Rapid Lesson Sharing

Event Type: Retardant Drops Protect Vehicle

Date: Aug. 21, 2016

Location: Cherry Road Fire, Oregon

Local BLM engines at the bottom of drainage below the location of the disabled vehicle.

"Looking at the smoke, it looks like she's getting pretty angry."

BLM Engine Captain

NARRATIVE

Early afternoon on Sunday, Aug. 21, Vale Dispatch received a call from a Malheur County Sheriff's Deputy reporting a 10-15 acre fire on top of the Cherry Creek drainage. Air Attack was dispatched at 1320. He immediately ordered multiple air resources. The initial attack Incident Commander and ground resources, including Task Force 1 (TF1), arrived about an hour later. The IC estimated the fire at 200 acres, burning in cheat grass and brush, with an active flame front on all sides and gusts out of the SSW at 10-15 mph.

Air Attack guided the resources into the fire, but access was slow and difficult due to extremely rocky, dusty roads and steep slopes. Local Bureau of Land Management resources that were more familiar and comfortable with driving on the roads arrived at the heel of the fire in the bottom of the drainage and were trying to establish an anchor point.

Task Force 1 had difficulties early on, with one engine breaking down due to an axle issue. When the remaining Task Force arrived at the top of the drainage, they held up while the Task Force Leader (TFLD) gained some situational awareness.

Local Engine Captains confirmed that from the top of the drainage the fire looked closer than it was. When the Captains asked the IC about access they were told that it was a fairly steep road with one hairpin turn—that the tactical tender had trouble getting around.

One local Engine Captain informed: *"From the top, looking at the smoke, it looked like she (the fire) was getting pretty angry. But the road was everything the IC described. It looks bad from the top, but once you move down the road, you realize the road peels away from the fire. I'm sure from up there, seeing that smoke boiling up, it looks like you're heading into a box canyon with light flashy fuels."*

Fuels and Fire Behavior Advisory

On Aug. 18, three days prior to the Cherry Road Fire, Predictive Services issued a "Fuels and Fire Behavior Advisory" for the Great Basin, including southeast Oregon. The advisory warned of a potential for extreme fire behavior due to low fuel moistures, heavy fine fuel (grass) loading, and prolonged dry weather. Areas with sagebrush and a heavy grass fuel load were reported to be at the greatest risk, with sustained winds greater than 20 mph.

http://www.predictiveservices.nifc.gov/fuels_fire-danger/GB_Fuels_and_Fire_Behavior_Advisory_08182016.pdf

Weather for the Owyhee Mountains Dispatch Zone called for sunny with a high of 84 degrees; low relative humidity of 7 percent; Haines of 5; winds less than 8, becoming 8-10 in the afternoon. Dispatch advised resources that a cold front was expected to pass sometime between 2100 and 2200 on Aug. 21 that would increase wind gusts to 20-25 mph.

Both Engine and TFLD Vehicles Have Tire Issues

Once assured that they could safely proceed, TF1 began slowly moving down the steep, rocky road toward the heel of the fire. Right away, one engine blew a tire. The TFLD advised that engine to return to the top and find a safe place to change the tire.

Before the Task Force was halfway down, the passenger side rear tire on the TFLD's rental vehicle sustained a three-inch gash in the sidewall. The TFLD was able to pull the vehicle off the narrow two track road to let a second local engine (not part of the Task Force) pass to proceed to the bottom of the drainage.

The TFLD reported the flat tire to the IC, who responded back to monitor the fire while dealing with the issue. Air Attack said that the Task Force was safe for now.

The TFLD and crew members attempted to change the tire, but being unfamiliar with the rental vehicle, they could not find the key to access the spare tire. Because he needed the resources, the IC asked if the TFLD could *"limp the vehicle down."* The TFLD replied *"No"* because the vehicle was already riding on the rim.

Task Force 1 and other resources fire out around the safety zone as the main fire approaches.

TFLD Abandons Vehicle; SEAT Drops Retardant to Help Protect It

From the TFLD's limited vantage point along the two track, it appeared that the fire activity was picking up. The TFLD reported to the IC that the safest course of action was to leave the disabled vehicle, get in with one of the engines, and return to the top of the ridge with the rest of the Task Force.

Air Attack was informed that the vehicle was vacated and to protect it if possible. Air Attack then directed eight SEAT loads of retardant along the road and below the vehicle.

Shortly after TF1 arrived at the top of the ridge, the IC reported to Dispatch that fire was 2,000 acres and was moving to the top of the ridge *"where the fire will really start moving."* He reported winds at 8-10 mph with gusts of 15-20 mph. A dozer that arrived at the ridge with TF1 began making a safety zone for nine vehicles. Once the safety zone was finished and the fire crested the top of the ridge, crews fired out around the safety zone.

Once the main fire had passed, TF1 and the other resources reengaged the fire. A few hours later, an engine returned with the TFLD to retrieve the disabled vehicle. They changed the tire and drove the undamaged vehicle back to the top.

Far Left – Rental vehicle tire not intended for off-road use.

Near Left – Vale BLM Engine tire showing severe damage that occurred on the Cherry Road Fire.

LESSONS

- ✓ Use the right tool for the job.
  - ❖ Rental vehicles that are equipped with highway-grade tires are not appropriate for wildland fire assignments, especially in the type of terrain represented on the Cherry Road Fire.
  - ❖ Allow contingencies for equipment failures in difficult terrain.
- ✓ Know your equipment. Take the time to learn the location, function, and accessibility of the safety features.
  - ❖ Using equipment that you are unfamiliar with can lead to delays when quick action is paramount to safety.
  - ❖ This vehicle's spare tire key is hidden in the key fob.
- ✓ Be aware of any fuels and fire behavior advisories regarding conditions that would lead to extreme fire behavior.
- ✓ Provide comprehensive briefings for out-of-area resources, including standard practices unique to the local area.
  - ❖ Consider assigning a local resource to work with out-of-area resources.
  - ❖ Consider highlighting different suppression tactics that others may not be familiar with.
- ✓ Understand that outside resources may not be familiar or comfortable with local tactics.
  - ❖ Recognize that outside resources may turn down a tactical assignment.

This RLS was submitted by:

Daniel Preston, Craig Glazier, and Traci Weaver

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