

Biscuit fire Chronology

An Analysis

Executive Summary

The Biscuit fire, which burned a record 500,000 acres of southwest Oregon Forest in the summer of 2002, serves as a useful example of the problems facing the nation in management of its forests. The main problem is the lack of aggressive response to wildfires during times of high fire danger. At one time it was mandatory that all fires be controlled by 10:00 a.m. the morning after they were detected. Changes in forest management policy began to take place in the late 1960's. Fire was viewed as the major management tool for maintaining forests. While fire is a useful tool, it is a tool that can produce tremendous damage if it is not used properly.

This analysis examines the Chronology of Events of the Biscuit Fire during the first 10 days of the fire. The Chronology was published jointly by the Siskiyou National Forest (NF) and the Six Rivers NF. It is available on the Biscuit Fire Web site: <http://www.BiscuitFire.com>. A short history of the Siskiyou NF, in fire control, and the use of Smokejumpers as an initial attack force introduces this document. Many observations on fire control are directly applicable to other forests in Southwest Oregon and Northwest California. The events of the Biscuit fire are abbreviated and printed in italics whereas observations on these events are presented in normal type.

Several direct conclusions can be drawn from the Chronology:

1. Extreme fire conditions existed before and during the Biscuit fire.
2. Insufficient preparation took place given the actual and predicted fire conditions.
3. During a time of extreme fire danger emergency initial response to known fires did not take place.
4. During a time of extreme fire danger minimal effort was made to search for fires after it was known that fires had been started.
5. The person directly responsible for management of the forest area (District Ranger) did not have sufficient authority to commit suppression resources.
6. There was confusion over the chain of command.
7. Fires were not attacked at the time of lowest fire activity.
8. Too restrictive regulations prevented efficient attack on fires.
9. Too restrictive regulations were used as an excuse not to take action.
10. Priorities for committing suppression resources emphasized protection of private interests over protection of the natural resources.

The following recommendations are made based on the conclusions of the analysis.

1. Policies should be changed to emphasize that all fires shall be aggressively attacked at the earliest time when high fire conditions exist.
2. Any fire not controlled by 10:00 a.m. of the day following the day that the fire started shall be the subject of a Fire Board of Review to determine the cause and make recommendation for future actions.
3. Any fire started in a time of high fire danger shall be considered an emergency condition.
4. The District Ranger shall have both the responsibility and authority to order and commit suppression resources during times of high fire danger.
5. Organizations that do not have Stewardship responsibility over the natural resources in danger shall have only advisory fire control responsibility and authority.