

Rapid Lesson Sharing

Event Type: Pile Burn Rx

Date: January 27, 2026

Location: East Fork Scott Prescribed Fire, Scott River Ranger District, Klamath National Forest

East Fork Scott Prescribed Fire Containment Breach – Decision Making Under Wind Event

On January 14, 2026, ignition operations were completed on the East Fork Scott pile burn unit on the Scott River Ranger District, Klamath National Forest. The unit transitioned into patrol status. For the next 13 days, resources conducted daily mop up and patrol operations with consistent documentation of status and conditions.

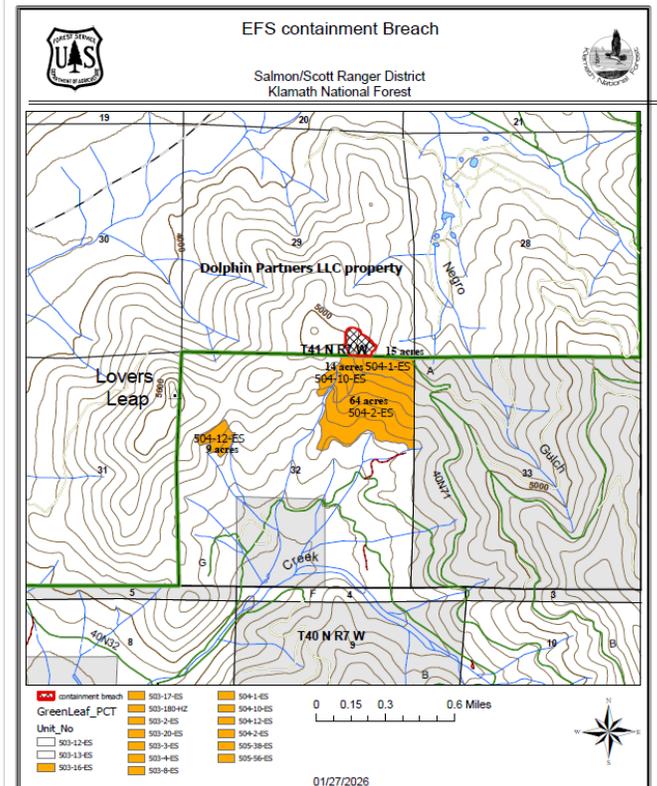
On January 27, a frontal wind event developed across the burn unit, with sustained winds of approximately 20 mph and gusts up to 38 mph from roughly the Southeast recorded at a nearby Remote Automatic Weather Station (RAWS). Under these conditions, residual heat sources within the unit became active and resulted in fire spread beyond the project boundary onto adjacent private lands (see map on right).

Resources on scene immediately initiated suppression actions. As fire behavior intensified with increasing winds, command transitioned to the responding highest-qualified personnel.

Based on observed fire behavior, time of day, available and responding resources, and probability of success, the individual in charge determined that containment would be achieved by the end of the operational period and that declaration of the prescribed fire as a wildfire was not warranted under the burn plan and applicable policy. This decision and its rationale were communicated through the District Duty Officer to the Forest Duty Officer and Agency Administrator (AA) chain.

Upward and lateral communication with key stakeholders—including Regional staff, CAL FIRE, Geographic Area Coordination Center (GACC), Forest leadership, and affected landowners—was timely and effective. However, communication between field resources and Dispatch was limited during the active portion of the incident. This resulted in minimal CAD (Computer Aided Dispatch) documentation and reduced situational awareness outside of the immediate operational chain.

During the incident, challenges arose in identifying the appropriate signatory Agency Administrator and Burn Boss of record due to multiple burn units within the same project area and staggered ignition dates. This contributed to delays in notification of the signatory AA and raised questions about responsibility and decision-making authority for burns in patrol status.



Topographic map of the East Fork Scott pile burn unit and containment breach on the Scott River Ranger District, Klamath National Forest.

A subsequent review by Regional Fire and Aviation Management (FAM) staff found that overall response and communication were appropriate and consistent with policy, while also identifying opportunities to strengthen burn plan standardization, chain-of-custody for AA oversight, Dispatch communication practices, and implementation of the Critical Weather Step-Up Plan (CWSUP).

Lessons

1. Patrol Status Does Not Eliminate Risk or Decision Complexity

Prescribed fires in patrol status remain operational incidents subject to changing conditions. Wind events can re-activate heat sources and produce fire spread outside the unit boundary even after extended mop-up periods.

Takeaway: Patrol status should be treated as an active risk period requiring continued situational awareness, weather monitoring, and operational readiness.

2. Wildfire Declaration Decisions Require Clear Policy Understanding

There was confusion regarding whether fire spread onto private lands automatically requires wildfire declaration. Current policy does not require declaration solely based on off-unit spread unless specified in the burn plan.

Takeaway:

- Units must ensure clear understanding of Element 18 of the NWCG Prescribed Fire Plan (Wildfire Declaration).
 - Forests benefit from a standardized Element 18 template across all burn plans.
 - Decision-makers must feel empowered to make risk-based decisions without stigma.
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3. Critical Weather Step-Up Plans Must Be Actively Considered and Communicated

The burn plan included a Critical Weather Step-Up Plan (CWSUP). But its application during this event was not clearly documented or communicated.

Takeaway:

- CWSUP triggers should be reviewed daily during patrol.
 - Activation criteria should be included in operational briefings.
 - Implementation should be documented and communicated up the chain of command.
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4. Clear Chain of Custody is Needed for AA and Burn Boss Oversight in Patrol Status

Confusion occurred regarding which Burn Boss and signatory AA were responsible once the burn was in patrol status and multiple units were active.

Takeaway:

- A clear chain of custody model should exist for burns in patrol.
 - An AA must remain available and informed even after ignition is complete.
 - AAs may transition duties to another qualified Prescribed Fire Agency Administrator (RXA) during the patrol phase. This ensures there is clear communication on who is responsible in the event of an escape.
 - Forests should maintain a centralized tracking system for burn status, AA, and Burn Boss assignment.
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5. Dispatch Communication is Critical for Situational Awareness and Documentation

While operational communication on tactical channels was strong, Dispatch was not consistently updated, resulting in limited CAD documentation.

Takeaway:

- Dispatch must remain in the communication loop during all phases of an incident.
 - CAD documentation provides critical legal, operational, and situational awareness benefits.
 - Regular status updates should be standard practice for any evolving incident.
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6. Burn Plan Accessibility is Essential During Incidents

During this incident, the burn plan was not immediately available to decision-makers at the Forest level.

Takeaway:

- Burn plans should be centrally housed and readily accessible (digitally and/or hard copy in a central location).
 - Standardized storage ensures rapid access to Element 16 (Holding), Element 18, contacts, and authorization pages.
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7. Culture Matters: Reducing Stigma Around “Escape” and “Declaration”

The term “wildfire declaration” continues to carry stigma, potentially influencing decision making.

Takeaway:

- Escape events are inevitable with large-scale prescribed fire programs.
 - Decisions should be based on policy, conditions, and probability of success—not perception.
 - Open discussion and shared learning strengthen program success and resilience.
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What Worked Well

- Rapid and appropriate suppression response by on-scene resources.
 - Strong upward and external communication with stakeholders and cooperators.
 - Clear operational decision-making based on probability of success.
 - Thorough documentation and AAR development following the incident.
 - Regional engagement and a constructive feedback process.
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What We Would Do Differently

- Ensure daily evaluation and documentation of Critical Weather Step-Up Plan (CWSUP) triggers.
 - Improve Dispatch notification and CAD documentation practices.
 - Establish a standardized and visible AA/Burn Boss chain-of-custody system.
 - Centralize burn plan access for all Duty Officers and leadership.
 - Provide consistent Element 18 language across all District burn plans.
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Key Takeaways

- Patrol status does not eliminate operational risk.

- Wind events can rapidly change conditions even after extended mop up.
 - Clear policy understanding enables confident decision making.
 - Communication with Dispatch is essential.
 - Standardization of burn plans and oversight improves response efficiency.
 - Organizational culture must support learning over stigma.
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This RLS was submitted by:

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