

FISH LAKE/GIBSON CREEK FIRE
JULY 27, 1977
WASHINGTON STATE
ONE FATALITY

The Fish Lake Fire started in north-central Washington as the result of an abandoned campfire on July 27, 1977. The Gibson Creek Fire started that same afternoon as the result of a long-range spot (3/4 mile) from the Fish Lake Fire. The Fish Lake Fire was on USFS-protected lands, while the spot which became the Gibson Creek Fire was on Washington State DNR-protected lands. Hence, the two separate fires.

Background Information

The Okanogan National Forest, along with the remainder of eastern Washington, was feeling the effects of the prolonged drought which began the previous year. Precipitation from September 1976 through July 1977 was about forty percent of normal for the area of the fire.

Topography

The starting point of the spot fire which became the Gibson Creek Fire was at about 2,000 feet elevation. The initial spread across the Spikeman drainage occurred on a slope that was approximately sixty percent. The rest of the area was marked by slopes from five to ninety percent. Rock outcroppings are prevalent throughout the steeper areas. The elevation range is from 2,000 to 4,000 feet. The general slope of the fire area faces east, however, Spikeman Creek and Gibson Creek dissect the area, providing some minor north and south aspects.

Vegetation and Fuels

The spot fire started on the north side of the draw which branches into the Spikeman Creek and Gibson Creek drainages. Fuel in this area consisted of dry grass, brush and small saw timber. Up the slope and up the draw, the vegetation changed to dense mixed douglas fir and ponderosa pine of sapling to large saw timber size. Accumulations of duff, litter, limbs and down logs due to fire exclusion were present from the lower third of the slope to the ridge. The creek bottom was extremely brushy. Chutes between rock bluffs added to the fuel in the bottom by dumping all of the side slope material into accumulations that resembled log jams. The less-steep slopes near the top edge of the fire had been logged and was somewhat broken up by old skid trails. Residual logging slash had been down long enough to deteriorate the fine fuels.

Weather and Fire Behavior

The fire behavior on the Fish Lake-Gibson Creek Fire was considered to be normal. Control of the fire was based on that behavior. A thunderstorm had moved through the area the previous day. Fuel sticks at Conconully were measured at 5% at 1400 on July 27. RH was in the mid 20's and temperature was in the low 80's. Winds that afternoon were generally upslope, upcanyon at 10-15 mph. At the time of the accident, however, the winds were gusty, from the east and north.

Strategy and Tactics

When initial attack was made on the Gibson Creek spot fire, it was 5-8 acres in size. A seven-person crew from Conconully Ranger District started flanking the south side of the fire, while a three-person Washington State fire crew started up the east side. The plan was to anchor at the southeast corner and construct handline up both sides to eventually pinch off the head of the fire. By 1530, the fire had started up the steep south side of Spikeman Creek. The Conconully crew pulled back and started retrailing and securing the southeast corner (Point B). The Conconully crew boss left the crew at this point to scout the extent of the fire up Spikeman Creek. Shortly after he started up Spikeman Creek, the fire began crowning, cutting off his planned escape route. He tried to get across Spikeman Creek and to open ground, but was overrun by the fire (Point E). The fire was about 300 acres at this time.

Spread of the fire was stopped on July 28 at about 1,750 acres. The crew boss of the Conconully crew was found fatally burned on July 30, 1977.

MECHANICAL FACTORS:

Fire shelters were not required at that time (1977). None of the firefighters were equipped with them.

All U.S.F.S. firefighters (including the crew boss) were outfitted in fire-resistant shirts and trousers.

HUMAN FACTORS:

Experience/Training: The crew boss had served as superintendent for the twenty-person regional reinforcement crew (Type I crew) for two years. He was a qualified operations section chief. He was the AFMO of the district on which the fire burned.

Physical shape/attitude/rest: At the time of the accident, the crew boss was in the best shape of anyone on the entire Okanogan National Forest. He was a very strong advocate of physical fitness training. His attitude was always

positive, cheerful and good-natured. He always had a kind word for everybody. Just prior to the fire, he had been on a review of a project some 30 miles NW of the fire. The short driving time and no previous physical exertion indicate that he was fully rested.

Panic: The crew boss was known to be "cool, calm and collected". Observers indicate that he assumed this to be "just another assignment".

OVERHEAD:

The crew boss was aware that the Forest Class II Team (Area Team) had been activated and he knew the incident commanders of both the Fish Lake Fire and the Gibson Creek Fire. The incident commander of the Gibson Creek Fire had not assumed command at the time of the accident. He was still enroute. At the time of the accident, the crew boss was acting on his own accord, without direction from the overhead team.

The air attack group supervisor for the Fish Lake Fire was in the air at the time of the accident and had radio communications with the crew boss until the accident occurred.

MANAGEMENT FACTORS:

Lookouts: The crew boss had not posted a lookout. He was in the process of scouting the fire to determine strategy and tactics and was trying to get to a vantage point. He was acting as the lookout.

He did not have a map of the fire area with him at the time of the accident. However, he was very familiar with the areas topographic features and the "lay of the land", having hunted deer there several times in the past.

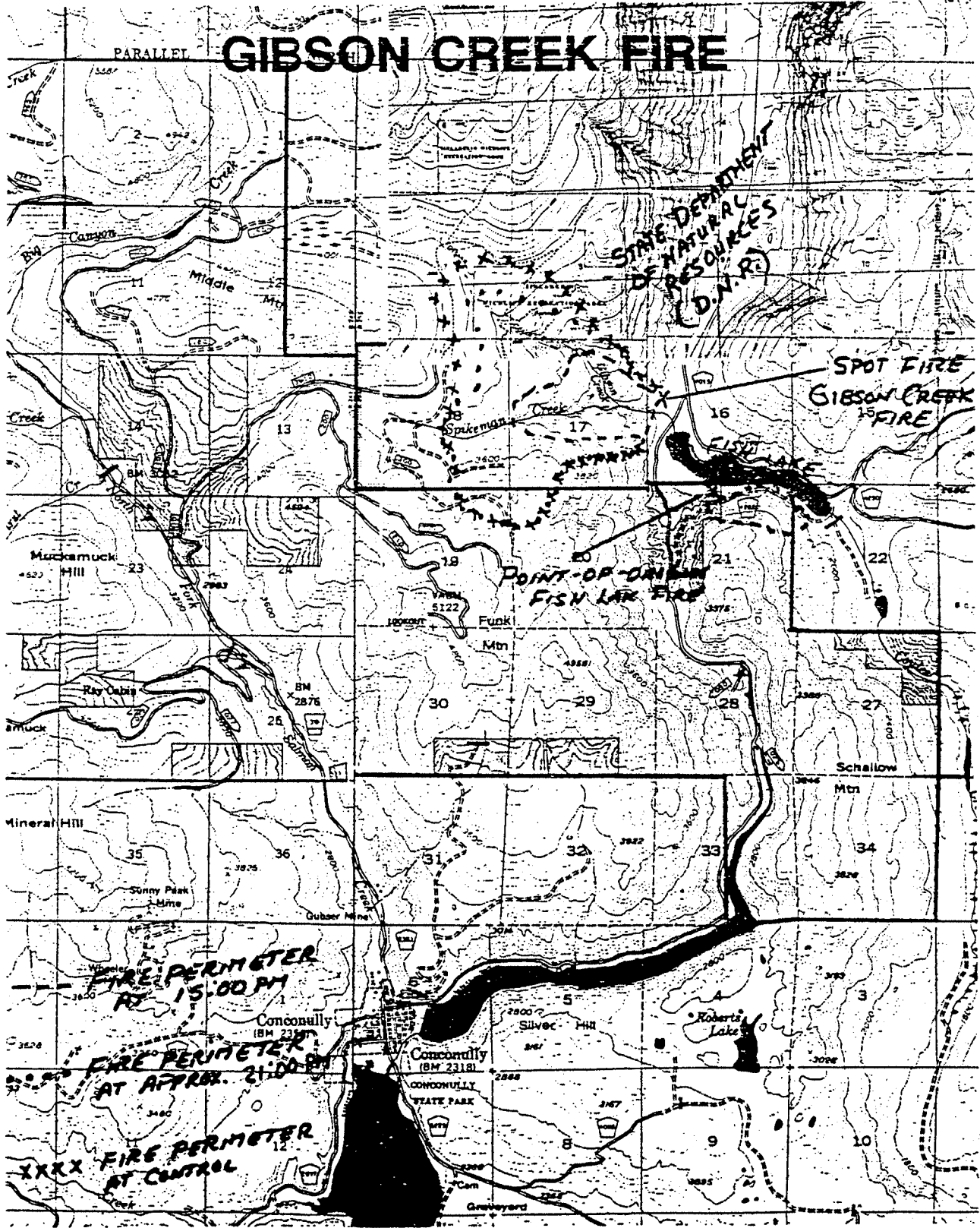
Retardant was ordered, but had not yet arrived at the time of the accident.

Fire behavior at the point of origin was a creeping-type fire, burning in NFFL Fuel Model 2. The site was on flat ground, sheltered from the strong southwesterly winds. When the fire moved upslope, intensity and rate of spread increased dramatically. The crew boss' initial size up of the fire was based on the creeping-type fire behavior.

The fire moved rapidly upslope from the point-of-origin into Gibson Creek. It then moved up Gibson Creek to the junction of Spikeman Creek where the fire split, moving up both drainages. The crew boss had traveled from the point-of-origin upslope and south of Spikeman Creek to approximately 3,400 feet elevation. At this point, he still had good communications with air attack and had discussed with him his plan to move down and across Spikeman Creek then uphill to an opening above the intersection of Gibson and Spikeman Creeks. The air attack group supervisor, because of extreme heat and smoke, did not have visual contact with the crew boss and did not know exactly where

he was located. It is speculated by those present at the fire, that the crew boss felt that he could (because of his outstanding physical conditioning) cross Spikeman Creek, traverse the slope, get to the opening and be air-lifted to safety before the fire could get there. The crew boss, from his location south of Spikeman Creek, could not see what the fire was doing (his vision was obscured by heavy timber). He did not realize the mistake that he had made until he began his climb out of Spikeman Creek towards the clearing on the ridge separating Gibson and Spikeman Creeks. It was at this point that the radio communications between the him and air attack indicated that he was aware that he faced imminent danger. He began running upslope and was less than 150 yards from the opening when the fire overran him. The same opening was later used to remove his body. There is some evidence that had the crew boss carried and used a fire shelter, he might have survived the ordeal.

GIBSON CREEK FIRE



STATE DEPARTMENT
OF NATURAL
RESOURCES
(D.N.R.)

SPOT FIRE
GIBSON CREEK
FIRE

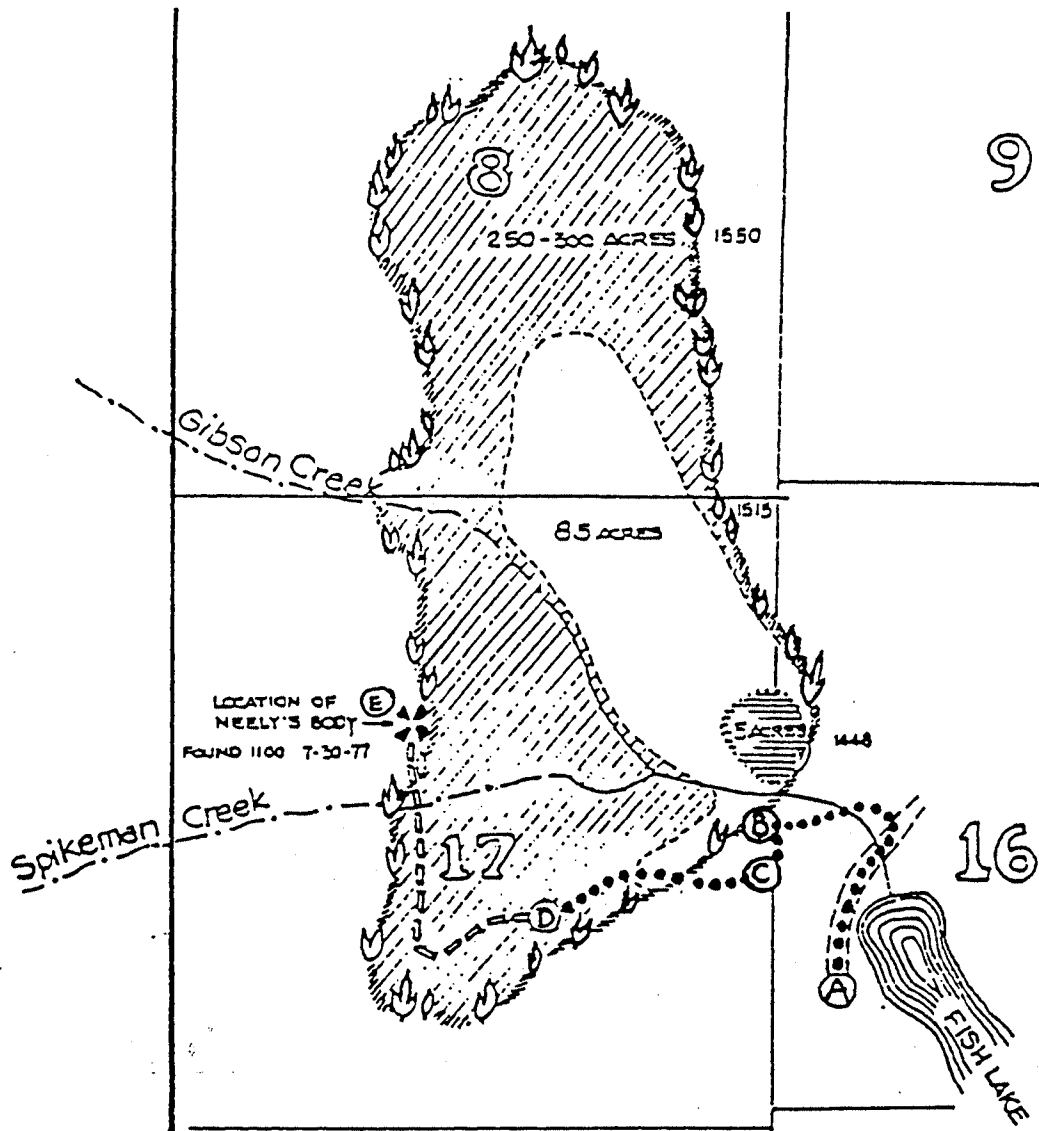
POINT-OF-ORIGIN
FISH LAKE FIRE

FIRE PERIMETER
AT 15:00 PM

FIRE PERIMETER
AT APPROX. 21:00 PM

XXX FIRE PERIMETER
AT CONTROL

GIBSON CREEK FIRE



- : CREWS ROUTE OF TRAVEL
 JULY 27, 1977 (A) 1437 : ASSEMBLY POINT
 (B) 1445 : CREW BRIEFING - FIRE REPORTED AT 1 ACRE
 (C) 1448 : HELISPOT VIEW POINT - NEELY REPORTED FIRE AT 5 ACRES
 (D) 1515 : NEELY'S LAST OBSERVED LOCATION
 - - - - - : NEELY'S PROBABLE ROUTE OF TRAVEL
 (E) 1550 : ACCIDENT SITE