

Grass Valley command center hub for fire activity

By Peter Hecht, Sacramento Bee

On Aug. 17, as the first calls for assistance came in from a fire 150 miles away near Yosemite, the ridgetop Interagency Command Center in Grass Valley was already at full throttle.

A shared room for tactical supervisors of the U.S. Forest Service, CalFire and the state Office of Emergency Services was directing materiel to the American Fire near Foresthill, then just 7 days old.

Outside, Grumman S-2 air tankers – dubbed “pink bellies” for the color of the fire retardant they drop – were taking off from the Grass Valley Air Attack Base. They were flying sorties over the Foresthill area’s deep forest canyons, where the stubborn fire was soon to top 26,000 acres.

Suddenly, this new Rim Fire was burning in treacherous terrain to the south in the Stanislaus National Forest. Within 24 hours, thunderclouds triggered vicious downdrafts, endangering firefighters and fanning a massive blaze toward the communities of Groveland, Tuolumne City and Pine Mountain.

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