



Southern California Firestorm 2003
**Report for the Wildland Fire
Lessons Learned Center**

For:
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This report was prepared by two private consulting firms with the input of federal agency employees assisting the Wildland Fire Lessons Learned Center.



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Introduction

During the last week of October and the first week of November, 2003, thirteen wildfires occurred throughout Southern California. These wildfires created a disaster on such a scale that they may redefine the concept of the wildland urban interface.

On November 7, a six-person information collection team from the Wildland Fire Lessons Learned Center (LLC) assembled in Southern California and spent a week interviewing 107 people from 43 different fire and ICS positions, representing at least 12 different city, county, state, and federal agencies. The team sought to capture the experiences of those who fought these fires, capture the important lessons learned by them, and learn how these events affected the firefighting strategy, tactics, techniques, and decision making of those involved.

“Firestorm 2003,” as the media is calling it, was unprecedented in scope and impact. The statistics to date are staggering: 12,000 firefighters, 750,000 acres burned, billions of dollars in damage, approximately \$120 million in suppression costs, 4000 homes destroyed, 22 human lives lost.

These events put people in new territory. The enormity of the situation pushed people into positions that the system and the rules were simply not prepared to handle and forced significant mental shifts in the thinking of those involved. Out of 107 interviewees, almost all used words like “conflagration” and “catastrophic” as they tried to describe what they had seen.

There is always a temptation in these kinds of incidents to blame the notorious Santa Ana winds or to rationalize the actions of those involved as once-in-a-lifetime experiences. Those interviewed, however, believed events of this magnitude will continue to occur, and not only in Southern California. In fact, the Santa Ana winds rarely exceeded 30 to 40 mph during these events. Many photos of the fires show flames and smoke standing straight up despite the winds.

Other conditions contributing to these extreme fires are common throughout the western United States: extended drought, widespread tree mortality resulting from insect infestation, high fuel loads, and the continuing expansion of the wildland urban interface. As one Type 1 Incident Commander put it, “This fire season is not abnormal, but the *new* normal.” Respondents feel the lessons offered by those who participated are worth studying.

The LLC Information Collection Team’s objective was not to list all the things that went wrong. While Incident Management Teams managed the complexity of multiple difficult incidents, the demand on the system simply exceeded its design parameters. Large systemic policy, coordination, and equipment failures were documented and need attention. Many of these are already being reviewed and investigated, and there will no doubt be policy and budgetary challenges that will impact all agencies at all decision-making levels.

But what if we had to do it all over again tomorrow?

This report identifies large unresolved issues, but its primary purpose is to report how people overcame challenges when the demands of the fire situation exceeded the capacity of the rules and the system to provide answers. Repeatedly, the LLC Information Collection Team heard leaders—from engine foremen to incident commanders—say that during these fires they were faced with some of the most difficult decisions in their careers. So what worked? How did leaders cope and find ways to mitigate the risks and adapt their thinking and tactics successfully?

The interviews reveal that people at every level and in every functional area of every agency found ways to succeed in spite of the overwhelming events. Firefighters described exercising initiative in the absence of communication and during the chaos before unified command could be effectively established.

Leaders spoke about adapting doctrine to create innovative solutions to new tactical problems. Respondents recounted how they had to adapt a rulebook that was no longer relevant and use sound judgment and experience to mitigate risk and remain effective.

Most of the firefighters interviewed said they were just doing their jobs. That may be true, but even this cursory examination of the events in Southern California made the members of the LLC team appreciate the achievement involved in being able to make that simple statement.

The representatives that met with the LLC team were open and selfless with their stories. Many described feeling compelled to relate their experiences in order to generate a frank discussion among the wildland firefighting community—to promote learning and help resolve important foundational issues.

It is important to note that this is not a complete history of the events or decision-making during these fires, nor was it within the LLC Information Collection Team's charter to do so. The LLC team's methodology included selecting and interviewing the broadest sampling of representatives from as many agencies possible—from different fires and at different levels and functional areas of their organizations.

This report focuses on the themes of common concern to all, rather than issues unique to one agency, and on those things that people at all levels can take away and begin applying immediately.

Project Scope

This section outlines the details of the team, objectives, focus areas, and interviews.

Team Composition

Team Leader

- Dave Christenson, Wildland Fire Lessons Learned Center

Team Members

- Tim Duck, BLM, Parashant National Monument, St. George, UT
- Kim Round, USFS, San Juan Public Lands Center, Durango, CO

- Jeanne Gural, USFS, San Bernardino National Forest and San Dimas Technology & Development Center, CA
- Michael DeGrosky, The Guidance Group, Washburn, WI
- Mark Smith, Mission-Centered Solutions, Parker, CO

Objective

An Information Collection Team (ICT) comprised of federal agency employees and two private sector consultants collected wildland urban interface lessons learned and best practices by interviewing numerous overhead and field personnel over a six day period. The team traveled throughout Southern California to conduct interviews with agency administrators, incident management teams, operations overhead personnel, and structural protection resources from a variety of agencies.

Focus Areas

Interviews were based on the following focus areas:

- Describe the best success in the urban interface you were involved with on your incident (tactics, techniques, or procedures).
- What was the most significant thing you learned regarding urban interface on your incident? Please explain.
- What was the biggest urban interface challenge you faced on the incident? Describe how you overcame this challenge.
- Describe any lessons learned on the incident regarding structural protection, evacuations, command and control, or unified command if applicable.
- How did the fire behavior affect your strategy and decisions on the incident?
- Please comment on the work/rest guidelines in regard to this incident.
- Were there any unresolved urban interface issues you faced? What is your recommendation for resolution?

Interviewees

Total number: 107 interviewed, representing 12 different city, county, state and federal agencies and private citizens who participated in thirteen fires.

Positions held by interviewees:

| | | |
|-------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------|
| Air Tactical Group Supervisor | District Ranger | Interagency Hotshot Crew Superintendent |
| Air Tanker Base Manager | Division Chief | Law Enforcement Officer |
| Air Tanker Pilot/Co-Pilot | Division Supervisor | Logistics Section Chief Type 1 |
| Area Commander | Emergency Medical Technician | Operations Section Chief Type 1 |
| Assistant Air Tanker Base Manager | Emergency Operations Center Coordinator | Operations Section Chief Type 2 |
| Assistant Chief | Engine Driver/Operator (structural and wildland) | Paramedic |
| Battalion Chief (structural and wildland) | Engineer (structural and wildland) | Planning Section Chief |
| Branch Director | Engine Captain | Prevention Technician |
| Camp Superintendent | Fuels Technician | Public Information Officer |
| Company Officers (Station Captains) | Forester | Radio Operator |
| Crew Coordinator | Fire Fighter | Rehabilitation Group Supervisor |
| Crew Leader Type 1 | Fire Management Officer (District and Forest levels) | Safety Officer Type 1 |
| Crew Leader Type 2 | Incident Commander Type 1 | Strike Team Leaders |
| Deputy Incident Commander Type 1 | Incident Commander Type 2 | Structure Group Supervisor |
| Dispatcher | Incident Commander Type 3 | |
| Dispatch Supervisor | | |