

# FOREST SERVICE NEEDS TO REASSESS ITS PRIORITIES

■ Problems handling the Pole Creek fire show a need to focus more on fire prevention rather than environmental issues

Now that we have snowflakes falling rather than ashes from the Pole Creek Fire, I have some thoughts that have been on my mind and I would like to share. Admittedly my timing gives me the advantage of hindsight.

I am a retired 32-year veteran, full-time professional firefighter. My career was with the Los Angeles County Fire Department, the largest county fire department in the world, and I retired as a Battalion Fire Chief. My specialty was in wildfire behavior and attack strategy. On wildfire reports our attack strategy was aggressive, as were our tactics. It was our procedure to dispatch ample equipment. If they weren't needed, units could be returned, but if they were needed they were already responding. Our officers were well-trained in fire behavior and in determining whether or not additional resources were going to be needed.

We worked closely in mutual aid with the U. S. Forest Service providing firefighting resources in the Angeles National Forest, most of which is in L. A. County in rugged mountainous terrain with elevations ranging from 500 feet to more than 10,000 feet.

While in college, I worked for the USFS seasonally on fire crews. We took our responsibilities very seriously as guardians of the forest, and were quite proud to wear the same uniform as Smokey. We also took pride in how rapidly we could respond from our station and of the work we could accomplish on the fire line. My father

was retired from the Forest Service and I have many respected colleagues from that organization.

But the USFS has changed since the early 1950s. Those changes are largely due to the influences of militant ecologists and their clout with persuadable politicians. In the 1960s their objective seemed to be to preserve the pristine wilderness, a noble and popular cause. Then they opposed logging on national forest land which, as we know now, has resulted in the near-death of an industry and has had a tremendous negative budget impact on the firefighting ability of the Forest Service because they

relied on timber sales to help fund their operations. Those same ecologists managed to make it against regulations to use mechanized equipment inside designated wilderness areas. This means fire fighting crews cannot use chain saws or any sort of power equipment, and helicopters cannot land to deposit, supply, or retrieve fire crews in wilderness areas, thus hampering their control efforts.

On Sunday, Sept. 9, 2012, a day the fire danger rating was forecast to be extreme, at 6:30 a.m., Mr. William Kuhn notified the Central Oregon Interagency Dispatch Center of smoke and gave them a detailed location of what was the beginning of the Pole Creek Fire. Mr. Kuhn stated that the dispatcher seemed casual and disinterested, and told Mr. Kuhn that his report would be checked later that day by an aerial reconnaissance flight. According to the Dispatching Center's record fire units weren't dispatched until 10:45 a.m. This four-and-a-quarter hour delay is inexcusable.

As a Captain, I had a three year

assignment supervising the Central Dispatch Center for the L. A. County Fire Department, where we had the responsibility for dispatching fire units to an average of 300 incidents per day. So I can say with authority that this incident was grossly mishandled. A fire dispatcher's primary responsibility is to dispatch the nearest

units as rapidly and efficiently as possible. It's not a dispatcher's prerogative to determine or modify the agency's initial fire attack strategy or to tell a caller the agency would take a look at it from the air later in the day. There is good

reason fire vehicles have sirens. It's called urgency.

The first Forest Service person to arrive at the scene was Dave Robertson, the Fire Management Officer for the Sisters Ranger District (The job title in the Forest Service used to be Fire Control Officer. This semantically implies that the USFS no longer controls fires, but now simply "manages" them.) Mr. Robertson is quoted as saying that when he arrived the fire "started to really pick up quick," fueled by a large amount of dead wood and other vegetation. He stated he "couldn't say with any confidence that a quicker response would have changed the result". If Mr. Robertson is qualified for his position he is familiar with the complexities of fire behavior. I don't understand how he could make that statement. I didn't have the opportunity to size up the fire in it's early stages, but from his description and in any

## Guest Opinion



Gene Vickery  
hawkherder@bendbroadband.com

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experience, I can say with reasonable confidence that with a timely and aggressive initial attack, the fire most likely could have been contained before it got out of hand. Of the hundreds of wildfires I have responded to there has never been one that couldn't have been extinguished with a tea cup of water if applied at the right moment. But it's a completely different situation if you arrive more than four hours later.

As we know, the Pole Creek Fire burned for over three weeks, decimated approximately 27,000 acres of pristine wilderness, and at it's peak had 1,200 firefighters on the lines, closed roads and trails, burned four vehicles, forced the evacuation of 30 people in the fire's path, and cost the taxpayers over \$17.5 million to fight. There is no way to estimate the wildlife loss in the

fire itself. It rained ash on land, streams, and lakes for 50 miles downwind, threatening wildlife outside of the fire. Dense smoke reached toxic levels unhealthy for all living creatures. The heavy blanket of smoke that hung in Sisters for long periods also had a financial impact to businesses there from which they are still struggling to recover. The Forest Service will have to rehabilitate certain parts of the fire such as roads, trails, and dozer lines. So the loss of the forest itself and the direct cost of fighting the fire are only part of the picture.

By this time, I hope dispatch priorities have been reinforced, and before our next fire season arrives perhaps the Forest Service should re-assess their preparedness and initial attack strategy.

Gene Vickery can be reached by phone at 541-290-2335, or by e-mail at [hawkberder@bendbroadband.com](mailto:hawkberder@bendbroadband.com)