

Rapid Lesson Sharing

Event Type: Fire in Fire Camp

Date: June 11, 2016

Location: Akawana Fire's Fire Camp;
Sisters, Oregon

NARRATIVE

On June 8 when the Type 1 Incident Management team was ordered for the Akawana Fire, the Logistics Section Chief contacted the local District to discuss potential fire camp locations. Because the local Sisters, Ore., schools were still in session, and it was rodeo weekend at the fairgrounds, and many local field crops had not yet been harvested, it was determined that the best place for fire camp would be on an undeveloped portion of the town of Sisters' industrial park located on the north end of town.

This site was comprised of open fields with paved streets. A more private parcel of ground on the industrial site's west end had a

young stand of ponderosa pine trees, averaging about 14 inches DBH. This private parcel was obtained on June 9 for the nightshift. The shade that these trees provided would offer better conditions for daytime sleeping. Daytime temperatures only reached the high 60s and low 70s on most days.

The Akawana Fire was located 13 miles northeast of this fire camp, burning toward the northeast. Therefore, the fire was not expected to impact fire camp with either ash and ember fall or direct flame impingement. Even so, as is standard practice, this fire camp was set up with defensibility considerations in mind.

Wind-Driven Fire Burning in Pine Litter in Sleeping Area

On Saturday June 11, at approximately 0400, a food unit worker and camp night watchman simultaneously investigated smoke coming from the fire camp's west side in the nightshift sleeping area. They discovered a fire burning in pine litter under the ponderosa pine trees with two-foot flame lengths—being wind-driven to the east.

The night watchman went to the camp's Communications Unit to have them call 911 while the food unit worker started waking up the people inside the tents located in the fire's path.

One person who was awakened went to the parking area to get his wildland fire engine to respond to the fire. Other personnel grabbed hand tools and pulled partially burning tents out of the fire's path. Through the 911



Folks scramble to wake people up and help put out a fire that erupts in the Akawana Fire's fire camp sleeping area at 0400 hours.

Much to the responders' surprise, one of the tents pulled out of the flames contained two small backpack-sized propane tanks for either a small stove or heater.

emergency system, the local Camp Sherman/Sisters Rural Fire Department was dispatched and two engines responded to assist in extinguishing the fire.

The fire was contained to an approximate 50 by 75 feet area with three tents totally destroyed and two tents pulled out of the fire that were damaged beyond use.

Tent Pulled from Flames has Two Propane Tanks

Much to the responders' surprise, one of the tents pulled out of the flames contained two small backpack-sized propane tanks for either a small stove or heater. While neither of the tanks were hooked to a device or suspected of contributing to the fire's origin, if this tent had not been pulled from the flames, it could have provided a serious safety hazard to first responders.

After the fire was extinguished, both a wildland and structural fire investigator arrived on scene to take over the fire investigation. The tent determined to be the fire's origin was identified to a specific 20-person contract crew on nightshift. As the nightshift crews returned to camp and reported to Ground Support, the fire investigators spoke with this crew first.

The tent of the fire's origin belonged to the Crew Boss of this 20-person crew. There was evidence of cigarette cartons inside the tent and fresh cigarette butts outside the tent. This was a non-smoking area. There was a designated smoking area on an asphalt cul-de-sac with metal cans for cigarette butts approximately 200 feet from the fire.



Because the fire site was so well mopped-up by firefighters, determining the fire's exact origin was speculative at best.

However, due to high relative humidity during the nightshift and very cool temperatures in the early morning—approximately 10 hours earlier when the nightshift crews would have been leaving camp—the discarded cigarette butts discovered near the origin were determined unlikely to have started the fire.

Because many people (not just the Crew Boss and his crew) had access to that area, it could not be determined who had discarded these cigarette butts. The Crew Boss produced a pocket of butts from his time on nightshift—indicating that he collected and put out his used cigarettes.

If this fire had occurred at 1600—instead of 0400—with warmer temperatures, lower relative humidity, and a wind event, the result could have been much worse.

Fire's Origin and Cause Undetermined

There was also an Apple Tablet and portable charging device inside the Crew Boss's tent. However, the investigators noted that neither item seemed to be in use, nor could they be definitely proven as the source of the fire.

Furthermore, while the Crew Boss's tent was located near the fire's origin, the fire site was so well mopped-up by firefighters that determining the fire's exact origin location was speculative at best. The fire's official cause was listed as "undetermined."

Thankfully, no one was injured during this event. If this fire had occurred at 1600—instead of 0400—with warmer temperatures, lower relative humidity, and a wind event, the result could have been much worse.

LESSONS

Despite the fact that this fire's origin could not be definitely confirmed, we can still learn several lessons from this incident to help prevent such future occurrences.

- ❖ Ensure the Communications Unit has a mechanism for contacting applicable IMT members both during the day and after hours, and that all applicable personnel know the emergency response procedures for the fire line and in camp.
- ❖ Besides planning a camp location in terms of the potential impacts from the main fire, also consider potential impacts from a fire starting in camp. Have a fire response plan and consider fire breaks in camp.
- ❖ When responding to fires occurring near any tents, whether in camp or on any other initial attack, remember that anything could be inside these structures, including hazardous materials (such as propane tanks). So, be cautious!
- ❖ Remind camp personnel at briefings not to charge devices while unattended and to only use approved charging devices. Do not use modified clam shell batteries and aluminum foil.
- ❖ Make sure that charging devices and devices being charged have adequate ventilation to allow any heat to dissipate and not build up. Avoid charging devices in your tent while unattended or while you are sleeping. Several structure fires have been attributed to devices unable to dissipate heat while charging under items such as pillows.
- ❖ Smoke only in designated smoking areas and not near tents.

This RLS was submitted by:
Incident Overhead

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