

REPLY TO: 6700/5130

8/30/88

SUBJECT: Safety Incident, Moose Creek Complex, 8/28/88

TO: Forest Supervisor, NezPerce National Forest
thru Incident Commander

Enclosed is the Incident Report of a fire shelter deployment. The incident occurred on August 28, 1988, on the Footstool Branch of the Moose Creek Complex.

INCIDENT BRIEF:

At approximately 1406 hours, fifteen crewmembers of the Apply Valley Helitac Crew broke out their fire shelters while trapped by fire in a safety zone. The crew was working on a large spot fire north of the main fire of the Footstool Branch. The situation was not life threatening at any time, but the possibility existed for approximately two hours. The crew recognized the developing danger, took precautionary measures, followed safe practices and procedures prior to and during the incident. Crewmembers sat or stood with their shelters faced toward the heat and smoke as it approached their safety zone from different directions. The foreman and squad leaders removed their shelters from their cases, but did not use them. Most of the crew experienced some smoke irritation. No injuries occurred during the incident. The crew reviewed the incident and returned to fire line duties on the following day.

INCIDENT SUMMARY:

On August 28 thirteen members of the Apply Valley Helitac Crew were assigned to contain a spot fire north of the main fire on the Footstool Branch (the remaining five crewmembers were assigned to helicopter support duties). The crew had constructed and burned out an indirect line along the east flank of the spot fire during the previous shift. The crew's instructions for the 28th were to patrol and hold the east flank and to construct line where needed along the north and west flanks. Their objective was to contain the fire between natural barriers.

The crew was briefed and given instructions at 0900 by the Branch Director and the Division Supervisor. They did not receive a copy of the Shift Plan for 8/28. The crew had patrolled the East flank and scouted the fire earlier that morning. The special fire weather and fire behavior forecasts indicated that fire activity would remain calm on the Footstool Branch throughout the day. East winds of 8-12 mph were predicted for the area. The Footstool Branch was partially sheltered from an easterly wind influence.

At approximately 1100 hours, Foreman Buster Fennessy noticed increasing fire activity within the burned area and along the east flank. He posted lookouts. The Division Supervisor was also acting as lookout from the ridge to the

South. Fennessy requested helicopter bucket drops and lined several sleepovers along the East flank. Fennessy had difficulty establishing radio contact to request helicopters at this time.

At approximately 1320 hours the Division Supervisor observed an increase in fire behavior and advised the crew. They had finished lunch and started to construct line along the north flank, east to west. The crew had planned to use the burned area within the fire perimeter as a safety zone if needed. Fennessy had observed reburning within the fire earlier. He decided to look for a more suitable location near the crew's present location. He located a clearing along the ridge line about 150' east of the helispot. The crew was instructed to proceed to the new safety zone, clear areas for possible shelter deployment, and fire out the perimeter if necessary. During this time Fennessy repeatedly tried to establish radio contact and request a helicopter for area recon of fire activity and possible transportation out of the area. He finally made contact and helicopter 554 arrived at 1406 hours. The helicopter made an aerial recon, but did not land at the helispot due to smokey conditions. Fennessy then directed the crew to remove their shelters from the cases and prepare for deployment if necessary.

At 1415 hours Fennessy directed the squad leaders to burn out the perimeter of the safety zone. The fire had made an upslope run from the north at about 1340 hours. It made additional upslope runs toward the ridge around the safety zone from the southeast and south until about 1540 hours.

The crew posted lookouts, sat or stood in their shelters, told jokes and watched the fire behavior around them.

The Operations Chief requested four air tankers at 1400 to support the crew if needed. They were cancelled at 1430 hours after Fennessy and the Branch Director assured operations that the situation was not life threatening. The crew was transported to Moose Creek Base by helicopter at about 1630 hours.

FINDING AND RECOMMENDATIONS:

The crew followed fire safety practices and procedures prior to and during the incident. They should be commended for their actions.

Prompt radio communications were not maintained at all times. This problem may have prevented the crew from being transported out of the area before it smoked in.

Relatively calm fire behavior was predicted for 8/28 on the Footstool Branch. Indications of active fire behavior occurred around 1100 hours. The crew had four options planned when fire behavior began to become active: 1) go into the burn, 2) walk back to the drop point on main fire, 3) fly out by helicopter, and 4) wait in the safety zone until fire finished making runs on the north and east perimeters. Under the existing conditions, flying out by helicopter earlier would have been the preferred option, staying on top of the situation a little better, and maintaining good communications through the chain of command would have resulted in exercising this option.

Enclosures:

1. Map of incident scene, and Footstool Branch.
2. Foreman Fennessy's account of the incident.
3. Branch and Division Unit Logs and statements.
4. Weather and fire behavior forecasts and safety message.

DAN SWEARINGIN
Incident Safety Officer

