

# Caples Escaped Prescribed Pile Burn Facilitated Learning Analysis



*Picture by the Prescribed Type 2 Burn Boss on October 9<sup>th</sup>, 2019, at 1800 “the night before declaration.”*

*“It’s an incident...we’re not implementing a planned prescribed fire project, we are making daily initial attack plans to maintain a prescribed fire project.” RXB2(t)*

*The FLA team wants to recognize that through all interviews conducted, there were no major safety concerns brought to the team’s attention throughout this entire incident*

*Eldorado National Forest, Pacific Southwest Region (R5)*

*October 2019*

## Background on Project:

The Caples Ecological Restoration Project was originally discussed around 2010 and was a project that had a “lot of interest” and support from the local community. The area is located 30 miles east of Placerville California. The watershed is more than 20,000 acres in size and is primarily managed by the Eldorado National Forest (ENF). It supplies drinking water to about 110,000 people and businesses and utilizes the El Dorado Irrigation District. The elevation ranges from approximately 5,800 feet in elevation to 10,080 feet at the highest peak. With this vast range in elevation, three significant vegetation types exist: Sierran mixed conifer, red fir, and subalpine which is interlaced with meadows, lakes and barren rock.

The project is located in an Inventoried Roadless Area and is a recommended wilderness area. The area is also cherished by the community and provides high quality backcountry recreation. The ENF identified the Caples Creek watershed as a priority watershed targeted for restoration activities. The three main actions associated with the restoration of the watershed are the gradual reintroduction of fire, management of fire-adapted ecosystems and meadow restoration.

Heavy fuel loading was a concern in the area where historic (pre 1900) fire return intervals were 10 years in mixed conifer, 40 years in red fir and 130 years in subalpine forests. Due to active fire suppression, the area had not experienced any active fire since 1916.

The Caples Ecological Restoration Project Decision Memo was signed in February of 2016 and approved the re-introductory of fire as an ecological process through prescribed burning on approximately 8,800 acres using manual and aerial ignition methods. Multiple entries within a 15-year timeframe was expected in order to meet multiple resource objectives. Approximately 4,400 acres was approved as understory burning in the lower elevations. Burning within vegetative islands (separated by barren rock) was approved on approximately 4,200 acres in the higher elevations where red fire and subalpine vegetation types would be targeted.

## Background for Implementation:

In 2016, local cooperators, stakeholders and some environmental groups supported the application that was approved to receive a three-year grant of \$472,000. It should be noted, that the same groups helped pay for the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) environmental preparation. The grant was given to the El Dorado Irrigation District to serve as the fiduciary agent for

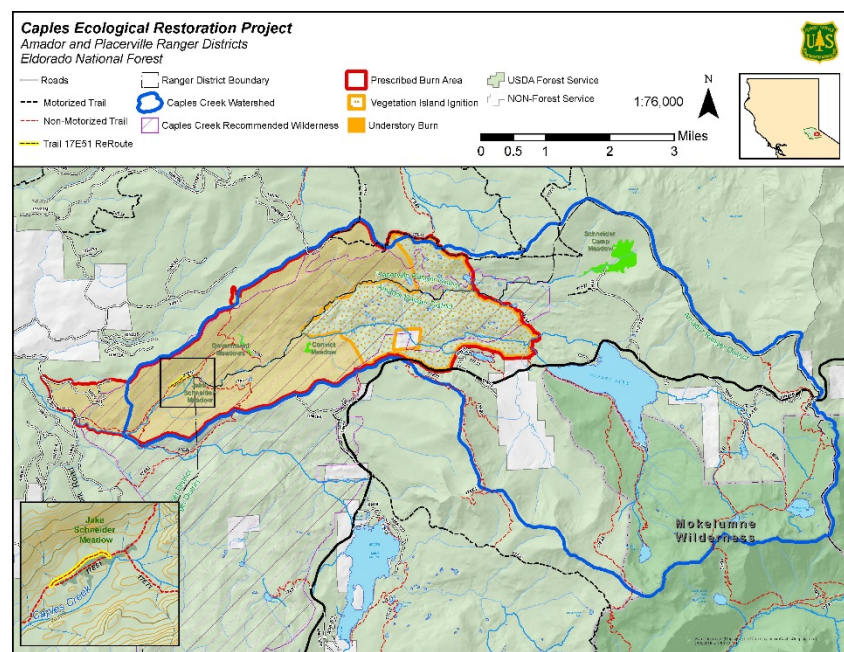


Figure 1: Caples Ecological Restoration Project area Map

the monies that the ENF would then submit for cost recovery reimbursement for work completed. This year, 2019, was the last year of the grant and to date, the ENF had burned approximately 300 acres and spent around \$80,000 of the funds. There had been serious discussions about getting extensions for the grant, but nothing to date had been confirmed.

The watershed (or project area), spans two districts, although in 2019, the Placerville Ranger District was further ahead in implantation with no burn plans finalized on the adjoining district. The Placerville District's overall plan for implementation of the project was to "start at the top and work their way down." With the heavy fuel loads, the district had completed a 50-foot fuel break along most of the ridge in preparation for the bigger burn blocks. Multiple pile burns (three underburns') were completed prior to September 2019. The underburns were implemented beginning in November 2017 with the last one being implemented for a couple hundred acres on June 30<sup>th</sup>, 2019. It should be noted that during that underburn, they had a slop over that required two Interagency Hotshot Crews (IHCs), and a couple engines working late nights to line the slop over and multiple days to mop up. It was expressed to the FLA team that it was "a lot of work."

In depth discussions for the October burn began to take place September 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2019. Pre-burn planning occurred between the IHC and local fire management leadership. It was expressed that the Caples pile burning was the "number one priority due to grant dollars." On September 27<sup>th</sup>, 2019, resources planning the prescribed burn raised concerns with local leadership regarding potential fire spread once fuels began to dry out and stated that "we will need to transition to a Type 2 [prescribed fire organization] and box in unit C-1 along the ridge top." A plan between DFMO and the IHC Superintendent began to occur where they discussed and agreed that they likely would need to transition to a type 2 burn after piles were ignited. With both in agreement, the plan was set in place to continue to pursue igniting the piles, knowing that they would likely get some creep. Forest Leadership had been informed of the planned ignitions and maintained their support of the project. Both the Low Complexity Prescribed Burn and Moderate Complexity Prescribed Burn plans had been previously reviewed and approved for that year's potential burn window. It was also discussed that there was substantial, "three inches," of rain received in the month of September.

USDA United States Department of Agriculture

**Prescribed Burn Notice**  
Eldorado National Forest  
Placerville Ranger District

**Caples Rx Pile Burn**  
Units 1, 2 (25 acres)  
*Depending on favorable weather conditions, ignitions are planned for*  
**September 30, 2019**

**Why Are We Burning?**  
Re-introduce fire back into the landscape to restore a vital ecosystem process in the watershed after nearly a century of fire exclusion. The project is intended to improve forest health and fire resiliency.

**Why Now?**  
Fall, winter, and spring bring cooler temperatures and precipitation, which favor prescribed burning. Each prescribed fire operation follows a prescribed fire burn plan, which considers temperature, humidity, wind, moisture of the vegetation, and conditions for the dispersal of smoke. This information is used to decide when and where to burn. We give as much advance notice as possible before burning, but some operations may be conducted on short notice.

**Smoke?**  
Smoke from prescribed fire operations is normal and may continue for several days after an ignition depending on the project size and environmental conditions. Smoke will settle into the valleys in the evening and lift in the morning. We coordinate with state and local county air pollution control districts and monitor weather conditions closely prior to prescribed fire ignition. Crews also conduct test burns before igniting a larger area, to verify how effectively fuels are consumed and how smoke will travel.

→ Follow us on Twitter @EldoradoNF for updates.  
→ If you have health concerns contact Teresa Riesenhuber at [trisenhuber@fs.fed.us](mailto:trisenhuber@fs.fed.us) or (530) 621-5223 to be added to the Smoke Notification List.

**Location?**  
Caples Creek Drainage  
Burn will be visible from Highway 88.  
*Legal location:*  
Township 10 North, Range 17E  
Section 7  
Township 10 North, Range 16E  
Section 13  
Township 10 North, Range 16E  
Sections 22, 27  
*Lat and Long:*  
N 38° 45.750  
W 120° 9.548

**Contact?**  
For questions about this project, call the Placerville Ranger District at (530) 644-2324.

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Eldorado National Forest website: [www.fs.usda.gov/eldorado](http://www.fs.usda.gov/eldorado)

Figure 1: The Caples Rx Pile Burn public notification flyer.



## Monday September 30<sup>th</sup> – Day 0 - The Day Piles were ignited

On the morning of September 30, 2019, Alpha Interagency Hotshot Crew (IHC) assembled at the Caples Creek Trailhead to implement the Low Complexity (type 3) Placerville Districtwide Pile burn which was similar to a project the IHC had accomplished the previous year, although later in the year, with no issues. Twenty-five acres of piles were planned to be burned that Monday. The burn boss, who had been identified three days prior, initiated the test fire at 0955. During the test fire, the burn boss, who was also qualified as a Type 2 (moderate complexity) burn boss, noted that there were “snow flurries and light rain.” The Alpha IHC Superintendent observed that it was “cold and there was snow on the ground.” The Owens Camp RAWS, which was the closest weather station to the burn, recorded over 1” of precipitation over the past 14 days. The weather forecast discussion for the day stated “Cold temperatures will continue today with periods of rain and snow showers. Dry weather and a warming trend are expected for the remainder of week” and that “afternoon West winds may increase later” in the week. At 1016, the burn boss documented that the test fire was successful and ignition operations continued with resources burning piles located at the Caples Creek trailhead, along Hay Flat Trail and Government Meadow.

As the burn progressed, personnel observed that older piles built in 2017, comprised mainly of Manzanita and fir, were not easily ignited. However, those that were built this year (2019) readily burned, especially those along Hay Flat Trail as it was located on a South aspect. The IHC Superintendent requested that the Burn Boss check with the DFMO to ensure “we are still all on the same page” in regard to the potential for creep. The burn boss relayed the information to the DFMO and included that the snow was melting quickly on the south aspect around the piles. The burn boss confirmed after the conversation that they were all “on the same page.”



*Figure 2: Picture of pile burn area on 9/30/19 prior to ignitions. Snow is still on the ground*

At 1402, ignitions were completed, and the burn boss instructed the Alpha IHC to “chunk” the piles to increase consumption. The IHC remained on scene until 1600 when they were released by the burn boss to return to their station. The crew noted there was no creep from the piles as they departed and that everything had gone as planned.

By 1800, the burn boss and IHC had returned to their station where discussions began regarding the next day of pile burn operations. Per the burn boss, the plan was to have the IHC light the remaining piles and patrol the next day. In addition, the burn boss would transition to another qualified Type 3 Burn Boss (RXB3) from Alpha IHC. Both the crew and the DFMO still expected that they would have some creep out there. The burn plan did allow for creep on “30% of the unit” and that if 30% or greater creep occurred, the burn boss “may” transition the burn to a moderate complexity Type 2 burn. The burn boss then informed the DFMO of the planned operations and all were in agreement.

### Tuesday October 1<sup>st</sup> – Day 1 after Piles were Ignited

The operation on this day would follow what Alpha IHC considered the normal plan for a low complexity burn operation. This included lining the piles to prevent creep. When Alpha IHC arrived at the project they found that, as expected, piles located in Hay Flat Trail had crept. The area that the creep had burned into, was steep and hard to access. It was also the area in burn unit C-1 (see figure 5 below) that had been planned with local fire management for under burning in the next phase of the project.

During the day, firing operations continued to burn the remaining 10 acres of piles. In addition to these piles being lined, they were “chunked” and the IHC remained on scene to ensure that these newly lit piles were secure. The burn boss and the IHC superintendent then discussed options for the next days’ operations and determined that continuing the indirect line constructed earlier in the year by a Type 2 crew along the C-1 Unit boundary would need to commence and that the crew would begin working on that task the next day. The DFMO asked that the IHC work their next day off to continue operations on the burn. In general, while the IHC crew had identified a lot more work ahead of them to regain the upper hand of the situation, the DFMO and crew were still in an operations normal mode.



Figure 3: Picture of smoke from piles burning on 9/30/19

### Wednesday October 2<sup>nd</sup> – Day 2 after Ignition

After arrival on the project and to expedite line construction, the IHC Superintendent requested a Type 2 initial attack (IA) crew to assist with the work. The request was filled with a 10 person Fuels crew. Shortly after ordering the additional crew, the IHC received an off forest resource order for a wildfire in Colorado. With receipt of the resource order, priorities shifted for the Alpha IHC and discussions followed with the Fuels crew when they arrived regarding command of the prescribed fire and actions to

be taken. The IHC informed the Fuels Crew that would be replacing them on the burn that Alpha IHC would remain on the burn until the Fuels Crew's burn boss "was comfortable" with the situation. The crews developed a plan to construct line along the ridge above the Hay Flat trail. The Fuels Crew Assistant Captain, who was the qualified RXB3, was then briefed by the outgoing burn boss before assuming command of the burn. As both crews initiated line construction, the IHC Superintendent asked that the incoming RXB3 "let him [IHC Superintendent] know when he [RXB3] is comfortable with them taking off for assignment."

As the day progressed, the IHC felt that operations were "normal." The IHC Superintendent, accompanied by one of his IHC Captains, returned to the Placerville District Office to brief Battalion Chief (BC) Zulu and BC X-Ray regarding the current prescribed burn situation and containment opportunities. They discussed three options: option one, put out piles at the junction; option two, put out all piles on the burn; and option three, line Unit C1, burn it and mop it up. Option three was the Alpha IHC recommendation. Discussion then shifted to contain the "creep" by implementing the Moderate Complexity (Type 2) Caples Burn Plan. Also, to identify the burn unit preparation that would need to occur prior to implementation. The IHC Superintendent stressed that 2 additional 10 person modules would need to be assigned to the burn along with immediately ordering "a crew to continue everything" and that if no crew was available, options would be limited. Both Battalion Chiefs felt that the plan needed to be reevaluated but felt that they would want to discuss options with the DFMO upon his return from leave. Once the briefing ended both Battalion Chiefs were "good" with the Alpha IHC leaving for their assignment.



Figure 4: Picture of smoke from piles burning on 10/1/19

As the District and Alpha IHC overhead briefed at the district office, the incoming burn boss, who assumed command of the prescribed burn at 1400, released the IHC who then returned to quarters. Prior to leaving, Alpha IHC Superintendent calls the DFMO and says, "things look good." In addition, the IHC Superintendent emphasized that another IHC needed to be ordered "ASAP."

Considering the advice provided by the IHC Superintendent to BC Zulu, BC Zulu placed an order for a replacement crew that day to the Forest Duty Officer (DO).



## Thursday October 3<sup>rd</sup> – Day 3 after Ignition

The DFMO returned to work from two days off on sick leave to assess the situation and see the area that had “crept.” As the DFMO hiked the active burn to gain further situational awareness, the Forest DO requested that all available resources respond to the Caples prescribed burn to assist with the operations. After viewing the burn and discussing the situation with the RXB3, the DFMO understood the complexity of the burn was increasing based on multiple actions that were

occurring, including the increased area of creep, line construction, potential firing operations along the ridge, and the current pile burn. With the new assessment of the situation, the DFMO determined that the burn organization needed to transition to moderate complexity to implement the Type 2 Burn Plan.

The DFMO decided that he would assume the role of RXB2 and BC Zulu would become the RXB2 trainee (RXB2t) in the new organization. Although BC Zulu accepted the assignment, he did not feel that he was adequately familiar with the project. Transition of command on the burn occurred during the afternoon of October 3<sup>rd</sup>, at approximately 1530.

During the evening of October 3<sup>rd</sup>, the resource order for the IHC crew was placed and filled with the Bravo IHC to assist with the prescribed burn. The IHC was to report to the Caples prescribed burn on October 4<sup>th</sup>.

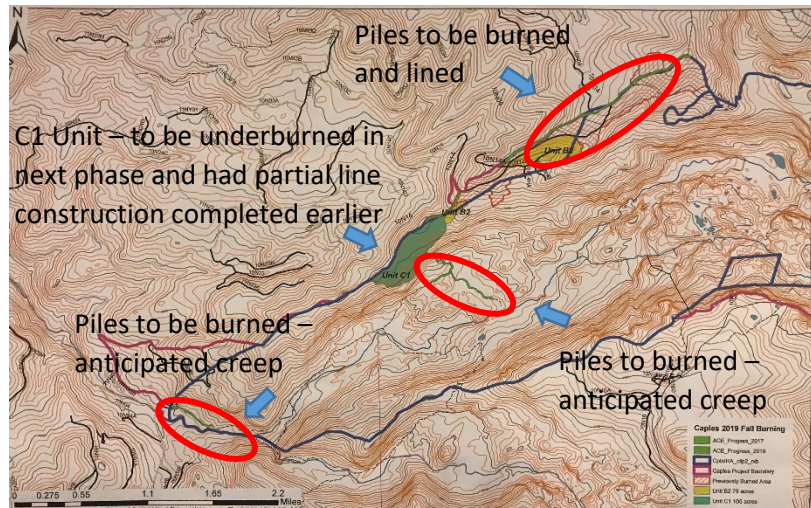


Figure 5: Map of planned 2019 Burning. Red circles are location of piles to be burned. Unit C1 (Green polygon) was location of currently approved underburn.

## Friday October 4<sup>th</sup> – Day 4 after piles were Ignited

With limited resources available on forest to assist with the prescribed burn, two engines reported on October 4<sup>th</sup>. In addition, a Field Observer (FOBS) was also requested and during the day, mapped the area that had crept at 30—40 acres. As resources engaged on the burn, the RXB2 and RXB2t met with the Forest Fire Management Officer (FFMO) and the Forest Fuels Specialist to assess the situation and review the fire modeling for the burn to determine the next course of action. During this meeting, the FFMO gave his “support” to burn down the ridge to Silver Fork Road. This expanded the planned ignition area, however the burn stayed within the existing unit boundary and project area.

There was discussion about the potential for the prescribed fire ignition to not back through the brush fields based upon the reported 130% live fuel moistures in the brush. This resulted in writing an amendment to have aerial ignitions available as a tool for future operations. There was discussion of adding an additional unit to the east end of the existing burn plan boundary to align with the original project NEPA boundary. The two components of the amendment were discussed with the Forest Supervisor and the District Ranger (DR), and agreement was reached to proceed. The amendment to

the existing burn plan went through the required policy steps, and was technically reviewed prior to signature by the District Ranger (DR). The additional acres that were addressed in the burn plan amendment included the lower halves of Unit A and B (see figure 6 below).

While an official burn plan for these additional acres had not been completed to date, Fire Leadership had been discussing the overall larger plan since the NEPA originally was initiated and given the circumstances if unit C1's containment lines did not hold, they felt like they had a good opportunity to implement the larger plan.

Bravo IHC arrived on scene and was briefed regarding their assignment to burn the previously constructed control line of unit "C1" located on the ridge. After the IHC's assessment, it was decided that the burning needed to be completed from the high point of unit C1 back towards the trail first before proceeding towards the west. According to the burn boss "Good progress was made" that day.

***"Good Progress Was Made."***  
*RXB2 reflected on the day*

As Bravo IHC and the burn bosses continued to discuss the current situation, they determined that additional line prep would be needed to adequately hold the line during firing operations. Once they felt comfortable to do so, they commenced firing while continuing to prep line ahead of the operation. As the shift continued, the IHC completed firing out along the control line towards the east of the unit, and scouted line to the west.

That day, a meeting occurred at the Supervisors Office with Forest leadership staff that was present. During this meeting a possible wildfire declaration was briefly discussed and dismissed as this was “the absolute last resort.” If we declared a wildfire “it would trigger an investigation.” The impression of some members of the Forest Leadership there, was that this burn was not a big deal and was “fully under control and in prescription.” In general, Forest Leadership was supportive of the plan.

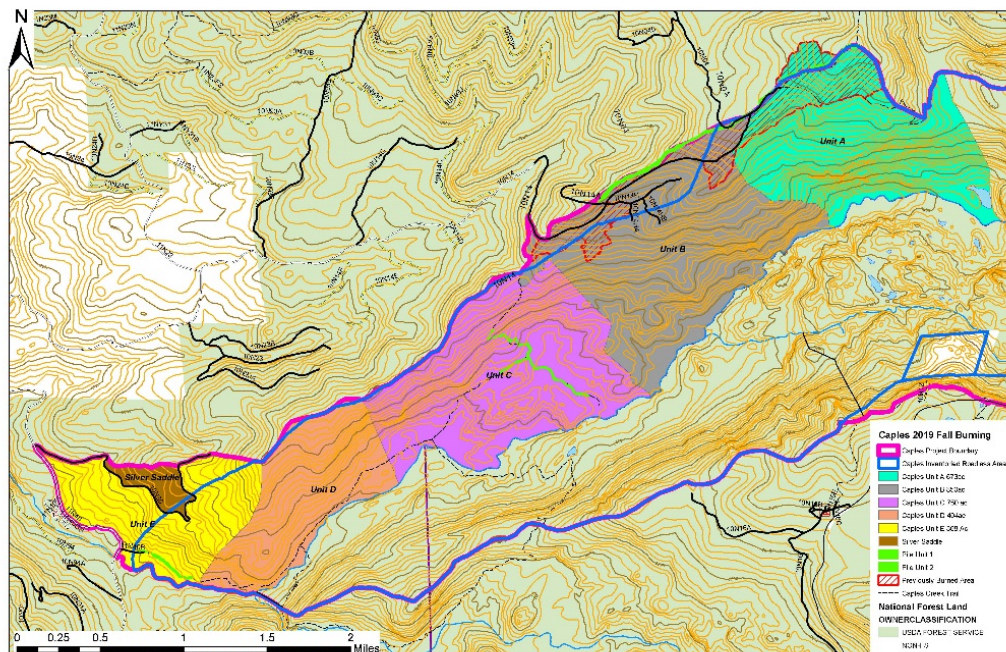


Figure 6: Map of 10/4/19 amended RXB2 units. See Figure 5 for original burn units



## Saturday October 5<sup>th</sup> – Day 5 after piles were Ignited

On this day, the first organized operational briefing for the Type 2 burn occurred with all resources onsite which included: (1) Type 2IA crew, Bravo IHC, (1) FOBS, (1) Dozer, (3) Type 3 engines, (1) Fire Effects Monitor trainee (FEMOt), (1) RXB2, (1) RXB2t, (1) Firing Boss (FIRB), and (1) Holding Boss. Operational objectives for the day included implementing firing operations along the ridge within unit C1. The long-term strategy was to continue to bring the fire down the ridge past the C1 unit boundary to extend to the Silver Fork Road before predicted high winds occurred later that week.

The Bravo IHC was put in charge of firing. The area that they were about to burn had a previously completed fuel break that had been cut, piled, and burned within the past year. After scouting the line, however, the IHC determined that additional line prep and snagging needed to occur prior to firing out the line. From Bravo IHC's perspective the burn "had minimal prep, minimal snagging and incomplete line."

They sent a module out ahead to prep the line for the burn out. The crew noticed a change in operational tempo and an increased emphasis on getting the C1 unit blacklined, however, this was dependent on the progress of the line prep and handline construction.

During the day, the Bravo IHC Superintendent continued preparation for the pending resource order to Region 8 for a "preposition" assignment with a reporting date of October 10. The IHC Superintendent notified the RXB2 of the order. After the conversation, the RXB2 believed that Bravo IHC would remain assigned to the burn until October 8. Later that day, the IHC informs the RXB2 they will only be able to be on the burn until the 7<sup>th</sup>. Bravo IHC was previously committed to the Region 8 assignment and expected that the information about the resource order had been communicated prior to accepting the assignment.

***Saturday was "the best  
prescribed burning that I have  
ever done."***

***-firefighter-***

Back on the fire, at one point during firing operations, the IHC felt that the burn had the potential to outflank them, but this was a situation they were accustomed to during firing operations on wildland fires and planned accordingly. As the day progressed, resources successfully completed and held firing operations along the “C1” ridge to the hand line on south side of C1 to meet the day’s operational objective. With the completion, both Fire and Forest leadership continued to be very supportive of the current operations.

During the evening of October 5<sup>th</sup> at approximately 2000, a wind event occurred and produced sustained East winds of 12-15 mph with gusts up to 20 mph.

### Sunday October 6<sup>th</sup> – Day 6 after piles were Ignited

The increased winds from the previous evening, pushed the burn out from the previous day, over the “C1” ridge blackline. It was discovered by the RXB2 early that morning. Resources arriving on the line about the same time as the RXB2 were surprised by the slop over as they were unaware of the forecasted winds from the previous evening. As resources engaged to contain the slop over, the RXB2 placed an order for three Type 21A crews or better in anticipation of the next wind event predicted in the Fire Weather Watch for October 9<sup>th</sup>.

After Bravo IHC had sized up the slop over, they requested a helicopter to assist with operations based on information provided at briefing that a local initial attack helicopter may be available for use. The plan to pick up the C1 Ridge slop over with the fuels crew, would go much faster with bucket support due to the amount of distance between resources. While a Type 1 helicopter order was placed it did not arrive that operational shift.



*Figure 7: Picture of smoke on 10/6/19. While driving back from days off, the Forest Supervisors witnesses column and begins to get “indigestion.”*

That day, the RXB2 and RXB2t discussed the possibility of a wildfire declaration. A general increase in stress across the organization is palpable and recognized. In the conversation, the RXB2t discovers that Bravo IHC will not be there the following day to fill a pre-planned resource order. This was the second IHC crew that had left the burn for a higher priority assignment, in less than 3 days.

Another order was placed for an IHC which was filled with Charlie IHC. When the incoming IHC receives the order, they look at the weather for the area, and were surprised to see that a Fire Weather Watch was predicted. Charlie IHC had heard that winter weather had been experienced in the area of the prescribed fire days prior to the project beginning. This caused confusion on the crew about what kind of assignment they were headed to.



Figure 8: Picture on 10/6/19. At another overlook, the Forest Supervisor views the burn and remembers thinking “this isn’t a pile burn.”

## Monday October 7<sup>th</sup> – Day 7 after piles were Ignited

Upon arriving at the office, the District Ranger (DR) promptly received a face to face briefing by the DFMO. Prior to this day, the DR had been away from the District due to a family emergency. During this briefing, the DR gave his leader’s intent and stated that “if we need to declare [a wildfire], I’m okay with it.” The Forest DO had also advised both the DR and the DFMO that the RXB2 should have “a good plan in place” if the prescribed burn were to be “declared a wildfire.” District and Forest leadership emphasized the safety of our people was the number one priority. Concerns about funding should be secondary and should not be a prominent factor in decision making. However, even with that emphasis by leadership the DR remembered hearing the DFMO state “don’t worry, I know what our daily burn rate is.” Strategy and tactics on the burn to date had been influenced by keeping under the budget they had for the grant.

***“Saturday looked like a prescribed burn with no control lines, after that I wouldn’t have wanted to be the burn boss.”***

*- firefighter-*

Later that morning, the District Ranger spoke with Forest Supervisor and the DFMO about a training that he was scheduled to attend from October 8<sup>th</sup> – 10<sup>th</sup>. He inquired whether it was needed for him to stay at the District instead of attending the training with the current events happening. It was agreed that his presence was not “necessary.” The DR asked them to alert him if the “status changes” and also let them know that he would “immediately return” if needed.



Resource orders continued to be filled by: Charlie IHC, (2) Wildfire Use Modules (WFMs), and (3) T2IA Crews. The request for a Type 1 helicopter was resubmitted. Back on the prescribed burn, Bravo IHC who was initially expecting to hold their previous days firing operations, was briefed to continue burning with the Firing Boss position again assigned to Bravo IHC. Although the Bravo IHC continued to prep line ahead of their firing operations, they sensed that the overall operational tempo of the burn had again increased and the emphasis on completing the firing operations became more critical.

As new resources arrived on forest, including Charlie IHC, they were briefed and sent directly to the Caples prescribed burn. Charlie IHC noted that the briefing felt more “suppression oriented” compared to their previous experiences at prescribed burn briefings. Charlie IHC also felt that there was a sense of “urgency” to complete the firing operations. Once they arrived at the burn, Charlie IHC tied in with the Bravo IHC. As the incoming IHC engaged, they continued line prep and firing in a “hot hand-off” with the outgoing IHC. The helicopter requested the previous day was finally filled by a KMAX helicopter and was ready to fly by 1500.



*Figure 9: Picture from helicopter flight on 10/7/19*

Later in the day, the RXB2, along with the Forest Supervisor, the District Ranger and FFMO, DFMO took an aerial recon of the Caples prescribed burn. During the flight, the FFMO observed 12 – 15 foot flame lengths in the brush during the firing operations and that these observations were not congruent with the reported fuel moistures for the area. They also observed that burning had progressed to the dozer line above the 10N30 Road.

It was noted by the DFMO that even given all the information provided on the flight that he was “surprised” with the support he personally felt from the Forest Leadership. He also felt that because of this support he was able to more readily focus on managing the burn. After the flight, the FFMO informed the Forest Supervisor that he felt that the current course of action being taken on the prescribed burn was their best option under the current conditions, but it was going to be a “coin toss” if we would achieve our goals. The FFMO also stated that he was supportive of the efforts.

## Tuesday October 8<sup>th</sup> – Day 8 after piles were Ignited

Murphy’s Law entered the scenario when Pacific Gas and Electric (PG&E) implemented a Public Safety Power Shutoff (PSPS) due to high winds to prevent potential fire starts from powerlines. This would further complicate operations and communication.

Due to expanding costs of the prescribed burn, the RXB2 began to get concerned about funding the project. The RXB2 expressed these concerns to the District and Forest Leadership, who continued to insist that we would find the funding.

With the accumulation of events up to this point, the RXB2 requested a Public Information Officer (PIO) to address any public information needs concerning the prescribed burn.

The focus of operations this day was to secure the eastside of the fire with two Type 2IA crews. In conversation, the RXB2 stated we “have to get through the wind event and tie in to Silver Fork Road.” It was noted that there were competing priorities on the fire as crews were moved around. Charlie IHC felt that the “command structure should have been broken into divisions” to increase span of control.

Another amendment to the already amended burn plan was suggested this day to the Forest Fuels Officer. The suggestion was for the burn plan to allow for additional acres on the adjoining Ranger District, however this amendment was not further developed.

### Wednesday October 9<sup>th</sup> – Day 9 after piles were Ignited

After the briefing, at which both the Forest Supervisor and Deputy FFMO attended, burn personnel began firing operations at 1100. It was again noted that the Forest Leadership was showing a lot of support to the personnel involved in the burn and were actively engaged. High winds had been forecast but did not meet the criteria for any type of warning or watch to be issued. Previous firing operations had burned to a depth of approximately 1,000 feet.

In order to hold the burn during the next wind event, Charlie IHC developed plans and timeframes for firing operations. In conclusion, the IHC felt that they were at least a day behind where they felt comfortable in reaching their goals of holding the fire. They then briefed the RXB2 on their planned course of action. Charlie IHC felt that they needed to burn as if on a suppression fire to be able to successfully hold the fire in the next wind event, however, it was apparent during the



*Figure 10: Picture of tree torching on 10/9/19*

briefing that they still needed to meet “prescribed burn” objectives. Charlie IHC found it to be “difficult” to burn as “fast” as they wanted while still trying to meet burn objectives. To help with this, the helicopter was used supporting the burn throughout the day.

The RXB2 was pleased by the progress at the end of the day. Firing operations were completed to FS road 10N30. However, near the completion of the burn out, a slop over occurred below the 10N30. It was quickly caught with dozer line. Early in the evening the RXB2t placed a cache order for pumps, hose and appliances to build a hose lay in anticipation of the weather predictions. Archeological sites were protected with hose lays, and pumps were located in safe locations near bridges.

During that day Expanded Dispatch began to get set up. The power outages caused delays and problems getting the organization set up to meet the support needs of the fire.

**“It’s an incident...we’re not implementing a planned prescribed fire project, we are making daily initial attack plans to maintain a prescribed fire project.”**

-RXB2t-

remembers saying **“It’s an incident...we’re not implementing a planned prescribed fire project, we are making daily initial attack plans to maintain a prescribed fire project.”**

Things were getting more complicated. Based on the day’s events, the FFMO remembers thinking that, “things were getting operationally challenging.” They ordered the fixed wing “firewatch” platform for the next day in anticipation of the night’s events. The Firewatch program is mostly known for the two Cobra helicopters that have advanced imaging equipment and can perform IR work on fires. The fixed wing platform also came with a qualified Air Attack, however, it was not ordered to serve in that capacity.

At approximately 2000, winds on the prescribed burn increased to 12-15 mph with gusts to 20 mph. During the night, the fire actively burned producing spot fires both to the east and west. Night shift crews were busy, holding and successfully securing the lines along the ridge.

USDA  
United States Department of Agriculture

## Prescribed Burn Notice

### Eldorado National Forest

Placerville Ranger District

### Caples Rx Pile and Understory Burn

Multiple Units (up to 500 acres)

*Depending on favorable weather conditions, ignitions are planned for*

## October 3-21, 2019

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⇒ Follow us on Twitter @EldoradoNF for updates.  
⇒ If you have health concerns contact: Teresa Riesenhuber at [triesenhuber@fs.fed.us](mailto:triesenhuber@fs.fed.us) or (530) 621-5223 to be added to the

**Location?**  
Caples Creek Drainage  
Burn will be visible from Highway 88.  
*Legal location:*  
Township 10 North, Range 17E  
Section 7  
Township 10 North, Range 16E  
Section 13  
Township 10 North, Range 16E  
Sections 22, 27  
*Lat and Long:*  
N 38° 45.750  
W 120° 9.548

**Contact?**  
For questions about this project, call the Placerville Ranger District at (530) 644-2324.

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Forest Service  
Eldorado National Forest website: [www.fs.usda.gov/eldorado](http://www.fs.usda.gov/eldorado)  
2017

Figure 11: Public Prescribed Burn Notice

The RXB2 and RXB2t began to discuss a possible night shift. With resource shortage concerns and the resources they had on sight, beginning to show the signs of fatigue from their efforts, this was debated for some time. It was decided that due to the predicted winds, they would need a night shift and began planning. In a briefing that day, the RXB2t





Figure 12: Picture of burn at the end of the day on October 9, 2019.

### Thursday October 10<sup>th</sup> – Day 10 after piles were Ignited

At the morning briefing on October 10th, winds were so strong that the “heavy” burn plan, two coffee cups, and an iPad blew off the hood of a truck and were blown approximately 250 feet away. At this point, the Forest Supervisor, who was continuing to show his support by attending the briefings, thought things were not going to go well. Weather conditions on October 10<sup>th</sup> again tested resources on the prescribed burn. At approximately 1000, winds increased to 10-30 mph and holding efforts were compromised. At the same time the firewatch platform reported that a 250 acre spot fire was detected across Caples Creek. After hearing the current situation on the radio, the Forest Fuels Specialist felt “we were outside of our complexity analysis.” Charlie IHC “suggested to the RXB2 that the prescribed burn should be converted to a wildfire.”

Upon the realization of events that had occurred, the RXB2 notified the Forest Assistant Fire Management Officer (FAFMO) of the spot fire and escalation of the complexity of the fire. At 1200, the RXB2 texted the District Ranger that “they were starting to lose it” due to the high winds. Upon notification, the DR proceeded to inform the Forest Supervisor that “that they are planning on declaring a wildfire for the Caples incident” given the increased winds and need for immediate support.

**“As soon as the declaration occurred, within one day I was able to build the proper organization to manage a complex type 3 fire.”**

*-Incoming Type 3 IC-*

A conference call was set up between the RXB2t, FAFMO, the Forest Supervisor and the District Ranger regarding the declaration to a wildfire. The Forest Supervisor stated that “we were not meeting our goals, acres were burning outside the unit and we couldn’t get resources.” After eleven days of prescribed fire, the Forest Supervisor made the decision to declare the Caples Understory Burn a “wildfire.”

When discussing the negative cultural stigma around declaring a prescribed fire a wildfire, the District Ranger remembers feeling “this is my one escaped fire” in my career, further indicating that it is not culturally acceptable in our organization to declare a prescribed fire a wildfire.

**“My world changed as soon as I declared it a wildfire... After that I had unlimited resources.”**

*-Forest Supervisor-*

The Caples understory prescribed fire was officially declared a wildfire at 1330 on October 10, 2019. After it was declared a wildfire, it became the second highest priority wildfire in the Region. The Forest Supervisor’s observation was: “My world changed as soon as I declared it a wildfire... After that I had unlimited resources.”



*Figure 13: Picture of the burn/fire taken multiple days after the fire was declared. This was a picture of the most severe fire effects on the fire. Some of the missing vegetation was old brush fields, but the effects were more of a mosaic burn.*

## Thoughts from Interviewees

As with any organization review, a close examination after an incident can reveal areas of improvement. Based on the open and honest dialog from personnel involved, the FLA team captured the following lessons learned:

- The Culture of the agency is that we will only declare a prescribed burn as a wildfire “as an absolute last resort.” There was concern expressed during the FLA interviews by personnel assigned to the Caples prescribed fire that in order to keep the prescribed burn from being declared a wildfire, that the daily strategy and tactics consisted of “Initial Attack” for each operational period up to the wildfire declaration. Questions that surfaced: Is this perception/reality putting more risk on our employees? What about hazard pay?
- It was suggested to have a Regional (possible National) discussion regarding the perceived/real impacts of an ordering process that differentiates between a “Wildfire System and Prescribed Fire implementation.” The common theme and quotes stressed the higher prioritization of needs by the Wildfire System, superseded the needs of the Prescribe Fire. Questions: What emphasis is placed on prescribed fires? Is there a difference between a prescribed fire and one that is on the verge of being declared a wildfire?
- It was mentioned that prescribed fire implementation is constrained by our current funding mechanisms. From the FLA interviews it was said that the burn operations, strategy and tactics, were constrained out of concern regarding the daily funding expenditures or financial “burn rate.” While this constraint was a grant, it is believed to be applied to any funding situation (i.e. HF, BD, KV, etc.). In this instance, it directly resulted in reducing prescribed fire operation efficiency. Quote from an IHC crewmember: “If you’re going to do a project – you need to spend the money – and not cut corners.” Question: Should funding drive operations or declarations?
- It was expressed by many, that Public Information Officer(s) (PIOs) are needed as a part of the contingency plans or at least incorporated in the wildfire declaration part of the Burn Plan. It was expressed multiple times that a lesson learned is to “order a designated PIO early and often.” Question: Should PIO’s be a part of the burn plan?
- There was expressed concern over the “revolving door” of resources and personnel transitions in and out of the organization. There was expressed frustration by how many IHC transitions occurred in a short time frame. It was suggested to create ROSS orders for all prescribed fire resources and personnel that are assigned (on forest or off) to avoid their reassignment to other ongoing and emerging incidents. Question: should prescribed fire resources and personnel assigned to the burn be committed in ROSS like a wildfire assignment?

## FLA Team members:

Kurt Steele, Deputy Forest Supervisor, Nez Perce Clearwater National Forests  
Mike Noel, Regional Fire Operations Risk Management Officer, Region 5  
John Wood, Asst. Unit Aviation Officer, Central Oregon Fire Management Service  
Rebecca Johnson, Prescribed Fire/Fuels Specialist, Stanislaus National Forest  
Troy Parrish, Assistant Fire Management Officer, Fremont-Winema National Forest  
Brent Skaggs, Retired Fire Management Officer