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Report: Fire Crew Almost Died

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CARLIN, Nev. (AP) -- An inexperienced government fire crew and its supervisors broke practically every rule in the book during a Nevada range fire last summer, and six firefighters were nearly burned alive before a shift in the wind saved them.

The previously undisclosed incident was detailed in a Bureau of Land Management memo obtained by The Associated Press.

The BLM's firefighting operation was slapped with a citation from the Occupational Safety and Health Administration because of the incident -- the first such sanction against the BLM since 14 federal firefighters were killed in a Colorado blaze in 1994.

And the fallout did not stop there. One of the government's 18 elite national firefighting teams has been disbanded because of its role in the near-disaster. And the National Park Service has set new standards limiting the number of inexperienced people allowed to work on a dangerous fire line.

The BLM was cited for failing to protect the six from "recognized hazards that were causing or likely to cause death or serious injury," according to the memo. The BLM must respond to the citation and take corrective action.

The narrow escape took place Aug. 9 on a fiery ridge of sagebrush near Carlin, 280 miles east of Reno. The six firefighters were treated for smoke inhalation and three of them were hospitalized, two with severe burns.

Firefighting resources in the region were strained to the limit at the time because the 170,000-acre fire was just one of several fires burning.

The investigative report describes a perfect recipe for disaster - from the broken-down bus that brought the inexperienced National Park Service workers from California to Elko, Nev., to jammed radio frequencies, poor planning and pressure from ranchers to stop the flames.

Among other things, supervisors ignored dangerous fire and weather conditions, failed to adequately brief the fire crews, failed to post lookouts, established safety zones too far apart and failed to establish a clear chain of command, the report said.

The situation on the ground became so desperate that three firefighters began to deploy their aluminum-foil-like personal fire shelters, known as "shake and bakes" -- the last line of defense when flames are about to overtake a firefighter.

"A fortuitous wind shift allowed the (crew) to escape the fire," an investigative team for the BLM concluded.

The state BLM director defended the agency Wednesday, noting that there were no deaths or life-threatening injuries during the record fire season this year.

"We take safety seriously. It is our highest priority," Bob Abbey said. At one point in early August, more than 4,000 people were fighting wildfires in Nevada. "Given the number of people and types of fires we had," Abbey said, "I think we did very well."

The BLM and the U.S. Forest Service were also hit with a citation after the 1994 tragedy in Colorado during the so-called Storm King fire.

In that fire, firefighters who had parachuted onto the mountain were trapped by flames. Among other things, poor communication, inexperience on the fire lines and misguided management were blamed for those deaths.

One investigator said the close call in Nevada shows that the lessons from the Storm King fire may have already been forgotten.

"We had a lot of investigations and a lot of reviews and a lot of time was spent talking about what we are going to do, but a lot of those things are just not being done," said John Kraushaar, a regional officer for the National Park Service.

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EDITORS: AP newsman Tom Gardner in Reno, Nev., also contributed to this report.

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