

“Operation Bear Bait” – How this CIMT Addressed and Resolved this Elk Carcass/Bear Hazard Threat to Firefighters

“As we began to leave, the bear paralleled our path just upslope until we reached a point where we could use the UTV to outpace it.” – REMS unit

On August 9, during suppression operations on the Paradise Fire, located on the Oregon/Washington border, crews found an elk carcass actively guarded by bears in a stream in the Mill Creek watershed.

As operations continued, the bears grew more desensitized to people—increasing the frequency of close encounters.

To complicate matters, the concentration of bear activity was along a steep, unchecked section of fireline approximately 65-70 yards below a road—making it difficult for crews to avoid the bears.

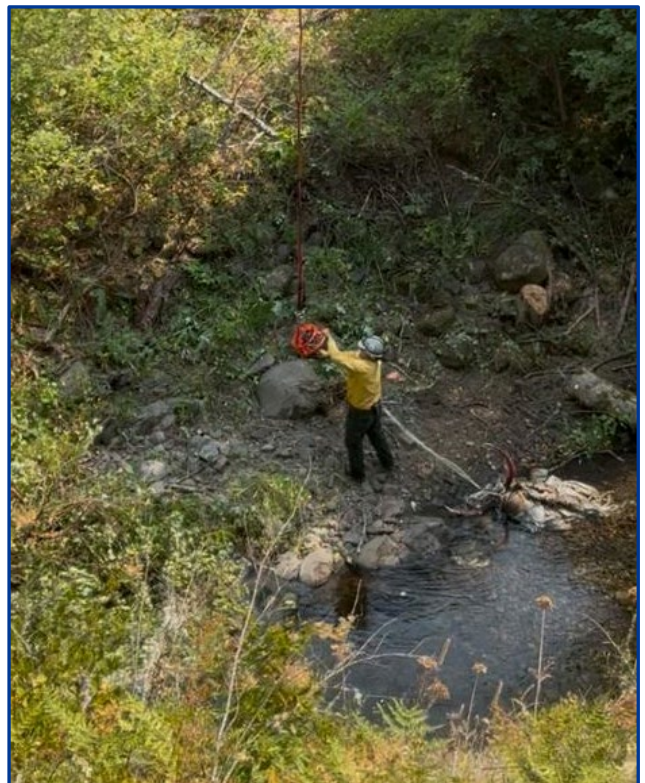
A Rapid Extraction Module Support (REMS) unit described one of these encounters, explaining: *“The bear walked above us on the hill. It stopped 15 feet above us, sat down and observed us. As we began to leave, the bear paralleled our path just upslope until we reached a point where we could use the UTV to outpace it.”*

Four Potential Strategies to Mitigate the Bear Hazard Issue

These frequent bear run-ins prompted the Complex Incident Management Team (CIMT) to evaluate safe ways to address this hazard. The CIMT identified four possible strategies to mitigate this bear issue:

- Leave the elk carcass in place and issue bear spray to firefighters.
- Package the carcass and sling it to another location.
- Disperse or obliterate the carcass with explosives, a common backcountry tactic.
- Remove the bears by cage trapping.

On August 10, as the CIMT assessed their options, resources working in the area were issued bear spray and trained on its use. As the bear encounters escalated, the CIMT Safety Officer quickly recognized that bear spray alone wasn't a viable long-term solution. Collaborating with experts from wildlife, aviation, operations, risk management, and city water systems, the team thoroughly evaluated their remaining options.



A firefighter secures the elk carcass sling load to mitigate bear hazards on the Paradise Fire.

Package and Sling Load the Elk Carcass Option Approved and Executed

Concerns about introducing nitrates into a water system serving more than 40,000 people in the Walla Walla area eliminated the use of explosives. The Team Safety Officer conducted an on-site visit with an Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife officer. Removing bears through trapping was deemed impractical because of the number of bears and the risk to wildlife and personnel. After consultations with aviation resources, the remaining two options were presented to the team Command and General Staff and agency administrators for a final decision.

They didn't support restricting fire operations in the area due to the need to prevent fire spread and to protect the municipal watershed from potential adverse fire impacts. After agency administrators approved sling-loading the elk carcass, the decision moved back through the CIMT sections for operational planning and execution.

On August 13, under the protection of wildlife officers, firefighters packaged the elk carcass in biodegradable materials and slung it to a different location within the fire perimeter.

Lessons Learned

Wildlife Behavior can Shift Quickly During Fire Activity

- Carcass-related bear encounters can quickly escalate when bears become accustomed to people during fire operations. Making sure firefighters understand wildlife behavior and carcass hazards can help crews identify these changes and act before encounters intensify. Having wildlife Subject Matter Experts (SME) available early can assist identifying concerning behaviors.

Start the Risk-Management Process Early

- Starting the risk-management process early gives SMEs time to gather information and ground-truth assumptions. Bringing in the relevant specialists early helps identify impacts and keeps options realistic. Early onsite assessments and conversations strengthened situational awareness and better supported decision making as the CIMT evaluated their options.

Collaboration Is Essential When Hazards Cross Jurisdictions and Disciplines

- Bringing the right people together as soon as possible matters when a hazard spans agencies and specialties. Wildlife, water system, safety, operations, aviation, and forest personnel all played a role in balancing wildlife risks, watershed concerns, and operational needs. That level of teamwork was key to identifying a safe, feasible option and completing the operation without injuries to personnel or wildlife.

High-Risk Decisions Benefit from Structured, Transparent Approval Processes

- When options are limited and carry high risk, clear decision criteria help keep the team focused and avoids delays. Stopgap measures were put into place at first by ordering bear spray and training personnel—providing them time to work through the approval process. That structured approach made it easier to weigh risks and determine a safe, defensible solution.

This RLS was submitted by:

**The Northern Rockies Complex Incident
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