

To: State Director Nevada
From: Director OF&A
Subject: Review of the escaped Mt. Como Prescribed Fire

Attached is the final report on the Mt. Como escaped prescribed fire. The escaped prescribed fire review was conducted on October 25th & 26th, 2000 by the OF&A.

The fuels management program at the Carson City Field Office is operation within the Bureau's guidelines and has a growing fuels management workload. All of the staff that were interviewed have a positive attitude and the desire to develop a safe and effective fuels management program.

The review identified causal and contributing factors relating to the Mt. Como prescribed fire project. In reviewing the Mt. Como project, significant planning or operational failures were not found. It was not the intent of the review to do an in depth review of the Field Office or statewide fuels management programs.

The Carson City Field Office in conjunction with the State office Fire management Staff should develop an action plan to address the findings in the report. When the action plan is complete, a copy of the action plan should be forwarded to the Director OF&A.

The review team greatly appreciates the support and assistance of the State Office and Field Office management teams and staff. Any questions should be directed to Al Carriere at (208) 387-5168.

The briefing checklist appears in the plan but was not signed by the prescribed fire burn 1

Mt. Como Escaped Prescribed Fire Review

The Office of Fire and Aviation was notified on October 20th, that the Mt. Como prescribed fire had escaped and that a Type II Incident Management was being assigned. On October 23rd, it was agreed that a National Review would be conducted following the procedures outlined in the Interim Prescribed Fire Guidance (IM OF&A 2000-20.) The review occurred on October 25th & 26th, 2000.

The Team was:

Al Carriere-Team Leader: Prescribed Fire Specialist, OF&A.
Phil Range : Prescribed Fire Specialist, OF&A.
Joe Freeland: FMO Elko NV.

Those interviewed were:

Carson City Fire Management Officer
Fire Ecologist and Burn Boss
Assistant Field Manager, Chief of Renewable Resources
Forester/Project Resource Advisor
Squad Boss IHC
Fire Ops Specialist

The objectives of the prescribed fire review are:

To prevent future escapes from occurring.
To establish accountability.
To determine if the prescribed fire plan was adequate.
To determine if the prescription, actions, and procedures set forth on the prescribed fire plan were followed.
To determine the level of awareness and understanding of the personnel involved. with regard to procedures and guidance.
To determine the extent of prescribed fire training and experience levels of the personnel involved.
To determine if overall policy, guidance, and procedures relating to prescribed fire operations are adequate.

Project Overview:

The need for the Mt. Como prescribed fire project had been identified for several years. The EA was written in 1996 and the first unit burned in 1997. The writing of the Prescribed Fire Plan for unit B was initiated in year 2000. The plan was prepared by the Fire Ecologist and reviewed by the District Fire Management Officer. The plan had a technical review by the Nevada State Office on September 9, 2000 and was signed by the Field Office Manager on September 15, 2000.

On October 18th, the Mt. Como prescribed fire was ignited at 1325 following the completion of the test fire. The on site forces included 11 people and two engines. Because no access existed to actual burn area, the engines were parked at the bottom of the area. Ignition was on the west side

The briefing checklist appears in the plan but was not signed by the prescribed fire burn 2

or upper slopes using hand ignition. The ignition went well with the fire remaining in the unit. Ignition was completed at about 1700. There was discussion that they may not want to do any additional ignition. However the fire continued to burn into the evening hours and actively backed down the hill all night.

On October 19th, the decision was made to not light any additional areas because of the evening fire activity and the forecasted winds. The decision was made to construct line around the active portion of the fire and to begin mop up operations. Additional personnel were brought in to help with this effort. They constructed line most of the day and found considerable heat along the fire line. Much of the heat along the line was in the duff, and dead materials. A fire line with trenches was constructed along the entire east side (lower slope) to catch rolling material. The only significant activity was a half acre slop over near the south end of the fire. This was contained without difficulty. The personnel on site felt good about the accomplishments of the day as related to securing the project area. About 300 acres (estimated) had been treated.

On October 20th, at 0800, there was no active fire, but several smokes could be seen. Seven people were on site and continued mop up and patrol was the plan for the day. The weather forecast was for a front to move into the area with wind speeds 5-12 mph and increasing after 1500. At 1000 onsite wind was 7 mph with gusts to 15mph. By 1500 the wind was at 10-12 mph with gusts to 30 mph. About 1530 a small interior island consisting of duff, litter brush, and 5-6 pinyon trees torched. This area was about 50 yards from the constructed fire line. A spot fire occurred just outside of the constructed fire line. Only the lookout was immediately available to respond to the torching and spot fire. He was able to construct about .5 chains of line when the wind decreased for a few minutes. The wind returned and the flames laid over the line and ignited brush over the line forcing the firefighter to retreat. Reinforcements arrived in about 20 minutes but the fire was not stoppable and long range spotting was beginning to occurring. The fire was declared a wildfire at 1645 on October 20th, 2000.

Causal Factor: The escape was caused by an interior island of unburned trees torching and causing a spot fire outside of the fire line, which could not be contained by the holding forces on site.

Contributing Factors: 1) An approaching cold front substantially increased the wind speed. This was forecasted and acknowledged by the Prescribed Fire Burn Boss. 2) There were several indications that fuel moisture levels were below normal. 3) A substantial portion of the stand had a litter/duff layer and ladder fuels not always associated with heavy Pinyon stands.

FINDING: Prescribed Fire Plan. The plan is well written, complete, technically sound, and follows BLM guidelines and policy. Several technical issues were noted.

The briefing checklist appears in the plan but was not signed by the prescribed fire burn 3