



Southwestern Region  
Whitewater-Baldy  
Gila National Forest  
June 15, 2012



The following is a chronology of major events for the Baldy and Whitewater Fires as the two fires became the Whitewater-Baldy Fire.

**Wednesday, May 9 and May 16th, 2012—the beginning**

--On May 9, the lightning-caused Baldy Fire was first reported at 0654 hrs South of Mogollon Baldy at the head of Lookout Mountain. This portion of the Gila Wilderness Area is steep, rugged, and inaccessible and because of these unsafe conditions, crews were unable to directly or indirectly attack the fire to suppress it at this time. The fire was to be monitored by air.



**Aerial Monitoring of Baldy Fire—May 18, 2012**

--On May 16, the lightning-caused Whitewater Fire was first reported at 1025 hrs, several miles west of the Baldy Fire within the Gila Wilderness Area. The decision was made to immediately try to put the fire out as quickly as possible. (**Full Suppression Strategy**) Two 20-person Hotshot crews and a helicopter fought the fire during the first 24 hours.

--Fire crews were forced from the fire line by large boulders rolling down the steep canyons in the incredibly rugged terrain after the first day. The fire size was estimated at 350 acres.



**Whitewater Fire on May 17th**

### **May 17 -21 2012**

--An Incident Management Team -IMT2 (Pierson) was ordered and in place on May 17. The Whitewater Fire was now threatening 57 residences and by the end of May 17 had grown to 630 acres. It was burning in mixed conifer and was actively backing downhill with some torching and uphill runs. A structure plan assessment was completed for Willow Creek. State Highway 159 was closed. Fire crews prepped the ridge along Highway 159 (aka Bursum Road) and Crest Trail to the north and east. There were 275 personnel assigned including five Hotshot crews. Dry lightning was predicted with a high temperature near 80, RH around 10% and winds light at 5-10 mph.

--For the next four days, ending May 21, the fire had moved very little with 995 acres burned by the end of shift. There were a total of 435 personnel assigned and accessibility and firefighter safety remained the key factors. There was active fire north of the confluence of Whitewater and Lipsey Creeks.

### **May 22, 2012, Tuesday**

-- The weather remained fairly seasonal, 80 during the day 10-15% RH and winds gusting up to 15 mph. Willow Creek was issued a precautionary evacuation notice due to falling embers and the potential for spot fires. During the day, the fire behavior was extreme with a high rate of spread and long range spotting and the fire was now plume dominated. The fire size was estimated at 1,824 with 0% containment the evening of May 22.



### **May 23, 2012, Wednesday—One fire**

--Red Flag conditions were causing the fire to increase at a high rate of spread in steep inaccessible terrain. Safety was once again the largest concern due to a lack of safety zones and an inherent inability to remove injured if necessary.

--Firefighters were forced to disengage from the Willow Creek Summer Home Area because of the extreme fire behavior as the two lightning-caused fires were now burning together. Twelve of the approximately 60 summer homes were destroyed during the blow-up along with eight outbuildings.

--The Whitewater moved violently to the east driven by 40-50 mph winds. The newly-named Whitewater-Baldy Complex grew to over 70,000 acres in just one day.

## **May 24, 2012, Thursday**

--By evening the fire was officially estimated be 70,578 acres in size with 0% containment. An Incident Management Team, IMT1 (Sciacca) was ordered and was scheduled to assume command on May 26<sup>th</sup> at 0600. There were 500 personnel assigned to the fires. A voluntary evacuation notice was issued for Mogollon. The Incident Command Post (ICP) was moved to Reserve, NM at the County fairgrounds.

--Weather during the day saw temperatures around 78 with an RH as low as 10% and winds 15-20 mph. The same concerns for safety remained as they were since day one.

## **May 25 2012, Friday**

--Winds continued to gust up to 35 mph and RH remained around 11%. Once again, the wind-driven fire exhibited extreme behavior with long range spotting and sustained crown runs through the forested canopy. Firefighters were once again forced to disengage from the fire line due to the safety concerns. The fire size was now estimated to be 82,252 acres with the same critical fire weather forecast for Saturday.

## **May 26 2012, Saturday**

--IMT1 (Sciacca) assumed command of the fire at 0600. There were twelve crews on the fire including 7 Hotshot crews with 6 more ordered. There were 600 personnel assigned. The IMT estimated they needed to build 40 miles of fire line as the fire had grown to 100,000 acres.

--Mogollon was placed under a mandatory evacuation order at 0800 and structure protection continued in the Mogollon and Willow Creek areas.



--The fire was easily burning through previously burned areas. Areas that normally would have been considered "fire resistant" were showing a high resistance to control. Areas of immediate concern included the Mogollon, Willow Creek, the Indian Creek Cabins, Bear Wallow Lookout and cabins, T&E Species, the White Creek administrative site, and private in-holdings.

--Flame lengths up to 200 feet were observed as the fire burned through mixed conifer, ponderosa pine, pinyon juniper and heavy concentrations of down and dead material.