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National Park Service Releases Review of Fire at Glacier National Park's Sperry Chalet

BOISE— Today, the National Park Service (NPS) issued the results of an independent review and investigation of the fire that burned the dormitory of the Sperry Chalet in Glacier National Park in August 2017.

The review outlines the origins and growth of the Sprague fire over the course of three weeks, until it reached the Sperry Chalet complex on August 31. It concludes that despite the best efforts of firefighters to protect all the structures at Sperry Chalet, an ember entered the structure near a second story window and ignited the wooden portion of the structure.

Fire crews successfully protected other structures within the Sperry Chalet complex. No lives were lost and no injuries occurred while defending the complex.

"Growing up near Glacier National Park, I have a special appreciation for the cultural significance of the Sperry Chalet," said Secretary of the Interior Ryan Zinke. "I applaud the great work of the firefighters who responded so bravely to the flames, and I look forward to rebuilding the Sperry Chalet as part of President Trump's focus on our American infrastructure. Still, the size and scope of the Sprague fire reminds us that aggressive fuels management is necessary to keep Americans safe from wildfires, particularly in the West. We need to continue removing the dead and dying timber from our forests so that we can truly address this problem."

The summer of 2017 was a challenging fire season nationwide. The location of Sperry Chalet deep in the park's backcountry presented additional logistical obstacles to firefighting. Water availability to operate sprinklers and hose systems was a concern due to early snowpack melt and lack of spring and summer precipitation. The lack of roads in the vicinity of the chalet made it impossible for fire engines to assist.

Retardant drops had been considered to assist in the protection of the Sperry Chalet complex, however, the terrain that makes for beautiful views from the chalet also made effective aerial retardant drops extremely difficult and dangerous to pilots. At the time the dormitory caught on fire, winds were blowing at 20 to 30 miles per hour and smoke blanketed the area.

The review provides observations and recommendations for the National Park Service and interagency fire community. Among these, the review team noted:

- Sprinklers were installed on the roof of the dormitory by a Glacier National Park maintenance employee trained in fall protection. The sprinklers were operating at the time the dormitory ignited.
 - Recommend that specific NPS wildland firefighters also be trained in fall protection to safely install sprinklers and shelter wrap. The focus for this training could be for parks with remote, high-risk historic structures.
- During the incident, there was much discussion about shelter wrapping the Sperry Dormitory. Shelter wrapping involves installing an aluminum barrier curtain around the entire structure. The review team consistently heard that firefighter safety was the first priority and the dormitory could not be completely and effectively wrapped due to the building construction. The lower part of the building was wrapped and was the highest level of work that could be accomplished safely and effectively.
 - Structure protection means that firefighters take appropriate measures, such as safely wrapping the areas where it will be effective, and realize that sometimes it means accepting unavoidable vulnerability, especially when highly flammable structures are situated in dangerous topographic settings.

“Wildland firefighters put forth their best effort in a difficult situation. We will use what we learned from the loss of this iconic structure to improve where we can safely do so,” said National Park Service Fire Director Dan Buckley. “The action items resulting from the investigation and review will inform us for managing risk in future similar situations.”

Glacier National Park Superintendent Jeff Mow said, "I and the park staff want to thank the review team. We appreciate their work and professionalism while reviewing this difficult event. We also deeply appreciate the work of the firefighters who tirelessly fought the fire throughout the night on August 31 at the Sperry Chalet Complex, saving the historic dining room and multiple other important buildings. We now turn our attention to restoring the Sperry Chalet experience for the next 100 years."

The NPS delegated the review and investigation of the fire at Sperry Chalet to an independent team of six interagency fire experts in September 2017. The primary goal of the investigation was to determine the dormitory fire's cause, while the review was to understand the decisions made based on the conditions that existed, and to identify and share lessons learned within both the National Park Service and interagency fire community.

The review report and fire investigation are located on the [Wildland Fire Lessons Learned website](#).



The Sperry Chalet burned during the Sprague fire on August 31, 2017. Few water sources were available in the area, firefighters used a portable water tank and hoselay to fight the structure fire.

Additional images and video are available on [Glacier National Park's Flickr page](#).

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