



## **2015 Chelan Complex and First Creek Wildfires Frequently Asked Questions**

**Background:** The Chelan Complex wildfires were ignited by multiple lightning strikes on the morning of August 14, 2015. A cooperative response by Chelan Fire and Rescue (CFR) (Chelan County Fire Protection District 7), the US Forest Service (USFS) and the Washington Department of Natural Resources (DNR) was immediately initiated.

**Weather/Lightning Storm:** A Red Flag warning for hot, dry and windy weather that could result in extreme fire behavior was in effect for Friday, August 14<sup>th</sup>. At approximately 5:30am, a thunderstorm moved through the lower Lake Chelan area, bringing approximately seven lightning strikes that immediately resulted in wildfires; 3 starts on Chelan Butte, 2 starts at First Creek, 1 start at Cagle Gulch (Deer Mountain) and 1 start in Antoine Creek.

The Chelan Complex fire started as the Reach Fire (on Chelan Butte), the Antoine Creek Fire, and the Cagle (Deer Mountain) Fire. These three fires grew together later in the day on August 14<sup>th</sup> and were combined into the Chelan Complex.

The First Creek fire was ignited by the same thunderstorm system that moved through Chelan. The First Creek fire was first reported at 0544 on the morning of August 14<sup>th</sup>.

**Mutual Aid:** A cooperative agreement for fire protection and suppression is in place between the USFS, and Chelan County Fire Districts, including Chelan Fire and Rescue. A cooperative agreement is also in place between the USFS, Washington DNR and the Bureau of Land Management (BLM). These agreements support a “closest forces” concept so that each of the agencies can assist in response to wildfires or other disasters. Closest forces is the guiding principle for dispatch of initial attack suppression resources – utilization of the closest available resource regardless of which agency the resource belongs to and regardless of which agency has protection responsibility. This concept is put into action every year in the Chelan area and was utilized on August 14<sup>th</sup> immediately.

The cooperative agreement also describes that the USFS has the responsibility for prevention, protection and suppression of wildland fires on National Forest administered lands and on adjacent or intermingled state and private forested lands as identified through written agreement.

The County Fire Districts have the responsibility for prevention, protection and suppression of structure and other non-wildland fires within the established fire protection district. These structures and lands protected by the Districts/Departments are intermingled or adjacent to lands protected by the USFS.

## **Why wasn't the fire on the Butte (the Reach Fire) put out when it was small?**

On the morning of August 14<sup>th</sup>, by 0600, there were three separate incidents ignited by lightning on Chelan Butte. Chelan Fire and Rescue (CFR), USFS and DNR units all responded to Chelan Butte following the lighting strikes.

Air support was requested immediately following the lightning strikes by CFR and USFS.

The incident above Rowe's Towing was identified first due to its proximity to Chelan and action was initiated on that incident based upon its proximity to the values at risk and access. While CFR units suppressed one fire near Rowe's Towing at the base of Chelan Butte, the other fires were not accessible by road.

USFS personnel, and resources on loan from the Wolverine Type 1 Team (PNW 2), hiked up Chelan Butte from the Old Chelan Falls road in an attempt to contain the fire, unfortunately they were not successful.

As the three incidents grew and combined into two and then one single incident, the resources available were making every effort to suppress the incident. The combination of a lack of resources, access, the number of incidents in the area, and volatile burning conditions proved to be more than the capacity of the initial attack resources could suppress.

All reasonable efforts were made to extinguish the fires on Chelan Butte before the winds picked up and caused the fire to run, pushing it down on the city of Chelan, ultimately jumping the Chelan Gorge and the Columbia River.



## **What took so long for the helicopters to start working the fires?**

*USFS Response:* The first helicopter was operating on Chelan Butte at 0830 hours. The closest aircraft available for the initial response to these incidents was assigned to the Wolverine Fire and had been working the previous day on the suppression of that incident. The flight hours of these air resources are closely monitored and regulated (by the FAA) in order to ensure the safe operation of the aircraft. Pilots are restricted to eight hours of flight time daily. The common practice is to begin a pilot's shift mid-morning so that they are available through the heat of the day and into the evening hours, which is typically when the most intense fire behavior occurs. The Wolverine Fire was still requiring a significant amount of aircraft use to protect Holden and Stehekin and the afternoon and evening hours were the most effective time for aircraft use. With those facts to consider, the Wolverine aircraft were scheduled to return to shift later in the morning.



When the lightning fires of August 14<sup>th</sup> ignited, the aircraft were brought into service and prioritized for initial attack on the new incidents as soon as their flight hour restrictions allowed. On August 14<sup>th</sup>, initial attack response for aircraft on the Reach Fire included three Type 1 (heavy) helicopters, two Type 2 (medium) helicopters, one VLAT (*Very Large Air Tanker*), three LATs (*Large Air Tankers*) and one Super Scooper.

## **Why were South Shore resources sent into town on the afternoon of Friday August 14?**

*CFR Response:* Chelan Fire and Rescue Engine 75, Tender 75, and Brush 75 were initially deployed in the South Lakeshore area at First Creek and the Granite Falls area from about 0700 hours until 1200 hours. They returned to Station 75 after all immediate threats, that they could handle, had been addressed. The USFS had taken command of the First Creek Fire around 1226 hours and had resources actively engaging the fire up on the ridge. Chief Lemon spoke with the Station 75's Lieutenant after a third tone out for resources, who inquired if Chief Lemon wanted Engine 75 and Tender 75 to respond to the City of Chelan. Chief Lemon affirmed he did if they were not needed on South Lakeshore as the south side of the City of Chelan was under direct flame impingement and they were short of resources.

At around 1412 hours Engine 75 responded to the City of Chelan. At 1445 hours, Tender 75 responded to the City of Chelan. Brush 75 stayed in service and available on South Lakeshore. Engine 75 and Tender 75 were assigned to Division "A" (South side of the City of Chelan) fighting fire from Rowe's Towing to Lakeside.



## **Why weren't the South shore resources returned to the South Shore when the fire reached South Lakeshore Drive?**

*CFR Response:* Chelan Fire and Rescue Engine 75 and Tender 75 were actively engaged in the fire fight in Chelan until 10:00 a.m. on Saturday August 15. It would not have been reasonable to have those units disengage from an active fire fight.



When CFR was advised of active fire on South Lakeshore, Command 5 and Engine 4 were pulled off another Division and sent out to South Lakeshore to assist Brush 75, USFS and DNR resources that were already in the area actively engaged in the fire fight.

## **Were any certain individuals given special attention with fire trucks or retardant drops?**

*CFR Response:* Calls that indicate people are trapped or their lives are at risk are given priority attention. The majority of the resources were deployed based upon information received through 911 calls, assessment made of the fire behavior by the field commanders and information being provided by the frontline firefighting crews that were fighting the fire.

*USFS Response:* The direction for air resources was provided through the prioritization of the four incidents (Reach, First Creek, Cagle and Antoine) based upon the values at risk, by the incident commanders, and the air tactical group supervisors. The values at risk on each incident are prioritized by threat to life, property, and resource based upon the current and predicted fire behavior. With those factors in mind, air and ground tactical supervisors and commanders prioritize the use of air resources based upon the intelligence they receive and deploy the resources in the locations they determine to be the highest priority and the most likely to be beneficial.

*DNR Response:* The department when acting in good faith, in its statutory capacity as a fire prevention and suppression agency, is carrying out duties owed to the public in general and not to any individual person or class of persons separate and apart from the public. However, DNR will divert resources for life safety missions, as described above by the District.

## **Who was responsible for coordination of resources?**

USFS and DNR coordinated USFS / DNR ground and air resources. Chief Lemon coordinated fire district(s) resources. Once resources are assigned to an Incident Commander (IC) or Division Supervisor, that IC or Division Supervisor is responsible for them and coordinate their activities and locations until released. When the Wolverine Type I Team took over the fire at 0600 hours on August 15<sup>th</sup>, they coordinated all resources.

Air resources were deployed as described above. Ground resources for BLM, USFS, DNR, and the resources from the Wolverine Fire, were coordinated through fire managers with the BLM, USFS, and DNR in collaboration with county resources including Chelan Fire and Rescue. Resource assignments to the incidents were prioritized by the values at risk (see below), resource type, and the needs of the incidents. Once the resources are assigned to an incident and an incident commander, the incident commander then deploys those suppression resources as they deem necessary to meet the objectives of the incident and the risk management considerations.

## **Who classified the First Creek Fire as a lower priority than the Chelan Fire and why?**

*USFS Response:* The interagency resources assigned to the four incidents that ignited on August 14<sup>th</sup> were assigned based upon the threat to the values at risk. National, regional, and local policies prioritize the values to be protected on any incident as (1) Life, (2) Property, and (3) Resource. With those priorities in mind, the location of the Reach Fire (Chelan Butte) was deemed as having the highest

amount of life and property immediately threatened by the incident due to the very high amount of private property and values, the proximity to the public, and the large concentration of critical public infrastructure. The First Creek incident was evaluated as having the second priority for resources due to the proximity to private structure and public infrastructure. The Cagle Fire (Deer Mountain) was deemed as the third priority due to the proximity to private property and public infrastructure and the Antoine Fire was given the fourth priority due a relatively lesser amount of private property and public infrastructure immediately threatened.

## **Is Chelan Fire and Rescue satisfied with the fire response on August 14, 2015?**

*CFR Response:* Chelan Fire and Rescue is never satisfied when members of our community suffer losses. However, we are proud of the hard work performed by our local career and volunteer firefighters, USFS, DNR, BLM and the many fire agencies that responded to our request for help from communities throughout our region, across Washington State and beyond. Without all of their hard work, dedication and willingness to stay in the fire fight, much more of our community would have been lost.

The fact that no lives were lost in the face of extreme fire behavior should not be discounted. In addition, the efforts to keep the fires from consuming two agricultural chemical facilities avoided what could have been a very serious hazmat event.



## **Will the South Shore engines be taken away again in the future?**

*CFR Response:* Each situation requires an assessment to determine what resources will be needed. There will certainly be times when Station 75 resources are directed out of the South Shore area when that need arises, just as trucks from the city of Chelan and other satellite stations (Chelan Falls, Union Valley and Chelan Airport) have been sent to the South Shore when needed.

## **Are South Shore residents getting a proportional benefit in fire service in relation to taxes paid?**

*CFR Response:* Chelan Fire and Rescue believes that the South Shore residents are receiving more than their proportional benefit in relation to the tax contributions from the South Lakeshore area. This complex of wildfires started on August 14, 2015 and did not end for Chelan Fire and Rescue until August 28, 2015. The Interagency Type I Team continued to deploy resources to the South Shore area well into September. The First Creek Fire report shows firefighters assigned to the area through September 11, 2015. CFR personnel logged in over 2,080 man hours on the First Creek Fire in addition to logging in 24 other emergency 911 calls during this time period. The cost of the resources that were assigned to the First Creek Fire from USFS, DNR, Chelan Fire and Rescue, Chelan County Sheriff's Office, State Mobilization resources and the Interagency Type I Team far exceeded the amount of taxes that have been paid. This does not include the emergency response work provided throughout the balance of the year before and after the First Creek Fire.

## **Do fire agencies have the right to set back burns on private property?**

*CFR Response:* Chelan Fire and Rescue does not conduct back burns, but will conduct burnouts between the fireline and the fire to reduce fuels and the amount of energy that the fire is putting out. This process helps reduce spot fires and fire spread in front of the main body of fire. Conducting a burnout is one of many methods firefighters used in an attempt to contain out of control wildland fires.

*DNR Response:* All privately owned forest land falls under the fire suppression jurisdiction of the DNR. In the spirit of cooperation and closest forces response, the USFS, under a cooperative agreement, is delegated the authority to suppress wildfires on private lands. The necessary fire suppression actions to minimize acres burned in wildfires may include back fire or burnout operations.



There are two types of burn operations; **burnout** and **backfire**.

**Burnout:** A burnout is typically a smaller scale burn operation that can be authorized by a crew leader in order to remove unburned fuel between the fire perimeter and fire control line in order to improve the holding capacity of the control line. Burning out is almost always done as part of line construction; the control line is considered incomplete unless there is no fuel between the fire and the line.

**Backfire:** A backfire is typically a large scale burn operation that is authorized by an incident commander, operations section chief, or division supervisor that is a strategic operation and is typically

of high complexity. It is most often used to contain a rapidly spreading fire. Backfiring provides a wide defense perimeter, and may be further employed to change the force of the convective column. Backfiring is a tactic which makes possible a strategy of locating control lines at places where the fire can be fought on the firefighter's terms.

## **What criteria are used to determine if burnouts or backfires will be utilized?**

The main criteria for a **burnout** are: (1) there is unburned fuel between the fire perimeter and the control line, (2) the removal of that fuel is likely to be beneficial to holding and suppressing the fire, and (3) there is a reasonable likelihood that the burnout operation will be successful and can be held at the control lines based upon the fuel conditions, the current and predicted weather, and the topography. Other factors to be considered include the available resources on the incident, the capabilities of the personnel on the incident, logistical considerations, timing, and the presence of values at risk within the burn area.

The criteria for conducting a **backfire** are similar, but the complexity of the concerns is typically significantly higher and the backfire operation must also meet the strategic objectives set forth by the agency administrators.

In the case of the First Creek Incident on August 14 through the morning of August 15, only small scale burnout operations were performed in an effort to remove the unburned fuels between the fire perimeter and the control line constructed to protect the private structure values at risk. While this burn operation was successful in the small scale, the varied spread direction of the main fire subsequently caused the values at risk to be threatened from other directions and structures were lost.

Every fire is evaluated. The strategy and tactics that will have a high probability of success, while protecting firefighter safety and minimizing acres burned, are selected.

## **What happens next?**

The USFS, DNR, BLM and Chelan County Fire Districts have identified areas of improvement for future incidents including improved communication, updated coordinated emergency response protocols, and increased interagency incident response training. Fire managers and leaders from all the agencies will be working together to learn from the experiences of 2015 in order to continually improve the incident response in North Central Washington.

Chelan Fire and Rescue has an ongoing evaluation process for emergency events to review what went well and what we can improve on. This same process is used throughout the year for the fire district. CFR is always looking for ways to improve service within the tax revenues that are made available by the citizens of our fire district.

The summer of 2016 could have conditions at least as conducive to fire activity as the summer of 2015 did. While fire agencies are looking at what strategies need to be in place for the next fire season, land owners must also examine what they need to do to make their properties more fire defensible. Free assistance for property assessing and preparing property for wildfire is available from the Cascadia Conservation District and DNR.

<p><i>For more information, contact:</i> <b>Chelan Fire &amp; Rescue</b> 509-682-4476</p> <p><b>US Forest Service, Chelan Ranger District</b> 509-682-4900</p> <p><b>WA Dept. of Natural Resources, Southeast Region</b> 509-925-8510</p>
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