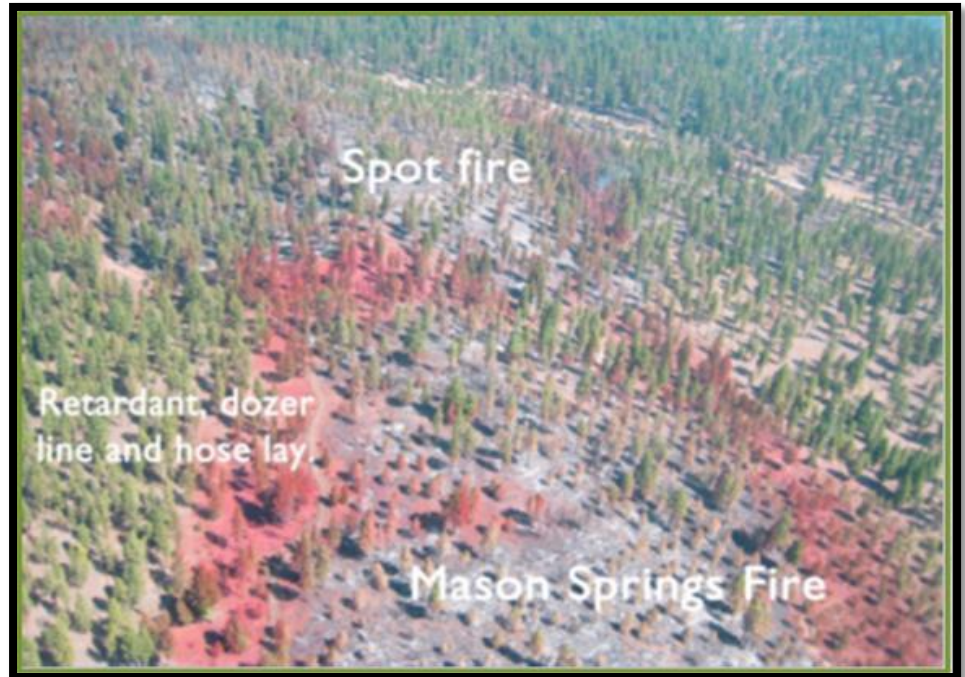
Once the dozer line was completed on the Mason Springs Fire, crews began mopping up (extinguishing all hot spots from the dozer line towards the interior of the burned area) on the afternoon of August 12. The fire was looking secure that evening so the engine crews bedded down near the fire that night. The firefighters were back on the fireline early the next morning and were continuing the process of mopping up the fire on August 13. The IC calculated it would take 2-3 days to completely mop up the fire with the resources they had. The IC asked for an additional crew to help speed up the mop-up but the Berry Creek fire was causing problems and became the priority fire the morning of August 13 and received the crew that was intended for Mason Springs.

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Why did the Mason Springs Fire get out of control when it was apparently called contained at 8:28 a.m. August 13?
“Contained” is the status of a wildfire suppression action signifying that a control line has been completed around the fire, and any associated spot fires, which can reasonably be expected to stop the fire’s spread.

The Mason Springs Fire was completely surrounded by a dozer line and a retardant line August 12. On August 13, handcrews were mopping up (extinguishing hot spots) working from the fireline to the interior of the fire. That afternoon was very hot, dry and windy; making the fuels (any burnable vegetation) were very receptive to ignition from any spark. Firefighters on scene believe that strong winds pushed firebrands (burning embers) downwind from the main fire and across containment lines. Those firebrands may have ignited a new spotfire 400 feet from the main fire. The spot fire immediately began running and torching trees creating new spots. The IC ordered air tankers, helicopters and requested the dozer back, the fire was spotting ahead of itself as much as ¼ mile. Even with much of the crew less than 500 feet away from the spot fire when it was noticed, there was no way to get it contained.



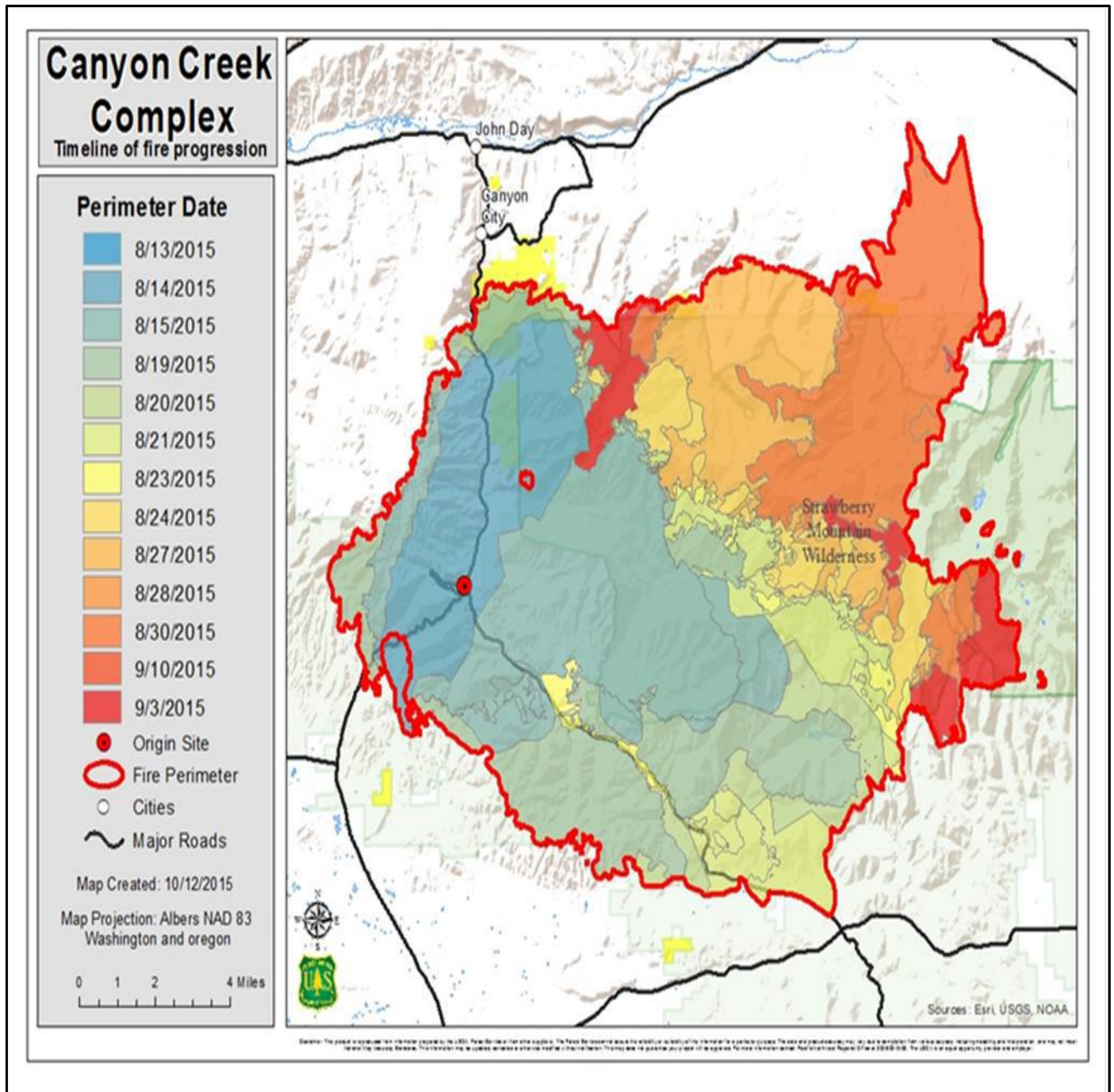
Why were the helicopters sitting idle at the airport, on August 12, the first day of the Mason Springs and Berry Creek Fires?

- On August 12 all of the local aircraft was used extensively all day long.
- On August 13 all of the local aircraft was able to fly most of the day. In the late afternoon winds became very erratic and gusty making it extremely difficult to be effective with water bucket drops. If the pilots, both fixed wing retardant planes and helicopters felt it was safe to fly in the gusty winds, they did. Between all of the helicopters in John Day on August 13, they dropped over 31,000 gallons of water, which equals about 100 bucket drops, on the fires burning that day.

Was the Berry Creek Fire actively fought with both air and ground resources on August 12?

The Berry Creek Fire was actively fought from the air and ground from the first day. Crews could not safely remove a very dangerous snag burning along the right flank of the fire, so the helicopter doing bucket work focused on the right flank while the hand crews built fire line from the heel of the fire along the left flank. At 8:45 p.m., crews disengaged from the fire due to many dangerous snags and unchecked fireline. There wasn’t a safe strategy to allow firefighters to work the fire at night with the snags and steep slopes. If a firefighter were to be injured while fighting the fire at night, no aviation resources would be available to medevac the patient as aviation resources are grounded at night per national policy.

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For further information or questions please call 541-575-3000 or visit <http://www.fs.usda.gov/malheur>

Malheur National Forest

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