

Rapid Lesson Sharing

Event Type: Emergency Extraction

Date: August 21, 2020

Location: Woodward Fire,
Point Reyes National Seashore,
California

The Interagency Emergency Extraction of Two Firefighters

Introduction

On August 21, a Field Observer and firefighter were assigned to scout for potential dozer line on the Woodward Fire at Point Reyes National Seashore in northern California.

The fire had been burning for six days in difficult terrain with heavy vegetation. Due to multiple other fires burning in both the state and nation, there were very few resources that were committed to this fire.

The ever-changing nature of the fire made it necessary to continually assess the potential for contingency actions and dozer lines.

The Field Observer and firefighter started to scout the potential line later in the day. As they proceeded down the ridge line, the vegetation they encountered was thicker and more dense than they had expected. At times, the only way the firefighters could move forward was to put their backs into the vegetation to proceed just inches at a time.

As late afternoon moved into evening, they realized that they were going to have a difficult time making it back to their vehicles before dark. At this time, fire activity increased as a result of a wind shift that brought the slope and fuels into alignment with this new wind pattern.

When they called nearby Marin County Division Supervisor to provide a status of their progress, the Division Supervisor realized that the firefighters were in a precarious situation. Within minutes, the Division Supervisor requested a local rescue helicopter from a nearby county to short-haul the firefighters off of the fireline to safety. The entire process, once initiated, was completed in less than an hour.



The Woodward Fire burning during the day of August 21.

The Purpose of this RLS

1. Identify contributing factors that led to the need for this extraction.
2. Highlight the effective interagency relationships that resulted in a successful outcome.
3. Provide recommendations that will increase awareness for the greater wildland fire community.

Unique Local Factors

- ❖ Most national parks have their own fire crews. Point Reyes National Seashore does not. For fire suppression of wildland fire on National Park Service lands, Point Reyes National Seashore relies on an agreement with the Marin County Fire Department, which is a professional “All Risk” agency, and a contract county with Cal Fire.
- ❖ Typically, fires in Marin County and Point Reyes National Seashore rarely exceed 5 to 20 acres due to the marine layer (coastal fog) which generally keeps fuel moisture values high. This moisture also contributes to a productive ecosystem characterized by thick coastal scrub. That day on the Woodward Fire, this vegetation was burning.
- ❖ The weather system that produced abundant dry lightning which came right on the heels of record high temperatures in the coastal communities of California was very atypical for August.



Photo depicts the density of the brush that limited the movement of the fire personnel.

LCES

The establishment of effective Lookouts, Communications, Escape routes, and Safety zones (LCES) is critical to the safety of all wildland firefighters.

These basic safety measures must be in place as we engage in suppression activities. We will discuss each element below and how they were utilized before and during this extraction.

Lookouts

Personnel in both adjoining Divisions knew where the Field Observer and firefighter were in relation to active fire.

Communications

As soon as they became aware of their predicament, the Field Observer and firefighter communicated with the Division Supervisor for assistance. Once it was determined that extraction was the necessary option, communication between the fire dispatch and helicopter were seamless. The ICP and IC were kept in the loop once the extraction was initiated.

Escape Routes

The escape route was known but the farther the two firefighters committed down the ridge through the thick vegetation and steep terrain, the more unviable the escape route became.

Safety Zones

The area where the vehicles were parked was an adequate safety zone—but only if there was an efficient way to get there. Potential safety zones farther down the ridge were not identified nor was there a feasible escape route to get there.



The location of the extraction helicopter's LZ and the two firefighters' location minutes before the extraction took place.

To see a body cam video of this extraction:

<https://youtu.be/rNu3MnNxvq0>

Conclusion

The local history of small fires in coastal scrub with low spread rates and high humidity prompted a temporary lack of situational awareness during a line scouting mission. Once the firefighters realized their precarious position, it was too late to get to their safety zone on foot. Fortunately, through close interagency relationships and a unique use of an available tool—the rescue helicopter and crew—a quick extraction and successful outcome was possible.

Lessons

- Upon accepting and engaging in a Field Observer assignment, overestimate the time required for the scouting mission. Give yourself time to deal with unexpected barriers and unforeseen events. Ensure you communicate your mission and check in regularly with adjoining resources.
- Constantly reevaluate your Situational Awareness and LCES. Recognize the difference between a “travel route” and an “escape route”.
- The term “Temporary Refuge Area” or “TRA” was used by local responders when discussing this incident. This term is not commonly used in the wildland community. Its use should therefore be avoided to prevent confusion.
- Never rely on helicopters as a safety measure. Air resource use can be constrained by mechanical failure, weather conditions, and other limitations.
- Once the pair of firefighters scouting the line realized they were in a bad situation, their communications with other fire personnel to remedy their situation could not have gone better.
- The positive interagency working relationships between Marin County, the National Park Service, and Sonoma County Sheriffs aviation unit was a key factor in the expedited success of the firefighters' extraction.

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