

Drought nightmare – the fire that wouldn't die

By Mark Grossi, Fresno Bee

Firefighting commander Rocky Opliger can dial directly into the Rough Fire on his iPhone 6s to track his location via satellite as he walks the perimeter for a detailed look. He can stream live video feeds from helicopters and aircraft – in 3-D.

From any angle, this monster wildfire east of Fresno is a zombie. Opliger, a highly experienced incident commander, and other leaders who preceded him here, say the Rough Fire has repeatedly come back from the dead.

Over seven weeks, the fire has found unexpected ways to stay alive. It has burned parched moss on boulders to slip through defenses, blasted through cracks in fire lines and made an unlikely crossing of the Kings River.

As San Joaquin Valley cities filled with smoke for several days in September, firefighters waged a desperate war against a fire cutting through moisture-starved grasses, chaparral and timber.

Public land managers feared this type of blaze from the very beginning when a lightning strike sparked it in the early evening hours of July 31. At the time, the fire had burned only a few acres on a remote ridge between Rough Creek and Deer Creek at the southern edge of the Sierra National Forest.

Contrary to rumors, there was never any thought of allowing the fire to burn vegetation to thin out an overgrown forest, Opliger and other authorities say. They say they were always

in suppression mode with this fire.

They had good reason to be concerned after four years of drought. California fires already have torched more than twice the acreage burned in 2014, according to CalFire.

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