

# Rapid Lesson Sharing

**Event Type:** IA in Remote Terrain

**Date:** September 6, 2019

**Location:** Kidd and Kidder 2 Fires, Marble Mountain Wilderness, Klamath National Forest

“Both forests (Payette NF and Klamath NF) involved in this incident, as well as the rappel community as a whole, all agreed that lessons could be learned by all types of IA resources. That’s why we wanted to share this story with the entire fire community.”

*Andy Guest, Helitack Supervisor  
Price Valley Rappel Crew*

## The Story

On the evening of September 4, 2019 a large lightning storm hit the Klamath National Forest with a vengeance. By the next day, the amount of fires on the forest had started to become overwhelming.

To increase their span of control, dispatch decided to shift from central Yreka dispatch to utilizing the local districts as a sort of expanded dispatch. It was so busy in fact, that they were not even able to look at fires they knew they had. The evening of Sept. 5, Scott Valley’s local helicopter flew two small fires located on the upper third of a rocky, exposed ridge in the Marble Mountain Wilderness Area.



SMOKE FROM THE KIDD FIRE (UPPER) AND KIDDER 2 FIRE (LOWEST TWO SPOTS) ON THE MORNING OF SEPT. 6.

**“It was pretty obvious that an elevated level of activity was going to be happening that day.”**

For the morning of Sept. 6, Price Valley Rappel Crew (from the Payette NF) was planning on inserting 4 rappellers on the upper fire, the Kidd Fire, and the local Scott Valley Rappellers would insert 4 rappellers on the Kidder 2 Fire, the lowest fire. Once over the fires, it became quickly apparent that the situation had changed from the prior evening. For one thing, the Kidder 2 Fire now had two distinct patches of smoke showing, with some rollout having established overnight. They estimated the Kidd Fire to have grown to approximately one acre, with a 100 percent active perimeter. Price Valley contacted Scott River Dispatch and ordered more rappellers and a bucket to help contain the fire. By around 1000, Price Valley had inserted 6 rappellers on the Kidd Fire and Scott Valley had inserted 4 rappellers on the Kidder 2 Fire. They established positive communications with Scott River Dispatch and proceeded to attempt to engage the fires directly.

The Price Valley helicopter returned with the bucket to support both fires. On the Kidd Fire, one of the Price Valley crewmembers moved higher on the hill to help direct the bucket drops on spots at the top of their fire. It was around this time that both fires realized that they were now having a very difficult time communicating with Scott River Dispatch, as well as fire to fire, despite the fact that they were on the same ridge, only several hundred yards apart and working on an established forest tactical channel.

The crewmember working with the helicopter found he could communicate directly with the Kidder 2 Fire as well as with Scott River. He therefore took it upon himself to act as an unofficial human repeater between the two fires.

### **Additional Air and Ground Support Needed**

By around 1100, it was becoming apparent to both fires that they needed additional air support if they were going to catch these fires. They were still having to share the Price Valley helicopter between the two fires. It was not able to keep up with their demand for water. The Kidd Fire IC, using the crewmember directing buckets, was able to relay to Scott River Dispatch that they needed additional air support and two hand crews. It was about this time that the Kidder 2 Fire IC trainee discovered that he could no longer reliably contact Scott River Dispatch, having tried to reach them 7 times with no success.

Meanwhile, other fires on the forest had begun to take priority over the Kidd and the Kidder 2 fires, drawing the majority of the resources elsewhere. At approximately 1200, the Air Attack for the one of these fires flew over the area to look at the two emerging fires. The Air Attack contacted both ICs and let them know that everything was looking pretty good, but that both fires were now around 10 acres each.

The Kidder 2 Fire IC trainee was still having difficulty contacting Scott River Dispatch when he was contacted by Scott Valley Helibase over Air to Ground and asked to use their crew tactical channel. Using this frequency, he requested that they relay that he would like additional resources, but he was told that the only resource available was a local Type 2 IA crew and it would be an approximate four-hour hike in from the bottom to get them to the fire. On the Kidd Fire, one of the Price Valley crewmembers discovered that he was able to get a cell phone call out to dispatch, and it was in this conversation that the Kidd Fire IC discovered that all of the resources he had requested were listed as "Unable To Fill."



VIEW FROM PRICE VALLEY SHIP AS FIRST RAPPELLERS INSERT INTO THE KIDDER 2 FIRE. SMOKE FROM THE KIDDER 2 FIRE CAN BE SEEN FARTHER DOWN THE RIDGE.

## **“A Swiss cheese model of communication.”**

### **Time to Reassess Tactics**

To complicate matters further for both fires, at 1300, the Price Valley helicopter was diverted from the two fires to support another fire, pulling away the only air support that they had. These things happen as priorities shift on the larger scale, but for the ground personnel on both fires, this was a trigger to reassess their tactics and start thinking about how to look at their fires from a longer term perspective. The Price Valley member who was posted up high on the ridge contacted Scott Valley and asked them to hand-program the National Rappel TAC into their radios. However, this proved to have similar difficulties to the other frequencies. He then moved down the ridge to tie back in with his crew to help figure out an alternative course of action.

### **Cached Gear Burns, Trigger Points are Surpassed, Crews Disengage**

A Price Valley crewmember who returned to the rappel site discovered that trees torching near the site had cast a large amount of embers onto their rappel gear, and that some of the cardboard boxes holding their food, water and overnight equipment were already burning. It quickly became apparent that they were not going to be able to salvage the gear and were only putting themselves at risk by staying up there. The IC called them and told them to “ditch the gear” and said they were going to pull out.

With all the Price Valley crew together, they decided to call their crew superintendent back at the helibase via cell phone, informing him their gear had burned and they were going to disengage the Kidd Fire, wanting to hike down and tie-in with the Scott Valley rappellers on the Kidder 2 Fire. Scott Valley was unaware this phone call took place.

The Scott Valley crew had regrouped and established trigger points for themselves, but less than ten minutes later, the majority of these were already surpassed. This, along with an increase of smoke and fallout coming over their escape route prompted them to gather-up their gear and begin to retreat down the ridge to the trail system at the base of the slope.

### **Radio Communications**

Price Valley had moved down the ridge a little ways and were able to make contact with Scott Valley. Price Valley informed them that some of their gear got “burned over,” they were “disengaging--the fire is going Type 4,” and that they were hiking down to try to tie-in.

Based on a prior conversation, the Kidder 2 Fire IC trainee understood that Price Valley was going to be using either the ridge as an escape route or dropping off the ridge toward the drainage and try to get underneath the Kidder 2 Fire. The trainee attempted to contact Price Valley to inform them that the ridge was no longer a good escape route—but was unable to contact them at that time. He chose to stay on the ridge a bit longer to attempt to make contact and act as a lookout. It was at this time that dispatch tried to reach the Kidd Fire, but was also unable to make contact. The Kidder 2 Fire IC copied the transmission and relayed to dispatch that: they were seeing a dramatic increase in fire behavior, that Price Valley was “abandoning” their rappel site, that “we can no longer communicate with Price Valley,” and are “not sure where they are going.”

## **'Imminent Life Threat' Announced**

Back at the Scott Valley Helibase, upon hearing this last transmission, alarm bells went off. The call was made to divert air resources toward the Kidd Fire for an "imminent life threat." Within 10-15 minutes, a "call when needed" (CWN) helicopter was on scene and had made contact with Price Valley, followed shortly by the Price Valley helicopter with the crew superintendent on board.

The Price Valley crew was now mid-slope and working their way down to get below the Kidder 2 Fire. Both helicopters were able to help direct them toward a quicker egress.

After the two helicopters came on scene, an Air Attack arrived with two retardant tankers in tow, announcing the "life threat" and asking the Kidd Fire IC where he wanted the retardant. The Kidd IC informed Air Attack that they were not in any threat, but also not on the fire, and that the ridge was clear to drop. After contact was made with Price Valley, Scott Valley proceeded to hike down the ridge to the trail at the base. Price Valley was able to meet-up with them on the trail and both crews hiked out to the trailhead together for pick-up back to Scott Valley Helibase.

## **Lessons/Considerations**

### **Lookouts, Communications, Escape Routes and Safety Zones**

- We often mention LCES when looking to engage a fire, but are we actually fully assessing what that means? Lookouts were discussed as the typical on scene "everybody is a lookout" situation. With limited resources, it is often difficult and sometimes not feasible to designate a specific lookout. However, when the Price Valley crewmember directing buckets discovered that he was able to communicate with dispatch as well as the Kidder 2 Fire, it helped to alleviate the poor communications on the two fires. Price Valley had discussed multiple escape routes and safety zones over the course of the day. However, the spotty communications (especially after the highest crewmember on the ridge had to move down upon losing the helicopter) made it difficult to make them known to anyone outside of the immediate area.

### **Sharing Pertinent Information**

- Sharing of pertinent information and resources is almost always beneficial. Keeping a designated human repeater up could have alleviated some of the communications burden, as well as passing on the common frequencies that were able to get in touch with helibase. Passing on that cell phone coverage was also available on the Kidd Fire could have helped both fires as well.

### **Communication Difficulties**

- The Marble Mountain Wilderness is locally a known spot for difficult communications, with line-of-site to a repeater one of the only reliable methods of reaching out to dispatch. The two crews, though they had a forest tactical channel, were having a very difficult time communicating with each other (despite being on the same ridge), and with helibase (despite being able to see it from the fire), and with dispatch.

## Misinterpreting Information

- Even when communications are crystal clear, it is easy to miss pieces of information and reinterpret, or misinterpret messages entirely. With such a broken chain of communication, it is unsurprising that people reacted with alarm when hearing that Price Valley was “abandoning” their rappel site, and that “we can no longer communicate with Price Valley,” and are “not sure where they are going.”

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**This RLS was written by Will Woods and Jarrod Sayer and submitted by Andy Guest.**

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