

# Rapid Lesson Sharing

**Event Type:** Approaching Wildfire Threatening Recreation Crew

**Date:** July 12, 2021

**Location:** Dixie Fire, Idaho

## What If a Local Wilderness Recreation Crew Walked into Your Approaching 20,000-Acre Wildfire Without Knowing—or Anybody Alerting Them?

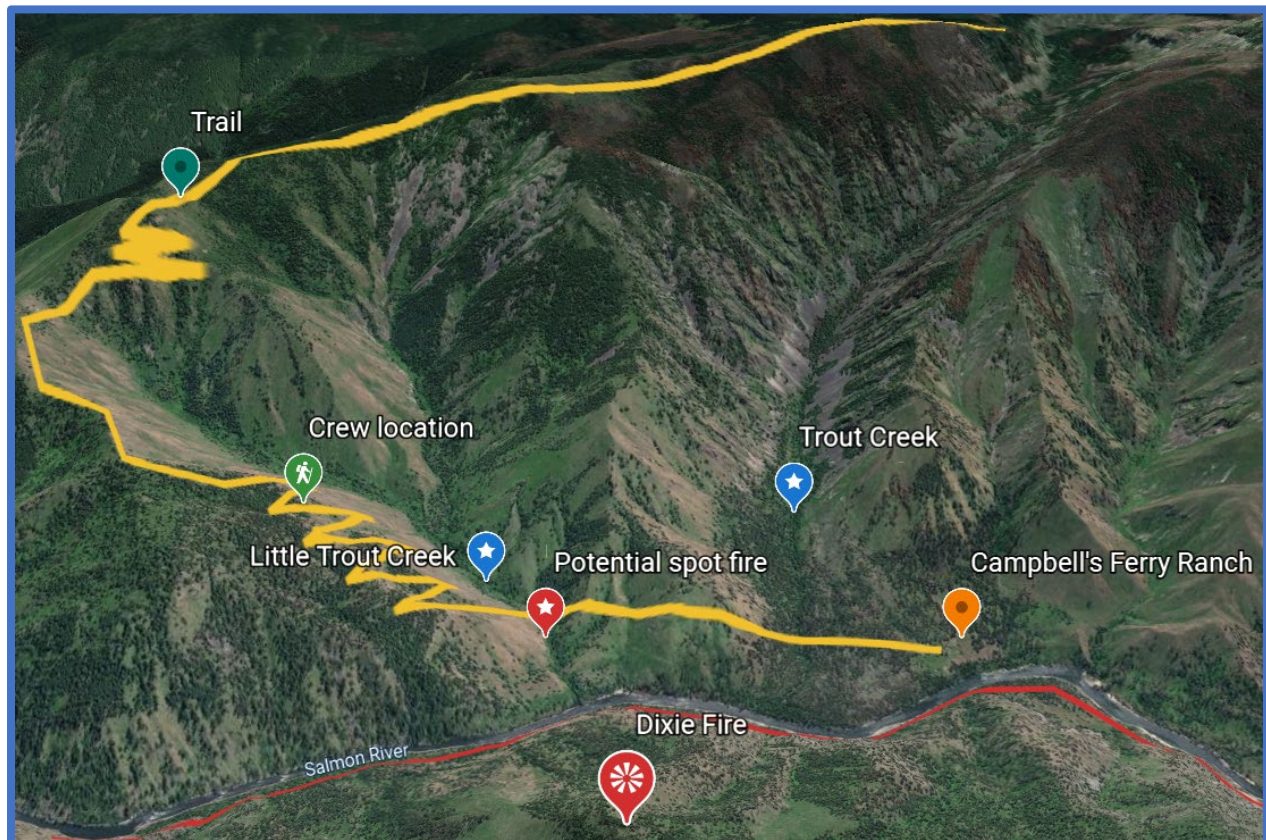
*One crew member wondered if he was in for an “early and tragic death.”*

### The Story

“See this!” the Assistant Fire Management Officer exclaimed as he pointed to the Enterprise Geospatial Portal (EGP) map on his phone. (EGP provides a rough estimate of wildland fire perimeters using heat detecting satellite data.) “It looks like the fire might have crossed the river. It’s in Little Trout Creek. It’s only a matter of time before the flashy fuels ignite and make a run up into the drainage.”

“Lucky we don’t have any crews there,” said the Recreation Program Manager.

“Yes, we *do*!” quickly came the response from around the corner.



***There was no “Zero-Risk” option. All the options delivered uncertainty and some level of risk to the crew.***

**Background**

On July 12, the Dixie Fire had burned onto the north bank of the Salmon River but had not crossed the river to the south into the Payette National Forest. Payette fire managers had been coordinating with the Incident Management Team (IMT) managing the fire (the fire was located on a different Forest in a different Region) to share information about current and predicted fire activity. Fire managers were anticipating that the fire would eventually cross the river, but nobody was quite sure where.

After it was confirmed that a Recreation Crew was near the potential spot fire, the folks in the room asked: *“How did our crew get into this situation given all the conversations we’ve had about the fire?”*

The Recreation Supervisor knew the crew’s location, but the Recreation Supervisor was on a backcountry hitch and was unaware that the fire was so close. The Recreation Program Manager, who was in contact with the Fire Staff and intimately aware of the fire, thought that the crew’s work in Little Trout Creek was being completed during a different week. And the Recreation Crew was unable to gauge the fire’s location because smoke and haze had been filling the river corridor for weeks.

Regardless of how this crew had ended up there, the staff knew they had to help them find a way out.

***How did They Decide Where to Direct the Crew?***

After discovering the Recreation Crew’s precarious location, the District Assistant Fire Management Officer (also Zone Duty Officer for the day), Recreation Program Manager, and Recreation Supervisor all began to weigh their options.

Upon learning of this situation, others arrived to contribute to the conversation, including: the District Ranger, a Fuels Technician, the Forest Duty Officer, and acting Forest Assistant Fire Management Officer. At this point, the focus was getting the crew to safety. Shortly after EPG indicated a potential spot fire, the Recreation Crew was contacted on the radio and told to stay put. To many, the situation felt eerily familiar to [other tragedy events](#) that had occurred in similar terrain.

Unknowns continued to complicate the decision-making. *How big is the spot fire? Is the EGP even accurate? Could helicopters fly with the smoke? Could the crew shortcut the trail, through steep terrain and heavy downfall, and make haste down to the river?*

*“Lots of people plus lots of uncertainty makes decision-making really difficult and time consuming,”* recalled one manager.

**No “Zero-Risk” Option**

A Division Supervisor from the Dixie Fire was able to contact the District and confirm that there was no fire visible from his location, but the Recreation Crew was in a separate drainage. Next, a resource assigned to the fire who was working at Campbell’s Ferry Ranch began hiking toward Little Trout Creek in effort to provide a size-up for the crew, but travel was slow in the complex terrain and smoke impeded visibility.

All the possibilities and unknowns were postponing a decision that had to be made. Radio conversations with the crew added uncertainty to their ability to hike back up the hill in the heat with very little water. There was no “Zero-Risk” option. All the options delivered uncertainty and some level of risk to the crew.

Conversations about trigger points, contingency planning, and possible solutions that created additional unknowns ensued. Some people wondered whose decision it was to make. Others felt like they were observing “Analysis Paralysis.”

*“How do you choose the best/worse-case option?  
There were so many people involved and so many unknown pieces of information.”*

**Assistant Fire Management Officer**

**The Staff Assembled in the Office Weighed the Most Reasonable Options:**

**1) Hike back up the trail**

- a. This would entail carrying their 60 lb. packs about 6 miles and 3,000 vertical feet back up the slope in the heat of the day with very limited drinking water. This would place them in a dangerous position with potential fire below them. If the spot fire became established in the drainage, options for outrunning the fire or seeking shelter in a safety zone would be non-existent.

**2) Attempt to extricate the crew with a helicopter**

- a. There were no known landing sites on the ridge near the crew.
- b. The Dixie Fire IMT had not been able to fly in the area all day because of poor visibility from smoke.
- c. All personnel were very reluctant to rely on aviation as their primary plan.

**3) Follow the trail downhill to the river**

- a. Follow the trail 4 miles down the ridge and through the drainage to the river where they could meet firefighters who were preparing to protect structures near Campbell’s Ferry Ranch.
- b. If the spot fire became established, the crew would have limited (if any) options for escape.

***What was Going Through the Recreation Crew’s Mind?***

For the Recreation Crew, the eighth day of a ten-day hitch was winding down and their water bottles were almost empty. The crew had been managing multiple “annoyances” that tested their resiliency: more down trees than anticipated, 100-degree temperatures, scorching sun with little shade, low water, and the fatigue that accumulates after multiple long days in a row.

After receiving word that a wildfire was in the area, the “cavalier thought of *just another annoyance*,” was quickly replaced by dread and fear. One crew member wondered if he was in for an “early and tragic death.” Another crew member reflected that he “felt powerless while waiting for people 50 miles away to tell us our next move.” The smoke and haze obscured any kind of view while the crew waited anxiously for a decision.

***What Option Would You Choose?***

Finally, after more than one hour of deliberation, a decision was made. The crew was to hike down to Campbell’s Ferry Ranch. During their descent, a fire resource was able to confirm that he didn’t see active fire in the drainage. The crew arrived at Campbell’s Ferry and was jet boated out of the backcountry.

It was later confirmed that there was no fire in Little Trout Creek and that the ERG had misrepresented the location of the fire. After a short stint in McCall, with minimal money of their own for food (a small pool of donations for dinner was collected) and no place to stay (all lodging options were full), the Recreation Crew was flown back into their backcountry station. (Their station is accessible by a day-long drive and a multiple day hike or a short flight to a backcountry airstrip.)

## Questions for Consideration

This story is a helpful platform to start a dialogue about wildfire risk with all program areas.

After reading this RLS, consider these questions to facilitate a discussion:

- ❖ How do you check in locally to understand current wildfire status?
- ❖ How will your crew respond in the backcountry? Do you have a contingency plan?
- ❖ How do you consider uncertainty when making decisions?

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