

**VIRGINIA DEPARTMENT OF FORESTRY  
FOREST FIRE REVIEW**

**FIRE NAME:** Woodview

**DATE FIRE STARTED:** 9/12/07

**DATE FIRE CONTROLLED:** 9/12/07

**LOCATION:** Pittsylvania County, North of Rt 895 (Coleman Mountain RD) ¾ mile east of 832/895 intersection 2 ½ mi Forest Technician 1 North of Shockoe.

**ACRES BURNED:** 81

**CAUSE:** Debris Burning

**INCIDENT COMMANDER:** Forest Technician 1

**WEATHER:** Temp 85, Wind NW 1-3, RH 23%, 1.2 " of rain since June 1st

**FUEL TYPE:** Pine Plantation, 8 year old

**TOPOGRAPHY:** Rolling 6 to 10% slope

**ASPECT:** NW

**DATE OF REVIEW:** 9/17/07

**LOCATION:** Chatham Office

**REVIEW CONDUCTED BY:** Fred Turck, Larry Cochran

**ATTENDED BY:**

**SIGNIFICANT EVENTS: REVIEW OF ACTIONS AND TACTICS:**

- Call came into the forestry office about 1445, Forest Technician 1 responded in his pickup and followed the fire department to the fire.
- As he was leaving town he could see the smoke column and called for Forester 1 and Forester 2 to bring the tractor.
- Forester 2 took the transport and Forester 1 took his pickup.
- Chatham VFD and Forest Technician 1 arrived at the scene first about 1500 hrs.
- Fire was in a bottom/cutover area which the adjacent landowner was burning off..
- The landowner was using a tractor with disc to control his fire.
- Fire had escaped into pine plantation across the disked line and was 1-2 acres when Forest Technician 1 arrived.
- VFD assigned to work on right flank.
- When Forester 2 and the dozer arrived about 15 to 20 min later they unloaded and Forest Technician 1 made the decision to be the tractor operator.

- Forester 1 and Forest Technician 1 called Halifax to put the dozer there on standby. Forest Technician 1 knew it was bad situation and the fire could possibly crown.
- A DGIF biologist was on scene and offered to help.
- Decision was made to plow the right flank and after getting the VFD to pull out the several hundred feet of hose they had out Forest Technician 1 began plowing.
- Forest Technician 1 was in full PPE, Forester 2 was also, however during the course of events he had removed one glove and did not have his neck shield fastened in front. Forester 2 had a shelter and there were 1 (or 2) shelters on the tractor. The DGIF person was only wearing his DGIF polo shirt and pants.
- Forester 2 was told to backfire as close to the tractor as possible.
- Forester 2 talked to VFD and gathered information about fire area. More plantation on right (SW) and Coleman Mtn. road in front of the fire about 2000 + feet to the SE.
- Fire pulled in at the beginning when line was first lit.
- The DGIF person is a certified burner with much experience on prescribed burns and has helped the Pittsylvania DOF folks even as a dozer operator in the past.
- Forester 1 arrived on the scene just as the tractor went into the woods. Coordinated with Fire Departments.
- Pine plantation was 8 years old, planted in 2000 and had be aerielly released in 2002.
- Forester 1 went to Coleman Mtn. and coordinated with the fire departments on structure protection and wetting down the south side of the road.. Fire was heading in that direction.
- Forester 1 requested helicopter after blowup.
- Blowup occurred 5 to 10 minutes after tractor went into woods at around 1515 to 1530.
- Structures threatened on Coleman Mtn. Road.
- Forester 2 discussed with the DGIF person on how to get out if something happened, in the black or back down the plowed line.
- Forest Technician 1 checked with Forester 2 on how far back down the line he was. Tractor had gotten ahead of Forester 2 and Moss.
- Fire jumped the line and Forester 2 radioed to Forest Technician 1 that the line was compromised.  
\* This is one issue that there is a bit of confusion over. The term compromised was not understood by all and Forester 2 added that he also indicated that the fire was on both sides of the line. Both Forest Technician 1 and Forester 1 only heard the first portion of the radio traffic ref the line being compromised.
- Forest Technician 1 not knowing the fire has crossed the line requested Forester 2 and the DGIF person to catch up to the tractor back firing as they came.
- Forester 2 and the DGIF person had to wait till the spot fire died down and they were able to walk through the burned area and then continued to backfire heading towards the tractor.
- When fire blew up, Forester 2 and the DGIF person had caught up with tractor.
- Tractor had started around head when fire blew up. At this same time the over heating light and warning sound was going off. Forest Technician 1 was concerned that the tractor was going to go into “limp home mode” and that he would not be able to move very fast. Luckily this did not occur.
- Forester 2 and Forest Technician 1 saw blow up about the same time. Forest Technician 1 yelled to evacuate.
- Fire crossed line behind the tractor.

- Forest Technician 1 did not realize how close Forester 2 and the DGIF person were till he spun around and he saw the DGIF person fall and drop his torch, then get up and start running “down” the line.
- Forest Technician 1 did not know it at the time but as he spun the tractor a small loblolly pine which he knocked down hit Forester 2 knocking him to the ground. He was not injured by this.
- Forest Technician 1 thought both the DGIF person and Forester 2 were now in front of him as they were evacuating down the line.
- Entire line was lost at this time.
- The DGIF person tried to go through the green to get away from the fire.
- Forester 2 said in a conversation (Tuesday) that as he ran down the line the first 50 feet was under a crown fire which was lapping over him from his right to his left. The next 50 feet it was very intense surface fire on both sides and the next 100 feet it was an intense surface fire on his right.
- In all he said he ran about 300 feet till he caught up to the tractor and was able to get inside with Forest Technician 1. Could not find the DGIF person.
- Forest Technician 1 waited for the DGIF person but had to move on when it got to hot.
- Forest Technician 1 felt like he needed to keep moving so it would not stall out.
- Forester 2 indicated that they went about another 100 feet when the DGIF person was at the cab trying to get inside. The metal cab was so hot he could not touch it and the cab door was opened up from the inside and he got in. The tractor would not move and they thought something was mechanically wrong since earlier the overheating light and buzzer went off. However it turned out that one of the guys was on the brake. Three in a cab was a tight fit. All 3 then went down the line to safety.
- They would not have survived without the environmental cab.
- Fire was in the crowns, not on the surface.
- The DGIF person who did not have communications with anyone, also could not see because of the thick smoke, got low to the ground a few times to catch some better air and rest before trying to run again. FD could hear him yelling on the line. The way he finally got to the tractor and relative safety was that he heard the tractor noise and ran towards the noise.
- At the same time the fire was “blowing-up” Forester 1 was calling for the rescue squad and also for a helicopter, Forest Technician 1 had asked him to do this.
- Having the push to talk button on tractor steering column was a great help.
- Would have been beneficial to have an aerial observer.
- Thought was to stop the fire at Coleman Mtn. road due to homes on the road.
- Could not hit repeater with radio (big problem).
- Rescue Squad took Moss to the hospital; T actually drove his pick-up out to where the rescue squad was.
- Forester 2 did not see the Rescue Squad, but did see a different squad member who was not with the ambulance and actually used Forester 2’s radio to talk to Forest Technician 1 ref Forester 2 and getting him medical attention. Forester 2 did not want to go however did go home for a while and then returned to the fire.
- VFD’s were placed on road to protect homes after burn over.
- Foamed down a trailer on road.
- Paged Pittsylvania strike team.
- Forest Technician 1 after about 30 min or so went back to plowing this time on the left flank, it was cooler and easier going he had gotten about 30-40 yards in when the Halifax Technician arrived.

- When Halifax Technician arrived with Halifax dozer Forest Technician 1 came out and he and Halifax technician planned their tactics. Forest Technician 1 went back to the right flank because he said he knew this well and Halifax Technician went to plow the left flank.
- 3 strike team members arrived to help.
- Forester 1 set backfire on Coleman Mtn. Road.
- Forester 1 talked with homeowner about evacuating home as ashes were falling on her porch, but as she was preparing to evacuate several fire dept engines showed up in her yard and she decided to stay. Her husband is a member of the fire department.

### **SUCCESSFUL ACTIONS AND TACTICS:**

- Forest Technician 1 said his many years experience especially with prescribed burning was beneficial actually it was critical in his “survival”. He went on to say if his usual tractor operator was on the tractor even though he was experienced he would have probably panicked.
- The Dozers one from Halifax and the other from Henry County arrived in timely manner.
- Good response from VFD’s and other resources.
- Forester 2’s use of PPE and shroud.
- Good communication with tractor.
- Environmental cab.
- Thought initial tactic was good.
- Communications/tactics.
- Discussed escape routes ahead of time.
- After Halifax technician arrived the more direct approach proved beneficial.

### **PROBLEM AREAS**

- Forest Technician 1 said he was too far from the fire. Should have been more direct the entire way.
- Should have been more vocal with the DGIF person about wearing PPE, Forest Technician 1 said he actually had some extra PPE in his truck.
- Communication problem with the DGIF person, when they were face to face they were able to communicate but once they were separated they lost communication with him.
- Wanted to protect structures, fire was small when they arrived. Thought they could hold the fire to a small acreage.
- Need to be very careful when going direct in pine plantation during a drought with the potential for extreme fire conditions.
- Forester 2 has some concerns ref initial line location and tactics but deferred to Forest Technician 1’s experience with out vocalizing his concerns.
- At some point in time long after the “blow-up” Two other DOF employees arrived with 2 ATV’s as they were returning from ATV training in R4. They both were used to patrol the lines on foot assigned to work with some of the more experienced part-timers. Both had full PPE but there was some question about experience. (Later found out that one did have 130/190 L-180 while in school through a program sponsored by the State Forestry Division and the other who has been with us for a few years has had our basic training) Two members of the Pittsylvania Strike Team Tim were the ATV operators.

## **DOF FIREFIGHTERS ON SCENE**

Forest Technician 1 on Pittsylvania 50

Forester 2

Forester 1

Halifax 50 w/Halifax Technician and a PT FF

Henry 50 w/ Henry Technician and 2 PT's

ATV1 w/DOF employee

ATV2 w/DOF employee

Pulaski crew w/Crew Boss

Seven additional PIT Strike Team members.

## **REVIEWERS COMMENTS:**

- Not really clear who IC was throughout the incident by some. Forest Technician 1 was IC at first but as soon as he started plowing there was really no IC till Forester 1 got there and assumed that role. Forester 1 operated as IC in a unified command with Chief of Riceville-Java VFD. Any decision regarding overall operations was Forester 1's. James was basically in charge of structure protection. During an opportunity to talk with the Pulaski crew boss who had a crew there for night patrol/mop-up, he was asked who he thought IC was when he arrived and he indicated maybe one of the PT FF but then said no he was more like a DIV SUP and maybe it was Forester 1 because he seemed to be directing the VFD's etc. The command structure was clear as to who was IC but some of the FF might not have been.
- Communication to tractor about line being "compromised" was unclear to tractor operator.
- Timing of the backfire off Coleman Road was of a concern.
- We as an agency need to re-emphasize the importance of the risk-management process and re-evaluate tactical decisions.