Informational Summary Report of Serious or Near Serious CAL FIRE Injuries, Illnesses and Accidents

GREEN SHEET

Firefighter Burn Injuries

May 1, 2026

Covelo South Incident

26-CA-MEU-005046

California Northern Region

SUMMARY

On May 1, 2026, at approximately 1215 hours, four CAL FIRE employees sustained superficial burn injuries while conducting firing operations on the Covelo South Vegetation Management Project (VMP) in Mendocino County, California.

CONDITIONS

The accident site is located within the Covelo South VMP, in plot 6D. The Covelo South VMP is located within the CAL FIRE Mendocino Unit (MEU).

Location:

- Covelo South VMP
- Latitude/Longitude (approximate): 39.715782, -123.154368

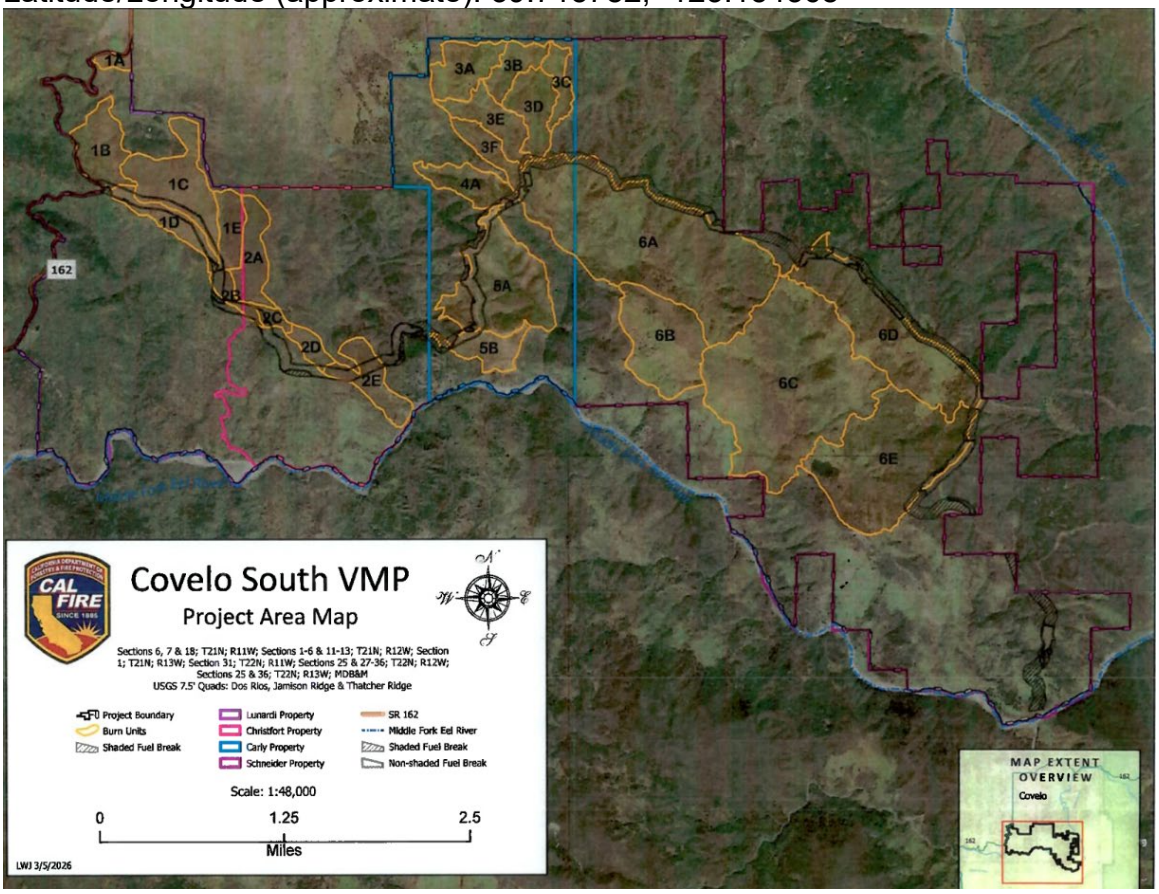

Figure 1: Overview of VMP site with plots identified.

Weather:

- Temperature: 76° Fahrenheit
- Elevation: 2,900 feet
- Relative Humidity: 52%
- Winds: 2 to 4 mph variable
- Visibility: Sunny

Fuel Type:

- The project area consists of grass, brush, and oak woodlands.

Road Conditions:

- Dirt two track road with dozer improvements

Topography:

- Coastal Foothills

Fire Behavior:

- Slow rate of spread

SEQUENCE OF EVENTS

On May 1, 2026, CAL FIRE Mendocino Unit (MEU) conducted prescribed fire operations on the Covelo South Vegetation Management Project (VMP). The firing plan consisted of two divisions and planned coordination of ground resources conducting hand-firing, along with helitorch (aerial) operations. The objective was to create a mosaic of burned and unburned vegetation to enhance ecosystem function.

All personnel received an operational safety briefing at the CAL FIRE Covelo Fire Station at the beginning of the day and prior to any burning operations. Personnel and assigned resources received the Incident Action Plan (IAP) and were briefed on the assigned radio frequencies, division assignments, and everyone received a safety briefing on helicopter and helitorch operations.

Figure 2: Aerial view of VMP operations.

A “Go-No-Go" checklist was completed and ground firing operations commenced at approximately 1100 hours. The Unit received Region approval and continued firing operations at 1105 hours. While conducting the initial test ignition, Firing Group 2, which consisted of two Battalion Chiefs (BC1 and BC2) recognized that the fire behavior and fuel conditions were significantly different from the previous day, including increased dryness and a 20 to 30% increase in the probability of ignition (PIG) reading from the day before. BC1 was a trainee working under BC2, who is qualified as a Division/ Group Supervisor (DIVS) and functioning as a Firing Group Supervisor.

The firing operations continued through plots one and two, both of which burned successfully. Even with the increase in the air temperature and burning conditions, the overall project conditions remained favorable and within the parameters of the prescription. The ground resources continued to edge fire the plots with drip torches and hand toss devices for additional depth into the fuels. Once depth was established, Firing Group 2 contacted Helicopter 1 (H1) and provided directions to burn out the remainder of the plot with the helitorch.

Following successful burning operations across plots one and two, BC1 and BC2 moved to plot three to continue to supervise burning operations. BC2 contacted the fuels crew Fire Captain 1 (FC1) and two Forestry Technicians working as part of the Firing Group (FT1, FT2) to ask if they would begin to edge fire in an effort to build depth from the control line.

At approximately 1215 hours, there was communication between a ground resource and H1. H1 was informed to start work in plot three. H1 made a dry run to recon the plot and decided to take smaller runs due to the increase in fire behavior observed during the burning of plots one and two. Halfway through the first strip, H1 observed a single individual located downslope from the dozer line and directly along H1's firing path. H1 immediately maneuvered the aircraft down and away from the individual. The individual on the ground was seen early enough to avoid direct overflight from H1. After completing the pass, H1 observed multiple people on the ridgeline rapidly moving away from the ignition area. BC 1, FC1, FT1 and FT2 were above the firing location and impacted by advancing fire. All four personnel retreated along the ridgeline utilizing a Utility Terrain Vehicle (UTV). During the retreat, all four personnel sustained superficial burn injuries.

At 1220 hours, an Incident Within an Incident (IWI) was declared with medical care and transport initiated. FT1 and FT2 were ground transported, while BC1 and FC1 were transported by air ambulance to a burn center. All personnel were subsequently treated and released from the respective medical facilities by 2000 hours.

INJURIES/DAMAGES

- FT1, superficial burns to the nose
- FT2, superficial burns to the left wrist
- FC1, superficial burns to the left side of the face
- BC1, superficial burns to the left side of the face

SAFETY ISSUES FOR REVIEW

- Ensure that **only** issued and approved wildland PPE is worn in compliance with the applicable CAL FIRE Handbook 1700 sections.
- Supervisors will correct personnel and subordinates if/when they find they do not have full PPE on.
- Line supervision must maintain accountability of all personnel assigned for the duration of the assignment.
- Ensure strategy and tactics align with operational pace of the incident.
- Ensure area is appropriately prepped prior to conducting firing operation.
- Constantly evaluate the pace of operations. Have alternative plans if current plan timelines cannot be met.
- When more than 10 minutes away from apparatus, ensure that Basic Life Support (BLS) line pack and burn treatment items are accompanying personnel in accordance with CAL FIRE Handbook 7242: Emergency Medical Services (EMS) BLS Line Pack Complement for Wildland Web Gear.
- If firefighters sustain burn injuries, reference CAL FIRE Handbook 7243: Burn Injuries and Treatment for proper treatment and transport decision making.
- Escape routes should be identified with all ground personnel in the specific work areas and validated.
- Changes or an increase in fire behavior should be communicated to all incident personnel. This ensures a high level of situational awareness is maintained.
- Post lookouts or communicate observations with a positive check back.

Figure 3: Stock photo referencing proper PPE usage.

- Ensure an ICS 206 is included in an IAP and followed during an IWI.
- When IWI response is enroute to the incident, incoming resources should utilize frequencies assigned in IAP.
- During briefings, ensure that line supervision is present and identifies self to others.
- Validate Incident Command System (ICS) positions in the IAP. Ensure that resources know what their geographical work areas are as well as adjoining divisional work areas and resources.
- Have physical address for access and GPS coordinates for specific work location.
- Establish the designated frequency for medical communications (Command Frequency) are listed within the Communication Plan and utilized.
- Use standard fire line terminology, avoid slang or acronyms. Reference National Wildfire Coordinating Group (NWCG) and FIRESCOPE standard wildland fire terms.
- Ensure all assigned resources monitor Ground Tactical, Command Frequencies, and Air-To-Ground Frequencies. If there is any doubt that radio traffic was received or understood, establish positive confirmation between the sender and receiver.
- Ensure clear expectations of ICS qualified and trainee positions on fire line.
- Fill critical ICS positions in IAP during planning stages.
- Ensure all CAL FIRE equipment is properly marked in accordance with CAL FIRE Handbook 6704: Mobile Equipment Identification, Application, and Assignment.

Figure 4: Stock photo referencing proper PPE usage.

INCIDENTAL ISSUES/LESSONS LEARNED

- Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)
  - **When working with fire, whether it is a planned event or emergency incident, proper use of PPE is required for everyone's safety.**
  - While using a firing device, employees shall have shrouds closed across face, goggles donned, NFPA certified gloves, and a wildland jacket zipped up with the sleeves rolled down.
- Helitorch Operations
  - The Helitorch is a gelled fuel aerial ignition device that is attached to a helicopter's external cargo hook. It can deliver large quantities of fuel and can ignite large amounts of vegetation rapidly, which must be coordinated with ground crews to ensure safe and effective operations.
  - To ensure safe and effective Helitorch operations, it is imperative to have a single point of contact to avoid confusion.
  - Ensure positive contact is made with the Helitorch crewmembers to ensure proper communication and coordination.
    - When contacting a Helicopter with a helitorch, the assigned Air-To-Ground frequency shall be utilized as the primary method of contact.
    - Air-Guard can be used when contact cannot be achieved on any other assigned frequencies.
  - Ensure Helitorch operations are clear and understood prior to beginning operations.
    - The Front Seat Captain or Helitorch Base Manager shall provide specific Helitorch safety awareness items to affected ground crews.

Figure 5: Helitorch operations

- UTV Operations:
  - Ensure that personnel know the identifier of resources when being utilized.
  - Consider the risk versus gain for utilizing UTV's in the fire environment.
  - Reference CAL FIRE Temporary Directive (TD) Regarding UTV Driver Requirements and CAL FIRE Handbook 6708-7: Miscellaneous Mobile Equipment – Employee Proficiency Requirements

PHOTOS/SITE DIAGRAMS/MAPS

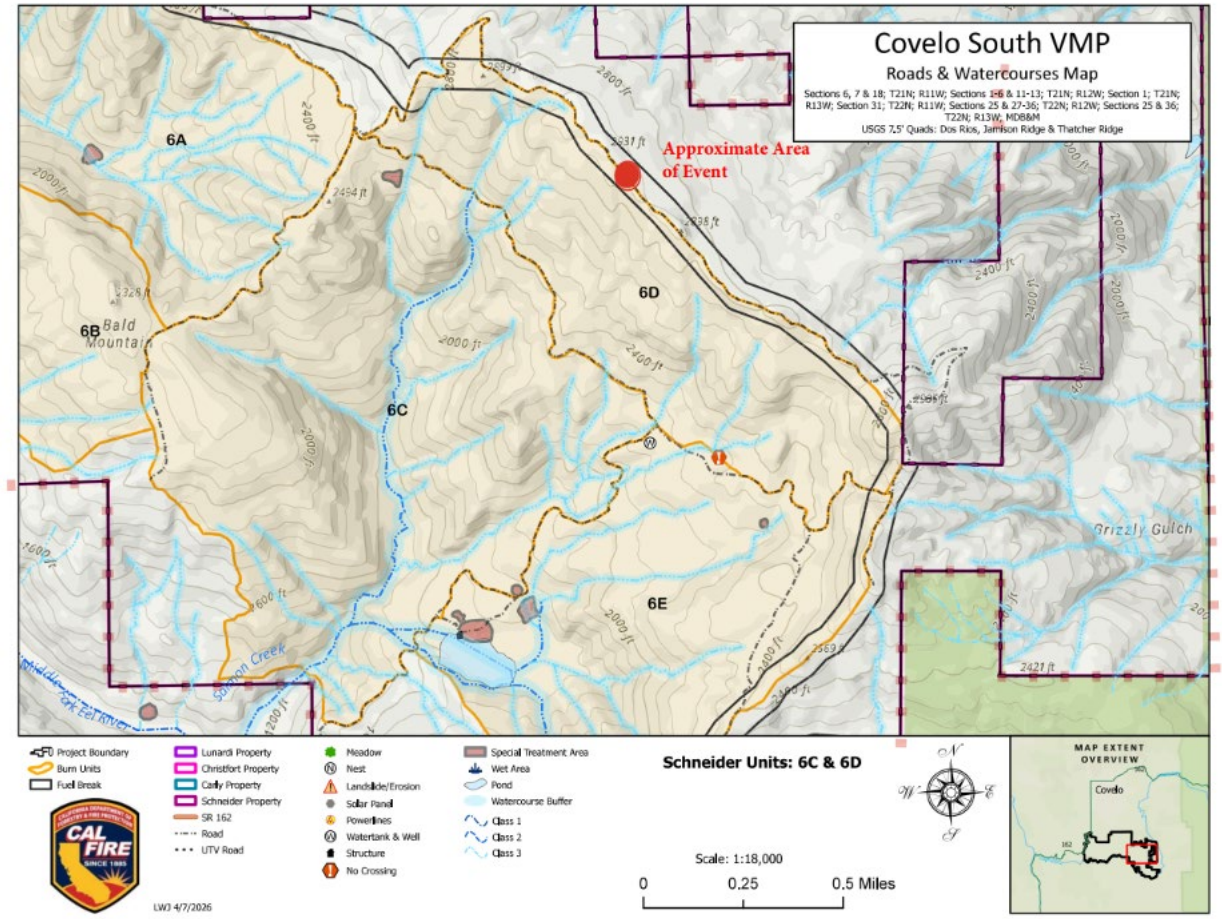

Figure 6: Covelo South VMP Roads and Watercourses Map

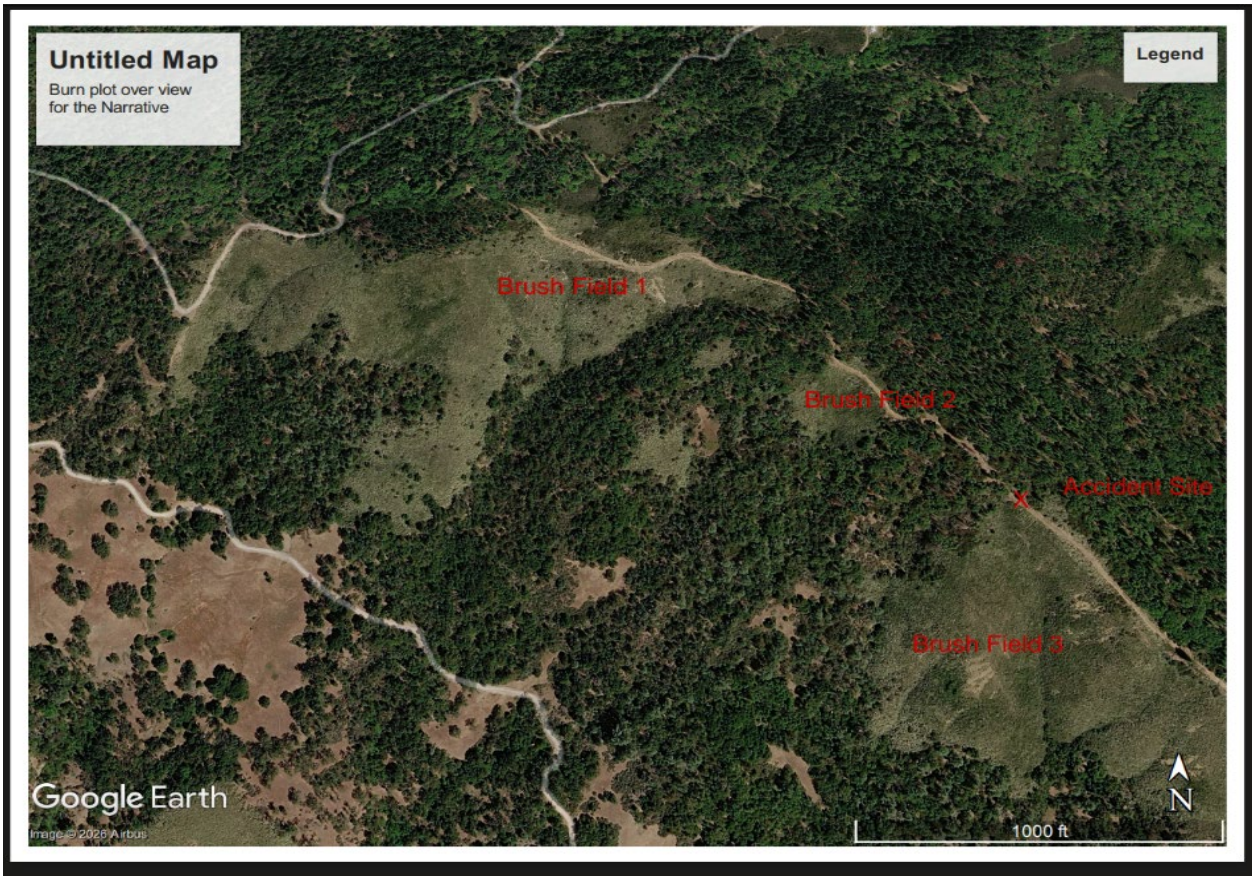

Figure 7: VMP map with key locations identified.

Figure 8: Approximate location of UTV and personnel.

Figure 9: Aerial photo taken by H1 during operations.