

July 16, 2004

Name of Incident: Mataguay

Type of Incident: Wildland Fire

Location: Northeastern San Diego County (Monte Vista Ranger Unit CDF)

Date: July 13, 2004

Circumstances:

One firefighter of the Palomar Hand Crew (Cleveland National Forest) received a first degree burn to the right side of his face and a small second degree burn to his right elbow while fighting the Mataguay Fire.

There was no direct flame impingement.

The firefighter was engaging in a mobile attack with the Palomar Crew Superintendent in light flashy fuels near the point of origin of the fire. The Superintendent was attempting to “re-anchor” the heel of the fire after the fire had burned through the wet line laid down by a water tender. The rest of the crew was not engaged in the mobile attack.

The firefighter recognized that he had taken some heat and backed away from the fire. The Superintendent asked the firefighter how he was and the firefighter said he was fine. The firefighter returned to working with the rest of the Palomar crew.

Later, after the firefighter rejoined the rest of the crew, one of the Crew Captains overheard him ask for some burn ointment and started questioning and evaluating the firefighter. Both Crew Captains agreed the firefighter should be looked at by the medics. An ambulance was requested as no medical unit had been established at the fire. The medics felt the burn was minor, but thought as a precaution it would be best if he was seen by a doctor. The decision was left to the Forest Service. The Forest Service Agency Rep agreed that the firefighter should be seen by a doctor. He contacted the Forest Safety Officer, who was assisting with chief officer coverage for the Palomar Ranger District, if he could meet him and take the firefighter to the hospital for evaluation and treatment. The Forest Safety Officer transported the firefighter to Rancho Springs Hospital emergency room. The firefighter was diagnosed by the doctor, treated, and immediately released to full duty.

Findings:

- The Superintendent and firefighter were conducting safe, aggressive suppression actions.

- When the firefighter realized that he was taking too much heat he prudently backed away.
- The burn to the elbow was very small – about the size of an eraser tip.
- The burn was caused by the elbow coming in direct contact with the fire shirt.
- There was no direct flame impingement.
- The firefighter was wearing all required PPE.
- The incident, as far as medical considerations, was very minor. The doctor treated and immediately released the firefighter to full duty.
- The Palomar crew overhead and the Agency Rep made the correct decision ensuring that the firefighter was diagnosed and treated properly by a doctor.

Recommendations:

- All Cleveland NF fire crew overhead (engines, hotshots, and helitack) and fire management need to further stress the effects of radiant heat. Specifically situational awareness when experiencing extended periods of time in high heat environments. As a reminder, two Cleveland NF firefighters received radiant heat burns (1st and 2nd degree) in early 2003 while participating in prescribed fire operations. The burns were a result of the firefighters standing too close to the fire and being exposed to radiant heat for a prolonged period of time. The topic of radiant heat exposure was discussed in AARs during readiness inspections conducted in June throughout the Cleveland.
- Review JHA's and firefighting protocols.
- Cleveland Fire Management has made some clarifications to its notification procedures. Specifically, to make certain the information is accurate before it is transmitted.