

Calif. probes near-death escape of 12 firefighters

By Steve Gorman, Reuters

LOS ANGELES – California forestry officials have opened an inquiry into a life-threatening ordeal faced by 12 firefighters who were nearly engulfed by flames in the Sierra Nevada last month before a helicopter pilot flew to the scene and led them to safety.

The team had already crawled into foil-lined personal fire shelters – a survival measure of last resort – before they were spotted by the pilot as columns of fire raced up a canyon at them, igniting whole trees along the way.

The incident, which came close to becoming the deadliest California firefighting tragedy in nearly five decades and recalled the loss of 19 firemen in Arizona last year, unfolded on the third day of the King Fire.

Cal Fire, swiftly began a “near miss review” of the Sept. 15 incident, but the story was not widely reported at first.

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