

Incident #187

The events described below occurred on the Prairie City Ranger District-Malheur National Forest, in the midst of fire season in the middle of August 2013. Justin Mund (Part II) and Rick Snodgrass (Part I and III) were Incident Commanders during this time.

Part I: (Snodgrass)

In the afternoon of August 9, 2013, a crew member and I arrived on incident 187. The fire was approximately .25 acres in size with a lightning struck snag as the point of origin, located amongst an old burn filled with multiple other snags and ceanothus patches. With the fire being located within the Strawberry Mountain Wilderness, I check with dispatch on the approval of chainsaw use. The response I was given was that “the approval was in the works; however chainsaw use in the event of an emergency was approved”. My Initial thought was that I needed to get the burning snags on the ground, not only for safety considerations, but for containment reasons.

The main carrier of the fire was heavy dead and downed snags intertwined within the ceanothus brush. Considering the amount of fuel on the ground and not having the ability to use a chainsaw to cut and remove it, I requested a handcrew. Due to the heavy fire load on the forest, resources were thin, but I was given a squad. With a squad of five and engine crew of two, we managed to cut a fuel break and put in a containment line with hand tools. Just about the time we were wrapping things up on the containment line, winds began to increase and snags began to sway. I was already uneasy about having exposed personnel to the danger of nearby burning snags and decided it was time to leave the fire location until the next day.



Part II: (Mund)

On August 10th, 2013, my two seasonal fire fighters and I hiked into Inc. #187 that morning to continue attack and suppress the fire. There was a transfer of commander from ICT5 Snodgrass to ICT4 Mund done the evening of the 9th. Snodgrass had prior commitments so I took the incident.

Upon arrival of the incident, I gathered my intel as needed for safety and suppression purposes. Fire activity was very minimal with some burning heavy fuels and smoldering litter. Spread potential was very low. There were several snags in the area (roughly 80/ac). The fire was located in the old High Roberts fire that occurred in 2002. There were several snags already on the ground and several still standing. There were three snags within the burn that had fire in them but burned out. Those snags (roughly 20'-40' in height) were sound and were not much of a threat to our safety. One particular snag that was roughly 80'-100' tall, had fire in the upper 2/3's of the bole. The fire had chewed 60% of the "meat" from the tree and was hard to judge its stability. The tree needed to come down to be able to control the fire.

Through my training and experience, I started to assess the condition of the tree to determine how this tree was going to come down. Using my falling axe, I hit one side where my holding wood would be. The head sank in over an inch into the bole, same on the opposite side. This told me there was substantial rot at the base of the tree. I also noticed small piles of sawdust on the ground around the base of the tree and this told me ants were present inside the tree.

A couple weeks prior to this incident, a contract faller from Central Oregon was killed in a tree falling accident where the top of a burning tree came out striking him and his partner while beginning felling operations. This was present in the back of my mind and reminded me of my current situation.

Lance Honda was the safety officer in central Oregon around that same time and he gave a safety briefing to us one morning for the Browns Creek Fire out of La Pine. He said "Every fire will eventually go out, but not every fire fighter goes home."

I thought about this for a moment and decided that this tree will come down, but not by my hand today. There were too many variables working against me in that situation so I walked away from the tree. My crew steered clear of the tree and we mopped up where we could without being within that tree's danger zone.

Part III: (Snodgrass)

After letting the snags burn for five days, my crew and I hiked in to check on the incidents status. The fire had crept outside of its containment lines due to the tops of the burning snags dropping outside the lines. The fire crept only a short distance and burned out. One burning snag (Subalpine fir approx. 30" DBH) still remained and still was too hazardous to fall.

On August 19th, we made our way back into the incident. This time we found the top of the lone burning snag had fell, but a 20ft portion remained. I cut the remaining portion down and we extinguished it. The incident was finally controlled and soon after out.

I learned two important lessons from Incident 187. One having chainsaw approval when you request it, rather than a day later can make a difference between a hazardous tree and a tree too hazardous to fall. Second, I'm not going to make the same mistake of exposing personnel to working around burning snags just to contain a fire, I'll search for another alternative to get the job done.