

Rapid Lesson Sharing

Event Type: Firefighter Search and Rescue
Date: August 11, 2014
Location: Lost Ridge Fire



“At what point do you call for Search and Rescue?”

Incident Commander

NARRATIVE

This August 11, two militia firefighters from the local District became disoriented regarding their location while conducting an evacuation of trails and campsites being threatened by the nearby Lost Ridge Fire. Through calm thinking, coordination and teamwork, the two were able to make it out of the backcountry without incident.

The plan to evacuate the public from trails and lakes had firefighters leaving from multiple trailheads and hiking trails to numerous lakes. The IC and an Engine Crew Firefighter (ENGFF) from the local District took a trail leading to one of the lakes. At the same time, two recreation staff firefighters (RECFF) who were working in the area and have normal job duties consisting of front-country recreation responsibilities, took another trail leading to two other lakes.

While both RECFFs had minimal fire experience, they possessed enough general backcountry experience to not be considered unskilled.

“If we would have taken an extra five minutes to make sure we had at least a map with us, this would have never happened.”

Recreation Staff Firefighter

One of the RECFF’s first tasks was to make the transition from their recreation duties to firefighting. As standard practice, the two RECFF’s daypacks were always filled with equipment that would be necessary for most given situations and be sufficient in case of unforeseen circumstances. Because of their new mission, the daypacks were left behind and replaced by their firefighting line gear—which would ensure that they had their fire shelters. Some key items not in the line gear that were later deemed important included: a map, GPS, headlamps, and warm-weather clothing. One individual carried a quart of water, while the other carried three quarts.

RECFFs Become “Turned Around”

As the two groups of firefighters began their hikes, the local engine, with the Engine Captain and additional firefighters, staged at a location that offered views of the fire and acted as field observers. At 1330, the RECFFs arrived at the first lake (L1). They radioed the IC to check in and then continued on to the second lake. As they continued, the trail signs were unclear and disorienting. Being unfamiliar with the trails, they decided to continue hiking, following the directions they felt were correct. They tried to radio the IC and ask for assistance, but radio communication was spotty and difficult.

“Good decisions are made from experience but experience is gained from bad decisions.”

Engine Crew Firefighter

“None of what they were saying about their location was jiving. And the more we communicated, the less it was making since.”

Engine Crew Firefighter

They arrived at what they thought was another trail junction and were able to establish enough radio communication to relay to the IC that they were “turned around” and needed directions. The IC—thinking they were in a certain location—instructed them to go down a trail and “keep the sun at your left”. This would connect them to a trail that would bring them out to a trailhead to be picked up. The IC also established a check-in time with them every 20 minutes.

The RECFFs continued down this trail, but it still didn’t seem correct. They stopped. Having thought that they might have missed a turn in the trail, they turned around and went back the way they came. They made a few more trips back and forth along this section of the trail—with no change to their situation.

911 Dispatch Pings Their Cell Phone for Lat/Long Coordinates

At 2030, sunset was quickly approaching. The IC decided that the two RECFFs needed to stop moving and “hunker” in place. The RECFFs decided to hike up to the ridge, thinking this would be a good place to spend the night. Once on top of this ridge, they discovered that they had cell coverage and were able to make a few calls out. One of the RECFFs called his father to let him know that he was not going to be home that night—and to not worry. The father, who happened to be visiting the local police station, advised his son to call the 911 Dispatch, explain their situation, and ask them to “ping” their cell phone for Lat/Long coordinates.

His son did so. The Lat/Long was passed along to the Forest Dispatch who converted it and radioed it to the IC. The 911 Dispatcher also asked the two RECFFs if they needed further assistance and if Search and Rescue should be notified. The RECFFs replied that they didn’t need any more assistance at that time.

RECFF has Prior Medical Condition

After the IC received the Lat/Long from Forest Dispatch, he decided that he would hike into the RECFFs, bring them supplies, and guide them out. One of the IC’s key concerns was knowing that the RECFFs would most likely spend the night out there without drinking water. Compounding this situation, he knew that one of the RECFFs had a prior medical condition that required being continually hydrated. If this person wasn’t able to consume enough water, it could result in serious complications.

Two ENGFFs, who had been with the IC throughout this event, volunteered to take the necessary supplies into the RECFFs. The ENGFFs—knowing they would stay the night—took enough gear to ensure that all four firefighters would be comfortable until morning. The motivation for the ENGFF’s was to ensure the well-being of the RECFFs and to address their fellow firefighter’s medical concerns by providing the much-needed water.

“I knew they were coming to get us that night or even the next morning, I was more focused on what I need to do to keep going.”

Recreation Staff Firefighter

If this person (one of the Recreation Staff Firefighters) wasn’t able to consume enough water, it could result in serious complications.

Two ENGFFs Depart Trailhead to Locate the Two RECFFs

At 2220, the two ENGFFs departed the trailhead with the supplies. They were instructed to check in with the IC every 30 minutes. To arrive near the coordinates that they had for the RECFFs, the ENGFFs faced a six- to seven-mile hike—carrying approximately 70-pound packs. At 0240, after a long trek through the dark, the ENGFFs arrived within one mile of where the coordinates indicated the RECFFs should be located. They made contact with one another over the radio and began using “hooting” calls to narrow their search. The rough terrain and thick forest made this process difficult.

Finally, after an hour, the ENGFFs were able to meet up with the RECFFs. All four firefighters then bedded down for the night. At 0830 the next morning, they packed up their camp and hiked out to the trailhead where the IC and remaining Engine Crew were waiting.

“The Forest Service, as a whole, has a lot of people with minimal backcountry experience. You don’t just leave coworkers lost in the woods. Knowing we were coming helped keep them calm.”

Engine Crew Firefighter

LESSONS

- ✓ At a minimum, have: a map of the area you are working in. A compass and GPS along with a map would be even better.
- ✓ Always be prepared for the unexpected.
- ✓ Allow an extra five minutes to plan for your assignment and discuss the “what if?” factors.
- ✓ Your fire gear needs to be set up to support you overnight—with food, water and some form of shelter (space blanket, tarp)—even if your plan is *not* to stay the night.
- ✓ Use “Spot” locators even on fire assignments that are “off the beaten path”.
- ✓ All personnel with medical conditions need to make sure that they have double their medications at all times, especially when doing backcountry work.
- ✓ Keep the communications link open with all levels of District management (District Ranger, Fire Staff, employee’s supervisor) throughout the incident.
- ✓ On this incident, having a higher level of “First Aid” (Wilderness First Responder) to assess the medical needs of the employees once they were located put all parties involved a little more at ease.
- ✓ Once the search was initiated, the Engine Captain used his “smartphone” apps to track weather (live radar) and give updates to all parties involved.

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✓ Use “smartphone” locator apps to get Latitude and Longitude or have emergency (911) dispatch center “ping” the cell phone for Lat/long. These apps and/or “ping” will be able to narrow the location down to a half mile area.

✓ Relying on “smartphones apps”, spotty cell service, low batteries and the simple fact of how much ground can be covered between location updates makes these “apps” no substitute for having experience and being properly prepared for the backcountry.

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With support from the Pacific Northwest
Wildfire Coordinating Group



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