

# Probe: Nev. cut staff for prescribed burn turned wildfire

By Scott Sonner, AP

An independent investigation into a smoldering prescribed burn that sparked a Nevada wildfire and destroyed 23 homes found several questionable practices at the state forestry division, including understaffing despite repeated warnings about unstable, windy weather.

The state of Nevada late Wednesday ordered the review made public on the fire that started Oct. 14 by lingering embers that spread in the Washoe Valley between Carson City and Reno.

“With knowledge of the impending wind event, staffing continued to decrease on the two days prior to the escape,” according to the report overseen by the Phoenix National Incident Management Organization.

It concluded that repeated requests from Washoe County and others to halt the operation due to deteriorating air quality and weather conditions were either ignored or failed to make their way up the line of command at the Nevada Division of Forestry.

In addition to failing to adequately monitor mop-up efforts on the burn, the report cites a lack of documentation for certain training requirements for some fire department personnel. In some cases, a “burn boss trainee” who was reporting to the “burn boss” improperly checked off on conditions necessary to ensure safety despite the fact wind speeds and relative humidity outside the approved parameters.

The burn boss and trainee specifically discussed the forecast

for high winds the day before the fire escaped.

“Based on the limited amount of heat near the control lines, success of the current mop-up effort and the risk to firefighters working in timber during high winds, the decision was made to not staff the prescribed fire in the night of Oct. 13,” the report said.

Other findings include:

- a daily risk analysis that identified hazards and mitigations was not done for the prescribed fire
- the smoke management and air quality plan was insufficient to effectively minimize negative impacts
- a review of the “complexity rating” assigned to the project “revealed that a few elements might have been underrated,” including “management organization” and “public and political interest.”

Gov. Brian Sandoval said he would discuss the findings with the Department of Conservation and Natural Resources overseeing the Division of Forestry.

“Bringing in an outside professional perspective was an important step in understanding how this tragedy occurred,” he said. “Once again, I would like to express my heartfelt sorrow to the victims of this tragic event and my sincere gratitude to the first responders and firefighters who battled this intense and shocking event without injury or loss of life.”

The actual prescribed burn that began on Oct. 4 was done “slowly and cautiously and was well staffed” with more than 100 personnel, the report said. But the next day, humidity levels fell below the approved parameters and smoke started to impact Incline Village at Lake Tahoe where it wasn’t anticipated.

Late that afternoon, the Washoe County Air Quality Management District “expressed concerns with air quality and asked the

burn boss not to burn on the next day." The report said the burn boss stated he did not recall that Oct. 5 conversation.

The operation continued Oct. 6 despite humidity levels, wind speed and direction outside the parameters. County officials told the burn boss that day "conditions were not favorable to continuing burning," and then spoke directly to the state forester on Oct. 7 in an attempt to "compel NDF to cease burning," the report said.