Rapid Lesson Sharing

Event Type: Road/Egress Blockage

Date: September 10, 2017

Location: Uno Fire, Washington

How Do You Adjust Your Plan When Your Egress has been Effectively Blocked?

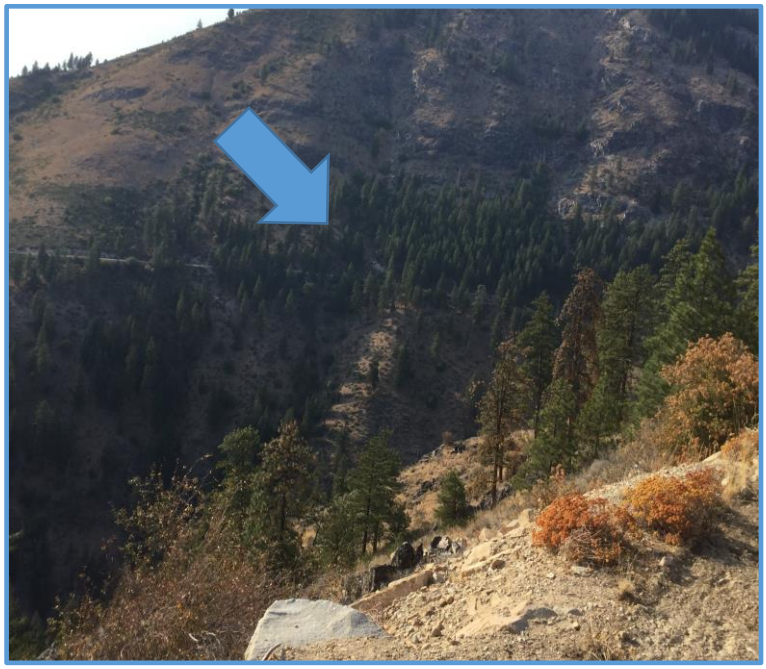
NARRATIVE

The Uno Peak Fire is a 8,700-plus acre fire located on the Okanogan-Wenatchee National Forest on the North Shore of Lake Chelan on the edge of the Lake Chelan-Sawtooth Wilderness.

Access to this fire consists of 25 miles of steep, rugged Forest road (the Grade Creek Road 8200) framed by steep, brushy cut-banks on one side and intermittent cliffs on the other—with few pull outs.

The bulk of the road is only passable for one vehicle at a time. The road near Nelson Ridge is too steep and out-sloped to be accessible for water tenders.

The road continues on up the hill and eventually ties into Gold Creek Road and the Grade Creek Road. Both of these roads lead back to pavement and to the Incident Command Post.



Example of the steep topography along the Grade Creek Road. Blue arrow approximates where the excavator was blocking the road across the canyon in the timber.

The road that was near Nelson Ridge was inaccessible to the water tenders and therefore could not be maintained with any reliability. The lower access of Grade Creek Road was determined to be the primary ingress and egress for the south side of the fire.

Masticators, graders and water tenders were used to help improve and maintain this lower portion of the Grade Creek Road. In addition, a dedicated radio channel and mile marker signs were also used to help improve the driving safety on this road. Driving safety was routinely identified as one of the major hazards during this fire's Safety Message and Division Breakouts.

Masticator Breaks Down – Blocks Primary Egress from the Fire

Initially, tactics did not require any of the heavy equipment—aside from the dozers and tenders—to be closer to the primary fire lines. On September 10, the decision was made to move the three masticators closer to the fire to aid in road brushing and line preparation.

One of these masticators was a wheeled unit. The other two were masticator heads mounted on tracked excavators, making them significantly slower to walk on the lengthy road. This rate of speed for the equipment was one of the initial factors in the decision to keep the excavators farther from the fire's edge.

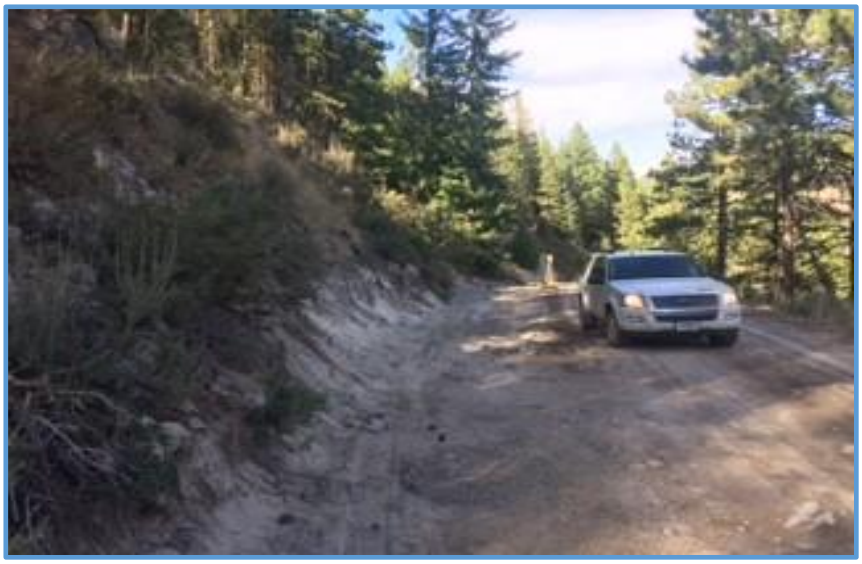
At approximately 1630, while walking the equipment closer to the fire, the larger of the two excavators had an equipment failure. The operator was unable to move the machine—that was now blocking the primary egress from the fire.

Example of how an excavator with masticator can effectively block a narrow road. (This is not the excavator from this incident.)

The Group Supervisor and Safety Officer were promptly notified of this situation. As the operator and mechanics attempted to get the excavator running again, it was determined that the cut-bank could be dug out and the road widened sufficiently for a standard-sized pick-up to be able to pass by. The next morning, this area was widened even more, allowing Interagency Hotshot Crew vehicles and tenders to pass by. Approval to do this was granted and a back-hoe was utilized for this operation.

Yet Another Truck Breakdown Blocks Road

Meanwhile, farther to west on this same road, a truck pulling a trailer with a UTV also broke down—blocking the road north of the DIV G/DIV R break. This new breakdown was blocking-in three water tenders, an Interagency Hotshot Crew, and a Corrections Crew between the two road blocks.



The vehicle is parked where the broken excavator located. Notice the narrow shoulder to the right and the improved detour to the left.

This new breakdown/road block was dealt with quickly. The truck and trailer were pulled off to the side of the road, allowing the two crews and their vehicles to pass by and use the alternate egress. The water tenders, however, were not able to navigate the upper road and had to be left on the Grade Creek Road for the night while their operators were shuttled back to the Incident Command Post by pickup truck.

All resources were able to safely return to the Incident Command Post that night. The weather and fire behavior remained fairly benign to help make this less of a hurried exercise.

It was determined that the excavator needed a new fuel pump to become functional again. The operators were able to obtain the part the next day, fixing the piece of equipment within 24 hours of the initial breakdown.

LESSONS

- When possible, endeavor to have as many routes to and from the fire line should one become compromised.
- Recognize the travel limitations of different types of heavy equipment and try to identify action points and egress times during the planning phases of fire line operations.
- Consider limiting support equipment use during periods of high potential for increased fire behavior, especially regarding areas with difficult or limited ingress/egress.

Critical Thinking Questions

These are not contributing factors to this incident. Rather, these questions are intended to help start a dialogue to promote and foster learning.

- When situations arise where ingress, egress and safety zones are limited, are we thinking enough about worst-case scenarios?
- Should we commit resources in an area where the failure of one of the resources could prevent the rest of assigned personnel from utilizing their escape route?
- Are there alternatives to directly engaging the fire, or is this the only/best option?
- Do we need to be grouping equipment so that in the event of a road block situation, one could move the other?

This RLS Submitted By
the Region 6 RLS Team –
with support from the Pacific Northwest Wildfire Coordinating Group.

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