

Barry Point Fire Review

Fremont- Winema & Modoc National Forests

USDA Forest Service



May 2013

Review Objectives:

Identify Best Business Practices Used on Fires This Past Season

Identify How Social and Political Issues Factored Into Our Decision Making

Identify Which Current Procedures Can Be Enhanced or Expanded

Identify Improvements That Can Be Made In Sharing and Clarifying Expectations

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Purpose

On November 26, 2012, James Hubbard, Deputy Chief for State and Private Forestry (SPF), issued a letter requiring several large fires of Fiscal Year 2012 be reviewed by the National Incident Management Organization (NIMO). The letter emphasized the responsibility of the Forest Service to evaluate management actions and assure they were appropriate, risk based and effective. The fires were selected based on complexity and national significance ensuring the selected fires provide a cross section of our risk management performance in fires of various final costs, sizes and oversight complexity.

On January 28, 2013, Tom Harbour, Director of Fire and Aviation Management (FAM), issued a letter to Mike Quesinberry defining expectations for the review of the Barry Point. The review was to identify areas that need improvement and carry recommendations forward for best management practices in the future. The reviews were conducted using the 2012 Risk Decision Framework which was included with the 2012 Wildfire Guidance letter signed by Jim Hubbard, dated May 25, 2012.

Background

The team reviewed records contained in the Barry Point Fire package located at the Fremont-Winema Forest Supervisor's Office. On site interviews were held in Lakeview, Oregon on February 25-27, 2013 and Alturas, California on February 28, 2013. Those interviewed included the Forest Supervisor and Fire Staff (or acting) of both the Fremont-Winema and Modoc National Forests, the initial attack Incident Commander, and personnel (both fire and non-fire) from the Supervisor's Office and Lakeview District on the Fremont-Winema. The focus of the review was internal, concentrating on organizational effectiveness. Another in-depth review of the fire by a team delegated by U.S. Forest Service R5 and R6 Regional Foresters was occurring concurrently.



Observation by Objective:

The following are key observations and corresponding lessons learned organized by the four objectives of the review.

1. Identify Best Business Practices Used on Fires This Past Season

The Barry Point Fire burned over a large geographical area and within the fire perimeter there are several private landowners. The private land became a challenge for the IMTs to manage. With extreme burning conditions and rapid large fire growth, it was hard for the IMTs to keep up with the contacts and notifications. Interviews indicated there was confusion among assigned firefighters regarding the overall strategy.

Pre-season planning between the Fremont-Winema and Modoc National Forests was identified as a lesson learned from the 2007 Fletcher Fire. As a result, open communication between the two forests was displayed on the Barry Point Fire; when the Forest Supervisor and fire staff from the Fremont-Winema made contact with the Modoc National Forest well before the Barry Point fire progressed onto lands they managed.

On the Modoc National Forest, existing fuels treatments were successful in transitioning the fire from a running crown fire to a surface fire. Fuels treatments decreased fire spread and intensity and provide defensible ground for firefighting resources.

Decisions and efforts were made on historical fire behavior, but the conditions never mimicked anticipated trends. As a result, a considerable amount of resources were deployed around the town of Lakeview and surrounding communities in anticipation of the fire approach. Unexpected large fire growth during the night time continued to make the next day's plan basically invalid. Decisions continued to be made on historical occurrences rather than actual conditions.

The atmosphere of "safety first" was prevalent in almost every interview held on both forests. Safety was paramount in decision making. It was acknowledged that maintaining a single camp near Lakeview for all suppression resources, even after the fire spread south into California, increased exposure of firefighters and the public through increased drive time between the camp and the fireline. This also decreased the effectiveness of timely transitions between day shift and night shift resources.

Continuity of leadership was an issue faced by both forests during the Barry Point Fire. The Fremont-Winema had three (3) vacant District Ranger positions at that time including the Lakeview District impacted by the fire as well as a vacancy at the Forest Fire Staff position. The Modoc also had vacancies at the District Ranger and Fire Management Officer



positions on the district affected by the fire. These vacancies resulted in an even greater demand on the involvement of both Forest Supervisors.

A process flaw was identified from the lack of thorough documentation of the sequence of events for the fire. Unit logs were weak to non-existent and daily corrected Incident Action Plans (IAPs) were not evident. The failure to document changes to the IAP and track incident resources made it impossible to tell the story of the Barry Point operational activities.

2. Identify How Social and Political Issues Factored Into Our Decision Making

Protection of private property and structures were clearly identified as a priority in the objectives for the incident. Some values such as structures, infrastructure and commercial timber were identified early on in the process. Other values such as grazing, fences, cattle, and sentimental values of the land were harder to identify and fully understand. The lack of discussion and understanding public interests on private lands and improvements on federal grazing leases between the agencies and the stakeholders led to numerous conflicts and animosities toward management of the incident on federal lands and those managed under direct protection agreements.

The people who were interviewed felt landowners and permittees had angst over not being listened to about their concerns for their property and felt under-utilized regarding their knowledge of the land, fuels, access and improvements such as fences and cattle safety. In some instances, actions were taken on private land without the owner being consulted. Contacts with stakeholders, both individually and through organized stakeholder meetings were slow to occur. Interviewees stated that property owners felt information they discussed with Division Supervisors and others on the fireline never got incorporated into the planning process. The Forest Supervisor stated the IMT did not meet his expectation of organizing a stakeholder meeting quickly enough.

It is obvious that this experience has impacted employees on both forests very much. The controversy over the protection of values at risk on private lands and those held by ranchers with grazing permits on public lands is still an emotional issue for many on both forests. This impact is magnified by long-standing ranch families from the area having family members who are employees of the Forest Service. Due to this fact, the suppression efforts of the fire and the efforts of supporting personnel took on a very personal and emotional tone. Both forests identified the need to improve communication efforts in understanding the values at risk for private landowners and permittees prior to ignition and during and after fire suppression. Some employees continue to feel conflict of priorities between their professional duties and their commitments to family and friends.



Although one-third of the burned acreage on the Barry Point fire occurred on private land, it was decided that the use of a “Joint Delegation of Authority” between the Forest Service, Oregon Department of Forestry and IMTs would provide the necessary incident structure to manage the fire in the interests of both agencies. Due to the extreme fire behavior, unified command may not have improved the situation of the Barry Point Fire, but would have assured the inclusion of the individual cooperator interests and concerns; and assisted in the development of a unified strategy which would have enabled the sharing of operational risk.

The wildland firefighter community continues to use aircraft when a lack of direct support limits the effectiveness. While this can be an effort to slow the fire until ground resources can catch up; this is often in response to the need to “just do something” even if probability of success is very low. Identifying that point and managing aircraft is a continuing challenge for IMTs and Agency Administrators and was evident on this fire.

3. Identify Which Current Procedures Can Be Enhanced or Expanded

Several common themes were identified in looking at expanding and enhancing procedures. The Wildland Fire Decision Support System (WFDSS) process was considered cumbersome with questionable value added to the firefighting effort. Some felt it was a valuable tool in the beginning, but lost value as the incident progressed.

There was the perception that the operational briefing was less about operations and more about other functions. This was confusing to cooperators and stakeholders.

There also seemed to be confusion over interagency and organizational roles. It was also suggested that the Forest Supervisor’s Office was too involved in tactics. There were discrepancies between information from resource advisors with the supervisor’s office and those from the district.

Employees have also experienced conflicts in priorities between supporting fire suppression and conducting work aimed at meeting targets in other program areas. Conflicting direction, both oral and written, seems to have been given from both the forest and regional offices.

NIMO was mobilized to add additional capacity to the Type 2 IMT. Due to rapidly changing complexity and the need for more operational capacity and address the span of control, a Type 1 IMT was ordered the day after NIMO assumed command. NIMO assisted the forest with preparation of a Strategic Risk Assessment and was asked to return at the end of the Type 1 IMT’s tenure, to re-engage with the local Type 3 IMT.



4. Identify Improvements That Can Be Made In Sharing and Clarifying Expectations

Agency Administrators and Incident Commanders are expected to develop and agree upon leader's intent with partners. They expect each region and forest to become actively engaged with their stakeholders and prepare them to participate in risk-informed decision making meetings to become prepared for the fire season. This was not evident on these forests.

The objectives for the Barry Point Fire were clouded by requirements and processes, making leader's intent unclear.

Leaders Intent was stressed very often on the *Barry Point Fire*. Firefighter and public safety was stressed as the primary objective. The safety record was impeccable on the fire, but there were values placed over safety in some instances, such as the camp location.



Lessons Learned Observations and Recommendations

National Priority

1. Communicate Leaders Intent in delegations and briefings and ensure it is more focused on objectives and does not include numerous process requirements that cloud the issues and values at risk to be protected. Discussions should occur between leadership and personnel to ensure forest priorities and mission are understood. Ensure that every firefighter understands their mission and can articulate their mission to anyone.
2. Clear and open dialogue should occur with stakeholders and neighboring community members to identify values and discuss suppression action consequences.
3. Decisions and rational should be well documented by **ALL** fire personnel. It's important to capture who, when, where, **why** and how decisions were made to depict the process and outcome.
4. The Wildland Fire Decision Support System (WFDSS) is intended to assist in the strategic decision process, however due to a lack of thorough understanding and familiarity with the system it is considered by many to be cumbersome with questionable value added to the firefighting effort. End users need to be better educated or provided a better explanation on intent and use of the program to understand its value.

Regional & Local Priority

1. Rapidly escalating incidents and response time for IMT mobilization require a forward-looking strategy for complexity analysis and team ordering to minimize the number of team transitions.
2. Engage and utilize the local knowledge of landowners and permittees when identifying strategies and setting tactics.
3. Roles and responsibilities of all cooperators locally should be clearly identified through pre-season planning, exercises and include the development of Evacuation and Structure Protection Plans.
4. Explore better methods of identifying landowners and securing contact information so contacts can be made timely when a fire does occur.
5. Unified Command should be implemented to assure resource coordination and address differing management strategies of the cooperators to improve efficiency and is highly suggested when multiple jurisdictions are involved.



Enclosure: Background Information and Fire History

Background

The Barry Point Fire (OR-FWF-120680) was ignited by lightning on Sunday evening August 5, 2012, and was declared 100% contained on August 27, 2012, after burning approximately 92,977 acres in Oregon and California on the Fremont-Winema and Modoc National Forests. Approximately one-third of the acreage burned by the fire was on privately owned land. The rapid growth of the fire in acres and complexity led to multiple transitions of Incident Management Teams (IMT). The fire was aggressively attacked and then managed by a Type 3 IMT, but rapidly progressed in complexity to a Type 2 IMT. The Type 2 IMT was augmented by a National Incident Management Organization (NIMO) team, and then relieved by a Type 1 IMT. The rapid growth in complexity and size and the presence of intermingled homes, private ranches, and timberlands within the fire area resulted in damage to private land, improvements, and resources; and spawned local controversy over how the fire was fought and managed.

Incident Management Transitions:

Day	Date	Command	Actions
1	Aug 6, 2012	Initial Attack	IMT T3 ordered
2	Aug 7, 2012	Extended Attack	IMT T2 ordered
3	Aug 8, 2012	IMT T3	
4	Aug 9, 2012	IMT T2	
5	Aug 10, 2012	IMT T2	NIMO ordered
6	Aug 11, 2012	IMT T2	
7	Aug 12, 2012	NIMO/IMT T2	NIMO assumed command 1800
8	Aug 13, 2012	NIMO/IMT T2	IMT T1 ordered
9	Aug 14, 2012	NIMO/IMT T2	
10 - 19	Aug 15-24, 2012	IMT T1	
20 - 21	Aug 25-26, 2012	NIMO/T3	
22	Aug 27, 2013	IMT T3	

Fire Environment:

On August 5, 2012, a weather system moved through southern Oregon and northern California, with lightning strikes occurring from 9:00 a.m. until 11:00 p.m. The Lakeview Interagency Fire Center (LIFC) in Lakeview, Oregon, activated their lightning plan.



Lightning detection data showed several strikes in the Barry Point area around the fire's point of origin. Several fires were detected from this storm and previous storms. By 9:00 a.m. on August 6, 2012, there were five (5) active fires identified on the LIFC zone and more fires on the Forest and Oregon Department of Forestry (ODF) District. At the time the fire started, the Pacific Northwest Region was at Preparedness Level (PL) 3 and the Nation was at PL4.

Environmental factors and fire behavior experienced throughout the Barry Point Fire resulted in high resistance to control and presented management challenges from initial attack through multiple IMT transitions.

Fire behavior on the Barry Point Fire from the day of initial attack on August 6-9, 2012, was influenced by heavy fuel loadings, remote access, warm temperatures in the 85 to 90 degree range, low relative humidity, gusty winds from the west-southwest up to about 10 m.p.h., and unstable atmospheric conditions as reflected by the Haines Index at levels 5-6. These conditions produced high intensity fire generally from mid to late morning with torching, crowning, and spotting up to one (1) mile. Fire spread was generally to the northeast due to prevailing winds, which is typical of most fires on the Fremont-Winema National Forest; however, a change in wind direction pushed the fire to the south, burning the east face of Dog Mountain and pushing the fire across the Dog Lake Road. Most firefighters with past fire experience in this area reported that they expected the fire to continue spreading to the northeast.

From August 10-14, 2012, the fire experienced changes in wind direction with winds varying from night to day. During nighttime, wind direction was predominantly from the northeast to east, and this changed the direction of fire spread to the south during the night. During each afternoon the wind direction was generally from the southwest to west up through August 13, 2012, and then it blew from the northwest on August 14. Sustained wind speeds were generally less than 10 m.p.h. with gusts up to 15 m.p.h. The Haines Index was at level 5 except on August 12, 2012, when it reached level 6. The nighttime winds from the north and the resulting fire spread to the south over a several day period was not typical of fires in this area. The increased rate of fire spread observed during nighttime hours was not expected based on past experience in the area.

On August 15, 2012, the fire continued to make significant growth to the south further into California on the Modoc National Forest. Weather conditions changed and on August 18, 2012, light moisture fell over the area. Afterward, more normal weather conditions with cooler temperatures, higher relative humidity and a more stable air mass settled over the area.



The Fire History – Key Fire Events:

Critical Values at Risk:

Values at risk in the fire area as identified by the Forest Service and Oregon Department of Forestry agency administrators included homes and businesses; public and private timber (including active logging operations); public and private grazing (forage) and ranch lands (including infrastructure; e.g., fences and corrals); transmission lines; communication sites; recreation sites; and the Ruby pipeline. Resource values at risk, such as wildlife habitat; threatened, endangered and sensitive species and habitat; watershed values; culture resources; aesthetics; etc. were also identified. Other values include sentimental and spiritual values attached to the land and resources derived from a long legacy in the area by families, and the desire to leave that legacy to their future generations. This value was expressed universally and at times very passionately by the local landowners interviewed in an independent review.

There are at least six (6) grazing permittees and 38 land owners in Oregon that were directly affected, with property in or adjacent to the fire perimeter. At least 24 of these permittees and land owners had losses or damage as a result of the fire or due to suppression activities. At least two residences were within the fire perimeter. No residences were lost, but several were threatened and required structure protection. Private economic losses included livestock (including loss, injury and death of animals, and loss of weight), forage, fences and corrals, and timber. Additional property was affected in California.

