

Audio Tour, Stop 2, Rim of the World Vista

Peer down into this winding river canyon. Here you can see the Tuolumne Wild and Scenic River, a pristine waterway set aside by Congress in 1984. Off in the distance, you can also see another canyon that houses the Clavey River. It is in this remote location, near Jawbone Ridge, that the Rim Fire started from an illegal fire set by a hunter. Fire restrictions were in place because fire managers knew that conditions were ripe for a large fire to start and grow unchecked.

Stanislaus National Forest, along with the rest of California, was in its second year of a severe drought. Pine needles, dead twigs and cured grass were brittle-dry from the lack of water. Due to the length of the drought, large logs on the ground were also parched. When conditions get this dry, even living plants that are drought-tolerant begin to struggle. Water is a precious commodity guarded carefully by native plants and yet, moisture levels were dropping within the manzanita and chamise. Fire restrictions are put in place when the water content of these two plants passes a certain threshold, indicating to us that fires in the brush fields will burn rapidly.

Locally, we call chamise greasewood because of all of the volatile chemicals it has in its foliage. Of all the places a fire could get started on this forest, this was the worst. Four out of nine fatalities on the Forest have occurred in this very canyon. I attribute that to a combination of factors including the drought, the impact that had on the fuels, the steepness of the slope and the fact that the fire started in a chamise field. Fast-moving fires are notorious in chamise plus there are so many branches on this bush that escaping a fire in an area like this would be impossible.

The initial attack Initial Attack Incident Commander, sized up the fire when it first began. Within one minute, the fire jumped from 10 acres to 40. Take a look at how steep the canyons are here. There were no roads to access this fire and the fuel was so tightly spaced, there was no way to safely fight the fire in close proximity, an action known to firefighters as “going direct.” Instead, we had to rely on aircraft to cool the fire down while we devised a plan to box it in from a safe distance.

By the time the IC completed his size-up, the fire had grown to 150 acres. Though other fires throughout California were competing for critical fire resources, aircraft were deployed quickly. Within minutes, tankers were on scene dropping retardant. 32,021 gallons were painted on the surrounding hills within a 4.5 hour period.

My plan was to box the fire in and then impose a set of contingencies in case the first box did not hold. Naturally, we wanted to put the fire out, but we also have a responsibility to our crews to keep them safe and as you can tell from the two monuments located at this vista, that is something we need to take very seriously.

Please pause a moment and look at the firefighting memorials that overlook this vast canyon. They are a stark reminder of what's at stake. By remembering those who have died fighting wildfires, we not only pay respect to those who have passed but we honor them by learning from what went wrong in order to help improve safety records for the living.

A shift in the winds on this fire could have been tantamount to death. We had no escape routes or safety zones. I needed to make a quick decision and my decision was to locate a reasonable area to dig in and begin the process of boxing the fire in. Many factors have to be considered in

a decision such as this but at the end of the day, it's my job to make sure that everyone on my crew returns to their families in one piece.

The IC made a series of critical life and property impacting decisions as the Incident Commander. Meanwhile, upcanyon winds were pushing the fire and it was getting bigger by the moment. It quickly became obvious that we didn't have enough resources available to catch this fire so the IC ordered a Type 2 Incident Management Team that day and started looking for a safe location to cut some fuel breaks.

Eventually, the fire grew to 257,314 acres. Evacuations occurred along the Tuolumne River Canyon to rush campers and kayakers to safety. Within days of the fire's start, the town of Groveland was evacuated as the Rim Fire leap-frogged ahead, making massive runs through the forest.

This was an unprecedented fire that exceeded everybody's expectations. It created a giant mushroom cloud that spewed smoke into the mid-west. Local school children were sent home due to health concerns. Red Cross had to set up emergency operations to help those displaced by the fire. Meanwhile it constantly out-ran our plans to contain it. It also impacted a lot of natural resources.