Rapid Lesson Sharing

Event Type: Engagement Dilemma

Date: August 29, 2015

Location: Pacific Northwest Region

Est. 2002

As the Operations Section Chief What Do You Do?

Fire behavior on your fire in late August.

NARRATIVE

Imagine you're assigned to a 50,000-acre timber fire as the IMT's Operations Section Chief.

It's late August. Resources are stretched thin. Your team has been extended. The incoming replacement team will be here tomorrow.

On this incident, you've had some good days—and some days you'd rather forget.

Still Miles of Indirect Line to be Secured

After nearly three weeks, the fire is reaching some containment. You've had humans and machines accomplish massive work. But there's still miles of indirect line that's yet to be burned out.

Outside of your lines, there's a wide variety of values at risk. Most of the fires in the Region have miles of uncontrolled fire edge, including yours**.** Numerous structures have burned. The flags at your ICP are flying at half-staff. The memorial for three U.S. Forest Service firefighters is just 200 hundred miles and a day away.

Super Strong Winds Predicted to Hit Your Fire

And now for the weather. An unseasonably strong low pressure system sits just offshore. This system—described by a National Weather Service meteorologist as a *"once in 30-year event for wind strength for late August"*—will bring a truly mixed bag as it rumbles onshore.

Burning out the day before the predicted storm under ideal conditions. Will it hold when the wind comes? Will you staff the Division you've worked so hard on?

There will be some rain, cooler temperatures, and higher humidity. But, on the highest elevations on your fire, the winds could also be 50-plus mph.

These winds will certainly impact your lines and the miles of your uncontained fire edge.

Folks are in camp. It's time for morning briefing.

And now your team is just one day away from the beginning of your transition with the next Type 2 Team. This new team is from a long ways away.

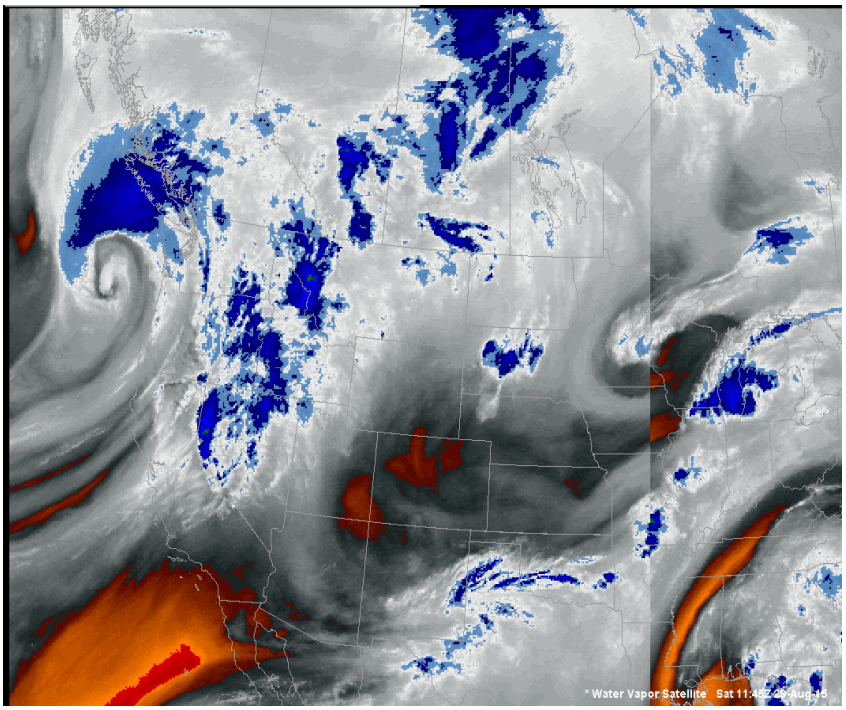
As the Operations Section Chief: What do you do?

Real Life Scenario
On August 29, this scenario was the "real life" actual dilemma facing the managers of the Cougar Creek Fire.

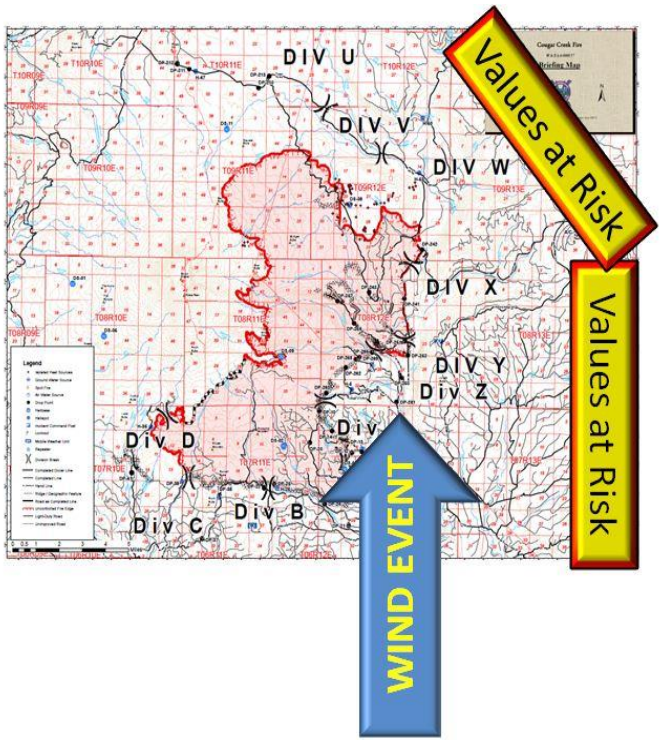
On August 28, the Pacific Northwest Coordinating Group (PCNWCG) issued a Safety Alert associated with this particular wind event.

During the days prior to the wind event, the IMT—in close consultation with the Incident Meteorologist (IMET) and Fire Behavior Analyst (FBAN)—discussed how they might respond to these forecasted winds. Here's some of what was discussed:

- ✓ The Cougar Creek Fire has large areas of dead trees in and around constructed fire line and the fire edge. Wind and snags and firefighters are a problematic cocktail. Numerous reports of both fire-weakened AND green tree near-misses had been shared throughout the Region.
- ✓ The timing of the wind event (which wasn't highly certain until the night of the 28th) might contribute to egress as well as escape routes being cut off as trees fall during the wind event.
- ✓ Aviation operations would likely be restricted, if not shut down entirely. This was significant for a number of reasons, particularly medevac support.
- ✓ If the storm failed to deliver any precipitation, there was a chance that the wind could significantly affect the miles of uncontained fire edge, potentially directly impacting line personnel.



The approaching storm on August 29 at 0445 hours.

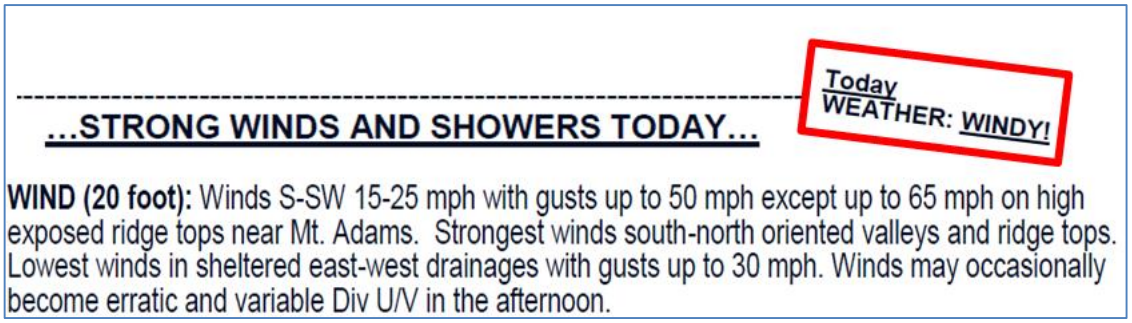


Miles of uncontained fire edge + values-at-risk + wind event = Engagement Dilemma.

What Would You Do?

Storm Assessment Response Team
The IMT concluded that they would limit the number of personnel who would travel to the line on the morning of the 29th. As one of the IMT's Ops Chiefs stated: *"We're going to have a soft start to the shift today. Folks are going to stay in camp this morning—at least for a while. Until we can get out to the line to see what's out there."*

In order to assess the feasibility of sending Division resources to their respective pieces of line, a "Storm Assessment Response Team" was identified. "*We used Storm Assessment Teams in 2005 hurricanes Katrina and Rita*," noted one IMT Safety Officer. "*They were very effective, and we thought we'd try something similar on this fire*." The Cougar Creek Fire teams included Safety and Operations personnel, as well as several pieces of heavy equipment to assist with opening roads.



The weather forecast for August 29, 2015.

The Storm Assessment Response Team traveled out to the line during the weather event and provided updates to resources back at ICP, including when weather conditions were conducive to engaging line personnel. In addition, this special team also gave updates on road and travel conditions.

Because winds showed up with much less impact than was anticipated, approximately 80 percent of the IMT's resources had actually made it out to the line by the end of the day—on a delayed and staggered set of timeframes. The burn out from the previous night held, and the transition with the incoming unfolded uneventfully.

LESSONS

- ✓ Variable levels of line staffing should always be an option, particularly when exceptional weather events could expose fire personnel to additional hazards as well as to limited egress or compromised escape routes.
- ✓ Input from an onsite Incident Meteorologist can be extremely valuable for operational planning and for real-time situational awareness updates.
- ✓ The deliberate, patient approach displayed by the Incident Management Team during this event contributed to an operational tempo that allowed and encouraged personnel to "go slow to go fast."

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