

Weather a critical factor in Washington Fire



The Washington Fire for several days threatened the town of Markleeville. Photo Copyright 2015 Carolyn E. Wright

Updated 10:55pm: *The Washington Fire's perimeter is 90 percent contained, at 17,790 acres; full containment expected by July 31.*

By Susan Wood

Fire officials evaluated the response timeline of the 2-week-old Markleeville-area blaze that spread rapidly in a wind-driven 24-hour period and found good news and bad news in their assessment.

The good news: The fire agencies and respective personnel followed protocol to the best of their ability under normal circumstances.

The bad news: The new normal is anything but normal in drought conditions and climate change. Hot, cold or otherwise, climatologists have long warned of more severe weather conditions in multiple seasons with climate change. One of those factors is wind.



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“They did a good job, but it wasn’t textbook,” Russ Bird, U.S. Forest Service fire management officer in charge of nine ranger districts in Nevada and a slice of California from Bridgeport to north of Reno, told *Lake Tahoe News*.

“The way they responded and how the people responded – they followed procedure. No one could have predicted (the wind) would have come up like that. I don’t think they knew the severity of the

Key Activity Timeline – Washington Fire near Markleeville

June 9-11, 2015 – Wide-spread heavy rain with lightning activity took place in the area where the fire began. With the right fuel and moisture conditions, this lightning can often ignite deep dead vegetative material on the forest floor that can smolder undetected for a couple of weeks before changing weather conditions such as low relative humidity, wind, and high temperatures fan embers to life, causing visible smoke.

June 19 about 6:15pm – Smoke was first reported in the Silver Peak area on the Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest (HTNF) Carson Ranger District.

June 19, 6:30pm – Both HTNF fire staff and Alpine County fire and law enforcement personnel began looking for the fire’s exact location by

weather. It was not worth the risk. It was hard to get people up there," Bird said of June 20, the second-day inferno when 40 mph consistent wind carried the fire and tree snags crashed, leaving embers flying every which way in steep, overgrown terrain.

"It was 40mph constant wind. It was like a cold front passing," Bird said.

Lightning sparked the June 19 blaze, which has consumed almost 18,000 acres and is 77 percent contained. Fire officials believe the lightning hit Alpine County 10 days prior to the first reports of smoke at 6:15pm June 19 in the Silver Peak area off Highway 4 in the Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest of the Carson Ranger District. This was reported in the time

traveling different routes.

June 19, about 7:15pm – HTNF fire staff located the general area of the fire, estimated to be about an acre in size, in a remote location. An engine was staged nearby while best access points were identified.

June 19, about 7:45pm – When it became apparent the fire was in an area with no road access, a helicopter was ordered to arrive in the morning. By the time a helicopter could have reached the fire when initially ordered, darkness would have made its use inappropriate.

June 19, about 8:40pm – A fire patrolman on foot arrived within 50 yards of the fire to better establish its location and size. The fire was in steep terrain with dense old-growth timber.

June 19, about 9pm – The four-person engine crew arrived at the nearest road location and began hiking into the fire area for initial attack of the fire with hand tools. Soon after, additional crews were ordered for the morning shift as they would not have been able to safely enter the fire area under darkness.

June 19, about 11:15pm – The engine crew reported the fire's latitude and longitude and the fire size at approximately 1.5 acres with active fire in the perimeter, including group-torching of trees in deep duff. The crew planned to conduct hand-tool suppression work through

line from the U.S. Forest Service Minden dispatch team to the duty officer of the Markleeville station. Upon hiking in to within 50 yards of the fire at 8:40pm that night, a fire patrol scout assessed most of the crews should stand down that night and wait to go in upon first light.

At another time, the fire's intensity prompted all the resources to disengage to reassess the situation from a safe location. The wind was erratic and more resources were ordered, the latter an answer to a shortcoming Tactical Team Division Chief Kevin Kutterer complained about when Lake Tahoe News asked about progress while on the scene off Wolf Creek Road.

Kutterer wasn't the only one being

the night.

June 20, about 7am – Overnight the crew had been able to build line around one-third of the 1.5-acre fire. Snags within the perimeter were throwing out embers and would need to be felled.

June 20, 8am-3pm – Additional ground crews and air support conducted suppression activities, including building line, felling burning snags, and dropping water and retardant from the air. Hot, windy conditions caused the fire to grow quickly as its intensity increased, bringing long-range spotting and group tree-torching.

June 20, about 4pm – Because long-range spotting was becoming more frequent, the decision was made to order Air Attack, including a heavy air tanker.

June 20, about 4:45pm – Fire intensity increased further, and winds became more erratic, causing the need to disengage all resources from the fire to reassess the situation from a safe location. More fire resources were also ordered to prepare for future operations.

June 20, 5pm – The fire size had grown to about 35 acres, and Air Attack recommended ordering another heavy air tanker.

June 20, 5:45pm – The Type III Sierra Front team was ordered in time to be mobilized the following morning.

June 20, about 6:30pm – Extreme fire behavior continued, and the fire was spotting over a mile in front of

critical.

Local businessman and property owner Tom Abdoo questioned what took so long for firefighters to attack the blaze.

“There was a 24-hour period when nothing happened,” Abdoo told *Lake Tahoe News*. “It was hard to get to. I understand that. But there were several ways they could have attacked it. Then, it went crazy.”

In some respects, Bird would agree with Abdoo that the fire went crazy on the second day. And, both men would like to see more tools at firefighters’ disposal to use for what many think the Sierra Nevada is embarking on – one of the worst fire seasons ever.

Under conditions of “high” fire danger, protocol calls for federal fire officials to send a chief officer, air tanker, three engines and a helicopter. But there’s no real protocol on when. The timing is based on a case-by-case basis.

“It takes time to get in there to figure things out,” Bird said of the rugged terrain.

The firefighting veteran would like more money for cameras so firefighters have more eyes in the woods. The two cameras that the UNR has installed on Snow Valley Peak and another at McClellan south of Carson City were turned the wrong way at the time of the fire, Bird said.

itself. Fire leaders determined a Type II team was needed. The request was made immediately. Before midnight, the Type III Sierra Front team was briefed in preparation for taking over management of the fire in the morning.

June 21, 6am – The Type III Sierra Front team took over management of the fire until the transition to the Great Basin Incident Management Team (Type II team) at 6am on June 22.

Source: U.S.
Forest Service