

Second AZ firefighters' death probe more revealing

By Cally Carswell, High Country News

As we reported in October, the first investigation of Arizona's Yarnell Hill Fire, in which 19 hotshots were killed this summer, drew extremely cautious conclusions. No "direct causes" of the accident were identified, no one was blamed.

Policies and protocols, the report said, were not violated. It was almost strangely timid, leaving some to wonder: How could 19 young men have lost their lives if so few mistakes were made?

That report was commissioned by the Arizona State Forestry Division, the agency that oversaw the firefighting effort on Yarnell Hill. Now, a separate investigation, this one from the Arizona Division of Occupational Health and Safety, has been completed – and it reached much more damning conclusions. The Associated Press calls it a "stinging rebuke" of the first investigation.

Worst of all, it bluntly concluded that protection of "non-defensible structures" – houses that didn't have adequate clearings around them to allow firefighters to safely fight encroaching flames – was prioritized above firefighter safety.

Firefighters should have been told to stand down before the storm arrived that blew the fire up, lead investigator Marshall Krotenberg told the Arizona Industrial Commission, which administers and enforces worker safety laws.

Read the whole story