

Rapid Lesson Sharing

Event Type: Civilian Extraction

Date: September 3, 2022

Location: Wallowa-Whitman National Forest,
Double Creek and Sturgil Fires

Civilian Hiker, Hunter, Horse and Rafter Evacuations on the Double Creek and Sturgil Fires

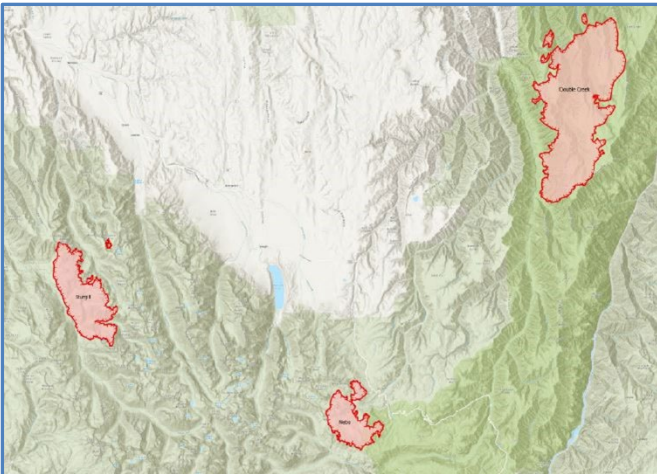
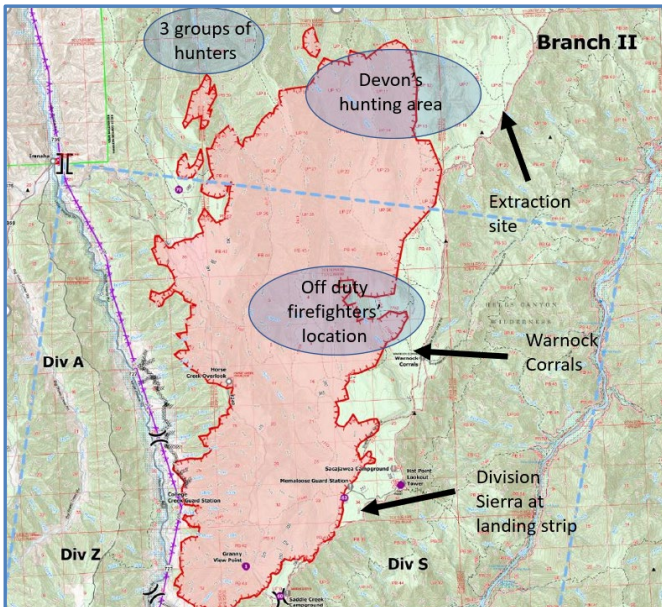


Image depicts fire sizes after significant fire runs occurred on September 3: Sturgil Fire, on left; Nebo Fire, center; and the Double Creek Fire, on right.



Map indicates the locations of the multiple civilian groups. The Double Creek Fire perimeter was drawn the morning of September 4.

Background

By the time bow hunting season opened in Oregon, numerous elk hunters were already camped out in the Blue Mountains around the Hells Canyon Recreation Area, preparing for opening day on Friday, August 26. Many Snake River recreationists were also in the area.

Lightning storms began moving into the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest that bow season opening weekend that started several small fires, particularly around Joseph, Enterprise, and Lostine. This prompted the local Sheriff to start making patrols into the fire-impacted areas to get a better understanding of how many people were in the wilderness areas. He and other law enforcement officers placed flyers on parked vehicles that explained the different evacuation levels and the Sheriff's Office contact information.

Three of these fires—Sturgil, Nebo, and Double Creek—grew to be large incidents. By Wednesday, August 30, they were being managed by two separate Type 3 Incident Management Teams (IMT) from the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest. As these fires grew in complexity, the Forest ordered a Type 1 IMT, the Pacific Northwest Team 2 (PNW2). Members of this IMT began arriving in Joseph on Friday, September 2.

Narrative

The local Sheriff had made contact with several of the recreationists in the area. In addition, PNW2 had made contact with both the Sheriff and the local Fire Management Officer (FMO) and established open lines of communication. PNW2 had also absorbed some of the local fire management. For instance, one of the Type 3 Incident Commanders (IC) became Division Sierra on the PNW2. This proved extremely valuable for sharing tactics and local knowledge as the fires continued to grow.

The IMT Operations Section Chief (Ops) streamlined communication concerning the public by becoming the

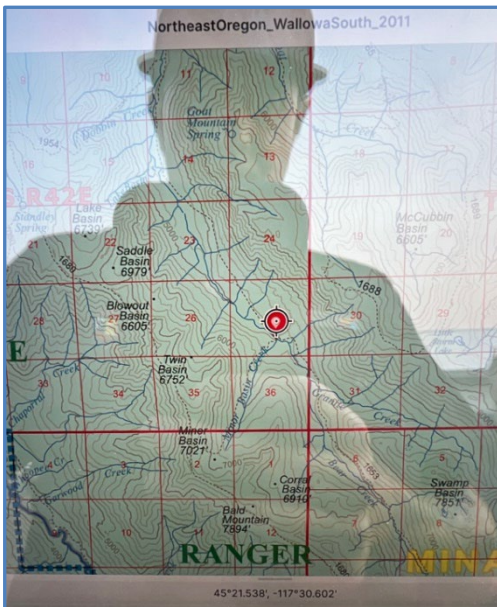
primary point of contact between the IMT and the civilian hunters and hikers who were located in the immediate fire-impacted areas.

The IMT Becomes Concerned About Group #1 – Two Hunters on Horseback

The first group (Group #1) that Ops made contact with were two hunters near the Warnock Corrals on the evening of Friday Sept. 2. A plan was established for them to check-in with him on their satellite phone at noon the next day to allow them to save battery power. However, because of the threatening fire behavior near them, these two hunters made several calls throughout Saturday asking for updates and information.

By mid-morning on Saturday, the two hunters, who were also off-duty local city firefighters, became concerned about the fire activity around them, west of the Warnock Corrals.

Part of their concern grew from the fact that they had their horses with them. They knew getting their trailers out through Hat Point Road would be difficult because the road was being impacted by fire. Although the hunters didn't know it at the time, Division Sierra was located about three miles from them, at the Memaloose Guard Station, which is where the hunters had parked their vehicles.



The red circle indicates the location of the first SPOT signal on the Sturgil Fire.

A SPOT Device is Activated on the Sturgil Fire

Meanwhile, at approximately 1000, a SPOT device (a GPS tracking unit that uses the Globalstar satellite network to notify search and rescue officials in an emergency) was activated on the Sturgil Fire—but it was quickly cancelled. The IMT took note of this SPOT signal's location in case they needed to respond if the device was activated again or further contact was made.

Group #1 –the Two Hunters—Leaves Their Camp

During their morning check-in call, Ops told the hunters that the fire had made a significant run and that their egress, Hat Point Road, had been completely cut off.

Ops told them that Division Sierra was at the Memaloose Guard Station and informed that if they could make it there, he could likely help them egress.

The hunters decided to leave their camp and make the several mile ride on horseback to Warnock Corrals, where they had two trucks and two trailers. They would then attempt to drive to the Memaloose Guard Station where Division Sierra was staged.

Although they were able to make it to Warnock Corrals, due to the fire's encroachment, they could not drive down Hat Point Road. As the day progressed, they realized that they weren't going to be able to get to the Memaloose Guard Station. But they believed they would be able to make it back to Warnock Corrals.

Ethan, a Separate Single Hunter, Checks In with the Sheriff

At about the same time Group #1 was working its way toward Warnock Corrals, a single hunter named Ethan, who was located about 10 miles north of the Hat Point Lookout Tower, began to notice the wind picking up and the smoke blowing toward him—more than it had the previous day.

He had been in contact with the local Sheriff, who was providing him up-to-date information about the fire during the last few days.



This image, taken by the individual hunter, Ethan, shows how close the Double Creek Fire was to him as he hiked to the rim near Mormon Trail.

Since opening day of hunting season on August 26, Ethan had encountered at least two other groups of hunters on horseback and a single hunter on foot. During one of their scheduled check-ins, he relayed this information to the Sheriff.

Ethan had been tracking an elk herd. By mid-morning on September 3, he had successfully called a bull away from the herd. In fact, he was in full-draw with his bow, ready to shoot the bull, when he paused. He suddenly realized that he should check his phone to see if there were any additional texts from the Sheriff about the fire behavior. Ethan recalled, *“I didn’t want to take down the animal if I wouldn’t have had a way to pack it out.”*

The Sheriff had tried to reach him. Ethan immediately called him back. The Sheriff said that the fire had made a significant run, that the road was cut off, and that Ethan should start heading east on foot.

Ethan ran back to his camp and started packing up some of his gear. He left his tent but took two full backpacks and his bow and headed east on foot, following the Sheriff’s instructions.

Ethan could see the fire start to stand up. He thought, *“If the fire gets bad enough, I’ll ditch all of my gear, scramble down the hill, and jump into the Snake River, swim north and get out.”*

The Sheriff made contact with the additional hunters who Ethan had mentioned, as well as other hunters who were located north of this significant fire behavior.

While Ethan was traveling east, he came within one half mile of the fire, which had spread an additional five miles in two hours. He lost cell reception. At approximately 1400, Ethan made it to the top of a rim near Mormon Trail where he was able to contact the Sheriff, who was at the Incident Command Post with Ops. After discussing the fire behavior and Ethan’s location, they determined that he was in danger of becoming entrapped.

The IMT Launches the Short-Haul Ship 8HX to Extract Ethan

The IMT contacted 8HX, the Grand Teton short-haul-ship that was positioned at Baker City, to let them know what was happening with Ethan. They were centrally located between Central Dispatch Zone and La Grande Dispatch Zone, to be able to support the multiple fires in Eastern Oregon.

Once 8HX was dispatched from La Grande Dispatch with Ethan’s coordinates, they began the approximate 10-minute flight to his area. The plan was, if needed, they could set down and configure for short-haul. When they got close to Ethan’s coordinates, they circled a couple times around a meadow at the top of the rim.

The helitack crew spotted “an awkward shape in smoky atmosphere” which turned out to be Ethan wearing camouflauge clothing and multiple backpacks. The crew confirmed to Air Attack that they had eyes on him before they began their low-level recon of the landing zone.

As they landed, one member quickly exited the aircraft to prevent Ethan from running any closer to the helicopter. As the crewmember approached Ethan, he went in for a hug. Ethan recalls, *“I was just*



Image, taken by Ethan, shows 8HX landing at the rim to extract him.

grateful. I was really, really grateful that they were there to get me. I mean, I wasn't terrified. But I was super happy to see them."

The crewmember introduced herself and clearly stated what was going to happen in the next few minutes. She said, *"We have time. You are going to put on this jumpsuit and helmet and I'm going to give you a briefing. When it's time, we are going to walk over to the helicopter."*

The helicopter manager weighed Ethan's gear and loaded it onto 8HX. Ethan remembered thinking that he had "zero worries" at that point because of the crew's calm demeanor and professionalism.



Image taken by one of the two hunters in Group #1 as they were riding to the Warnock Corrals.

Concern Intensifies on Group #1 at the Warnock Corrals

As Ethan was getting rescued off the rim, the IMT became more concerned about the two hunters with their horses at the Warnock Corrals. Ops decided that it was time to send a helicopter for them, too.

The fire's smoke column had folded over onto the Warnock Corrals area, diminishing their visibility. The IMT therefore thought that a better option was to call the National Guard ship out of Boise to perform their rescue. Ops contacted the hunters and said, *"We're sending a helicopter for you."*

Knowing that they would have to leave their horses and being unwilling to do so, the hunters replied, *"You can send the helicopter, but we're not gonna take it. We're not gonna leave our horses."*

Quickly recognizing that the IMT was not going to change the hunters' minds, they consulted the local unit who told them that because fires had gone through the area in the recent past, and because there had been fuels reduction projects located around the Warnock Corrals, the safest place for them was to stay right there.

IMT Receives a Second SPOT Signal from the Sturgil Fire Group #2

While the IMT was monitoring the situation at the Warnock Corrals, the same SPOT device that was activated at approximately 1000 that morning was activated again.

1CV, a Type 3 helicopter from Alaska, was already on a mission to do recon for Branch I and to deliver supplies to firefighters at a remote airstrip. The IMT asked 1CV to recon the area that matched the coordinates for the new SPOT device activation.

Knowing that the Sturgil Fire could make a similar run as the Double Creek Fire had made and that they may need to short-haul someone from that SPOT device location, the IMT also dispatched 8HX and Air Attack. As 1CV approached the SPOT device location area, they could see a tent at the dispatched coordinates—but no people.

After receiving a new "ping" from the SPOT device, 1CV flew north, following the Bear Creek Trail. They could tell that the person or group who had the SPOT device was moving north on this trail

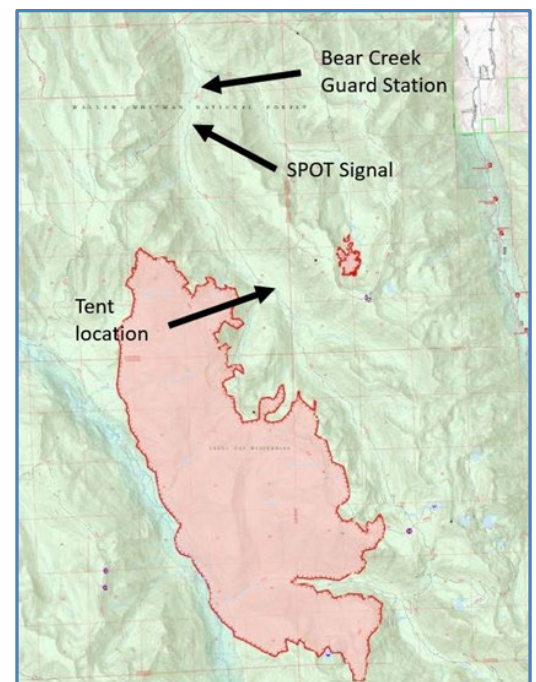


Image shows the tent and SPOT signal locations identified by 1CV on the Sturgil Fire.

toward the Bear Creek Guard Station. 1CV then spotted four people and three horses near the guard station, none of whom appeared to be in distress.

Before 8HX had taken off, they had a conversation about “pumpkin time” (when a helicopter must be back on the ground depending on the official sunset), and how much fuel they needed to carry—considering that they might have to pick up civilians threatened by the fire. 1CV relayed the tent and cabin coordinates to 8HX through dispatch and 1CV landed at the airstrip to complete their supply mission.

8HX launched and began to recon the dispatched area for several minutes. They were unable to see anyone at the given coordinates. They located the tent close to the fire and the cabin at Bear Creek Guard Station. It appeared people were camping near the guard station, but they didn’t see anyone in distress. 8HX therefore determined that the guard station was not in imminent danger from the Sturgil Fire.

The location of the camp, guard station, and the pings from the SPOT device indicated that Group #2 was moving in a safe direction away from the fire. The IMT determined that Group #2 was therefore not in distress and directed 8HX and Air Attack to return to Baker City.



Image taken from Warnock Corrals
the night of September 3.

Meanwhile, Back at the Warnock Corrals

As the Double Creek Fire began to encroach the Warnock Corrals area, the IMT talked the hunters through performing a burnout operation.

The IMT also asked Wildland 27, a fixed-wing aircraft, to fly IR (infrared) for as long as they could into the evening to monitor what was going on at the corrals.

The smoke was heavy; the fire was close. Although the hunters’ burnout operation wasn’t very effective, they were able to create enough defensible space for a safety zone, using their limited backcountry supplies.

Once the safety zone was established for the evening, the hunters and the IMT identified a check-in time of 0900 the next morning. The hunters turned their satellite phone off to preserve the battery and

operations wound down for the evening. The following morning, the hunters called in to say that they had driven to Hat Point Road near Memaloose and were being escorted the rest of the way out by incident fire crews, who were clearing fallen trees and debris from the roadway.

The Next Morning, the Rafter (Group #3) Contact the Sheriff’s Office in Distress

Mid-morning the next day, Sunday, Sept. 4, a group of four rafters on the Snake River, who had hiked up out of a portage, began to recognize that the fire was intensifying around them. They contacted the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest, who put them in contact with the Sheriff’s Office, who put them into contact with Ops.

While these rafters were located northeast of the Double Creek Fire, they were within an area that could be easily impacted by the fire’s spread. Ops asked them about their situation and their capabilities to hike out. During that conversation, it was determined that the group could safely hike down the trail system, back to their rafts to get out.

By 1500, the rafters contacted Ops to let them know they had safely made it out of the area in their rafts.

Lessons

I. Lessons for better communication with the public during evacuations.

A. The local Sheriff's Office did the preliminary work of identifying who might have been cut-off from their egress because they were already camping in the recreation areas before the fires moved through. The Sheriff's Office made contact via word-of-mouth, by placing flyers on vehicles, calling local outfitters/guides, etc. This also enabled the Sheriff to anticipate future logistics challenges, such as what to do with people whose vehicles were lost in the fire. While this was "above and beyond" the Sheriff's standard job duties, it better served members of the public and modeled a spirit of community.

B. Communicate early and realistically with impacted people. Local law enforcement and the IMT recognized that it would be a waste of time to try to convince some members of the public to leave the area early or leave their livestock during an evacuation. Rather than trying to be more persuasive, their strategy was to provide up-to-date, accurate information at predetermined intervals. This allowed the IMT to: 1.) Develop a sense of trust with the public; 2.) Consolidate to one point-of-contact for communication; and 3.) Save valuable battery life for electronic devices.

C. Learn about hunting seasons and the type of hunting that's taking place in the fire vicinity. Archery hunters in Oregon aren't required to wear "hunter orange" vests or garments. Therefore, looking for hunters in this state who may be in immediate danger will be more difficult.

D. Communicate a sense of calm (when appropriate) during evacuations. The crewmember from 8HX who briefed the hunter before loading him into the helicopter told him "We have time," before telling him that he would get a briefing and that they would walk over to the helicopter together. Saying these things outloud to the hunter conveyed a sense of professionalism as well as setting his mind at ease so he could follow their instructions.

II. Lack of closure around particular incidents can function as "noise" as incident management continues. The IMT was managing multiple SPOT device activations on this incident, as they were simultaneously handling other types of evacuations. The SPOT activation that happened at 1000 evolved from a hunter who had fallen off of his horse. His hunting party determined that he was okay and cancelled the SPOT. Later, the same hunting party activated a second SPOT, which was briefly tracked by 8HX. 8HX determined that whoever was "pinging" the SPOT was in a safe area, and that they were headed into an even safer area, farther away from the fire activity. Knowing this, the IMT turned their attention back to the other evacuations. However, some IMT members felt a lack of closure concerning this particular hunting party. Even if a group is assumed safe, confirming their safety and notifying everyone involved about their status will free-up peoples' mental space moving forward.

III. Have open conversations with crews about the policies and best practices around the short-haul program. In every geographic area, fire behavior has intensified due to climate-related issues such as drought and the accumulation of unburned fuels. This potential for increased fire behavior can be more difficult to predict, both for the land management agencies and the members of the public. Rapidly growing wildfires may put firefighters and members of the public who are located in remote, hard-to-reach areas at risk.

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