

# Rapid Lesson Sharing

**Event Type:** Tractor Plow Burnover

**Date:** May 7, 2017

**Location:** West Mims Fire, Georgia

***This wind shift caused the flanking fire to become a head fire—which was now moving toward the stuck tractor plow.***

## NARRATIVE

On May 7 at approximately 1640 EDT, a burnover of a tractor plow unit occurred on the southern flank of the West Mims Fire, located about eight miles west of St. George, Georgia.

At the time of the incident, the tractor plow was working with two other tractor plows. Winds were out of the west-northwest. The tractors were therefore operating on a hot flank of the fire.

At 1630 hours, the Type 1 Operations Section Chief (OSC1), who was supervising the operations, observed that the fire intensity was beginning to escalate to the point that any further efforts at control were futile and were exposing firefighters to unacceptable levels of risk. The OSC1 made the announcement on the radio that all forces should begin a withdrawal back to the road (an established safety zone). This notification was forwarded to the tractor plows through a Strike Team Leader.

Almost immediately after this announcement, a call was heard over the radio that a tractor plow unit was stuck on a stump.

By this time, the wind had shifted (from 304 degrees to 338 degrees with gusts up to 15 mph, according to the nearby Eddy Tower RAWS). This wind shift caused the flanking fire to become a head fire—which was now moving toward the stuck tractor plow.

### **Incident Within an Incident is Declared**

The tractor plow operator exited the machine and utilized a fire extinguisher to try to put out spot fires which were starting to threaten his machine. He then walked down the line he had just constructed back to the road to retrieve another fire extinguisher. When he attempted to return to his machine he was stopped by his Strike Team Leader because the fire had become well established, making the return trip unsafe.



**This tractor plow unit shown stuck on stump just as a wind shift caused the flanking fire to become a head fire—which was now moving toward this stuck tractor plow.**



**The only damage to the tractor plow was the loss of a tire on the fire plow.**

***As the helicopter cleared the area, a Type 1 Air Tanker constructed a retardant line from the tractor plow back to the road to which all forces had withdrawn.***

At this time, radio communications were confusing. It was not clear to the overhead if the tractor plow operator was still with the machine.

An Incident Within an Incident was declared. Notifications were made throughout the Incident Management Team. Safety, Medical, and EMTs began to converge on OSC1's location.

The OSC1 contacted Air Attack and asked if a visual could be established on the stuck tractor plow. This occurred and Air Attack immediately requested water and retardant be placed on the tractor plow. A Type 1 Helicopter responded and dropped a full load of water on the stuck machine. As the helicopter cleared the area, a Type 1 Air Tanker constructed a retardant line from the tractor plow back to the road to which all forces had withdrawn.

#### **Tractor Plow Operator's Safety is Confirmed**

It was determined that the tractor plow operator was indeed safe. In fact, he was standing among the group who was concerned for his safety. (The tractor plow operator had actually started washing retardant off of his Strike Team Leader's truck). The EMTs determined that the operator had no visible injuries and was not in distress. As a precaution, he was transported to the hospital and released later that day.

Mechanics went to the tractor plow and determined that it was still functional. They then started the machine and drove it back to its transport. The only damage to the tractor plow was the loss of a tire on the fire plow.

The operator was able to load the tractor plow onto his transport and go home for the night.

The next day, the operator and the tractor plow unit returned to the fireline.



**The tractor plow after being driven back out to the road.**

### **LESSONS**

- ✓ Tractor plows working in heavy fuels should keep their blades close to the ground to reduce the chances of getting stuck on stumps.
- ✓ Tractor plow operations during high to extreme fire indices need to be modified to provide for the safety of operators, especially in heavy fuels.
- ✓ In the event of a potential emergency, insure that the radio channel is cleared for emergency traffic only. Insure notifications are made through the Chain of Command when reporting and when the issue has been resolved.
- ✓ Insure the incident Communications Plan is the primary form of communications while obtaining information concerning the incident. Avoid using non-incident channels when communicating to the Chain of Command and surrounding resources.

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**This RLS was submitted by:**  
**Field Personnel on Scene**

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