CONGRESSIONAL REVIEW OF SEVERAL FIRES IN NEW MEXICO DURING MAY AND EARLY JUNE, 2012

Seewald Report

Bill Derr – Representing Congressman Stevan Pearce
Roger Seewald – Representing – USDA, Forest Service

The review began with an introductory meeting the morning of August 13th 2012, with Regional Forester Corbin Newman and Fire and Aviation Director Bob Leaverton.

New Mexico Fire Review:

Field interviews and information collection was accomplished between August 13th and August 20th, 2012. Additional information was requested and reviewed after August 20th. Individuals were given the opportunity to provide information without interruption and then specific questions were asked. The questions asked during the interviews were, what I would consider, unbiased and seeking facts. Each person was also given the opportunity to have others contact us, if they had firsthand and specific information related to the fire events. To my knowledge there were no individuals who came forward with specific firsthand accounts of events on any of the fires that would indicate the Forest Service erred in its suppression tactics or decisions.

It should be noted that prior to each interview Bill and I were very open with the individuals and clear as to our roles and our backgrounds with the Forest Service. The emphasis was for substantiated information about the specific fire(s), but the conversations often involved perceptions and issues not entirely related to our mission.

Contact was made with Sean Stafford (Acting Fire Staff Officer on the Lincoln National Forest during the Little Bear Fire) and Bob Lippincott (Acting Fire Management Officer on the Little Bear Fire during the Little Bear Fire), questions were supplied electronically for a response. Answers were received from Sean Stafford (Attachment 2 – Sean Stafford Responses), but due to the severe fire situation on the Clearwater and Nez Perce National Forests in Region 1, Bob Lippincott has not had the time to respond.

Interviews were conducted with a variety of individuals that believed they had information concerning the Little Bear Fire and the Whitewater-Baldy Complex (Whitewater and Baldy Fires). Of those interviewed only personnel who were directly associated with the actual fire suppression efforts during the early stages of these fires had any firsthand knowledge of the existing circumstances which led to the tactical decisions.

Part of this process included a review of the "Unit Logs" prepared by the Sacramento Hotshots for 6/5, 6/6, 6/7, and 6/8, along with the general and spot weather forecasts for those days. The

Unit Logs are specific as to actions and accomplishments for each day and also note that the predicted weather for Saturday June 9, 2012, arrived on the afternoon of June 8th.

The Little Bear Fire is an example of a fire where most of the interviewees, which included members of the general public and some local paid and volunteer fire personnel who were not involved in the fire until it escaped on June 8, 2012. They each had their personal views related to what should have done, yet none of them had factual on the ground information of why certain actions were taken. I have enclosed the report I did on the Little Bear Fire (Attachment 1 - Little Bear Fire Review – August 13-16, 2012) after a site visit with Acting District Fire Management Officer Anthony Sanchez. The results of a telephonic interview with Matt Barone (Sacramento Hotshot Superintendent), conducted by Bill Derr, substantiated the findings in Attachment 1, but also included additional information about increased resources committed to the fire on June 8, 2012.

Barone stated to Derr:

- No suppression constraints placed on their actions.
- Minimal impact suppression tactics (MIST) was not used.
- Additional air resources would not have been effective.
- There was a containment line around the entire fire.
- The Red Flag weather predicted for Saturday arrived early – midday on Friday.
- Interior torching caused the fire to escape.

Several individuals who made initial attack on the Little Bear Fire have yet to be interviewed. They are:

- The two members of Mescalero Helicopter 372 who were dropped off on the fire the afternoon of June 4, 2012 and initiated suppression action until relieved on June 5, 2012, by the Sacramento Hotshots.
- Pilot of Mescalero Helicopter 372.

There is the possibility those interviews might disclose something unexpected and if that were to occur, I would revise, as necessary this report.

An item that is not covered in Attachment 1 relates to authorizations in the White Mountain Wilderness Area. The initial attack firefighters were immediately given verbal approval for helicopter and chainsaw use within the wilderness area, indicating this was to be a full suppression action.

There were several people initially interviewed with reference to the Whitewater-Baldy Complex. They included Kelly Russell, Forest Supervisor – Gila National Forest; Pat Morrison, District Ranger – Glenwood Ranger District; Gabe Holguin, Fire Staff – Gila National Forest; and Robbie Gallardo, Fire Staff – Glenwood Ranger District. These key individuals gave us a chronology of the events and the decision processes during the initial stages of the Baldy Fire (Reported May 9, 2012) and then the Whitewater Fire (Reported May 16, 2012).

Baldy Fire:

- Aerial reconnaissance of Baldy Fire.
- No suppression actions taken at the time.
- Firefighter safety was paramount, so crews not placed on fire.
- A number of other burns around the Baldy Fire location.
- Baldy Fire hardly moved for several days.
- Fire placed in a "modified suppression" status and would be monitored to determine when active suppression action could safely be taken.

Whitewater Fire:

- On May 16, 2012, suppression crews were dispatched. They included a Type 2 helicopter and two hotshot crews.
- Due to the steepness (80%), rolling rocks, and the fact the fire was headed to the helispot the crew flew into, the decision was made to pull all personnel off the fire on May 17, 2012.
- The ERC and 1000 hours fuels were about normal for that time of year.
- The use of air tankers would not have been effective since there would not have been any firefighters on the ground.

The last in person interview for the Whitewater-Baldy Complex was Doug Boykin, Socorro District Forester – NM Forestry Division. Doug is a longtime resident of the area and extremely familiar with the fuels, topography, weather, and fire history and actively involved with the suppression efforts on the Whitewater-Baldy Fire. He stated:

- Had it not been for the Whitewater Fire, the Baldy Fire would only have been a shot blip on the screen.
- The Whitewater influenced the Baldy.
- Helicopters would have been ineffective due to the lack of sufficient water to support the operation.
- Fixed wing aircraft would also have been ineffective because of the inability of ground forces to work in the steep terrain containing heavy vegetation.
- Firefighter safety was the main reason engagement with the fire was not initiated.

In summary: I believe the Forest Service made every reasonable effort to extinguish the Little Bear Fire and used acceptable methods and strategies to control the fire. The area of communications with the local publics and cooperators should be revisited to determine if there was a lack of information flow to local communities about the Little Bear Fire, its status and the actions the Forest Service was taking on it – to include **firefighter safety**, topography, and fuel loading. This information flow would seem prudent on the heels of a record setting fire on the Gila National Forest. The same would hold true for the Whitewater-Baldy Complex.

I believe there are other systemic issues that spearhead the numerous complaints about the perceived lack of suppression actions on the Little Bear Fire. The fire was just the catalyst to bring all the other issues (including fuels work, logging, travel management, etc.) up.

I appreciated the opportunity to represent the Forest Service and believe I presented an unbiased view, based on firsthand information, in this report.

Roger Seewald

ATTACHMENT 1

Little Bear Fire Review – August 13-16, 2012

(Prepared – 8/21/2012)

On August 13, 2012, during an introductory meeting with District Ranger David Warnack and Acting District Fire Management Officer Anthony Sanchez, the subject of a site visit was discussed. It was decided that if such a site visit was necessary that Bill Derr would contact District Ranger Warnack. After meetings with numerous non Forest Service local individuals on August 13th and 14th regarding their knowledge of Little Bear Fire events, Bill Derr contacted District Ranger Warnack to confirm a site visit.

It was agreed that on August 15th, Roger Seewald would accompany Anthony Sanchez to the location where the Little Bear fire started to assess the terrain, slope, fuel types, fuel loading, and other conditions at the actual site, including the fire suppression actions taken.

On August 15, 2012, Acting DFMO Anthony Sanchez and Roger Seewald met at the Smokey Bear Ranger Station at approximately 0700. At approximately 0730 they departed for the origin area of the Little Bear Fire. Arrival at the origin area was at approximately 0900. They departed the origin area at approximately 1330.

Elevation – approximately 9950
Legal location:
N 33 25 76
W 105 49 68

Finding 1 – Personnel placement. Sanchez and Seewald discussed the fire in general and Sanchez showed Seewald where the Sacramento Hotshots spent Thursday evening (6/7/12). The crew superintendent of the Sacramento Hotshots moved his crew to the top of the fire on 6/7/12 believing there was no potential for the fire to escape and to increase crew work time on the fire.

Finding 2 – District oversight of suppression actions. The District Ranger and Acting DFMO had gone to the fire site on June 7th to personally observe the fire suppression activities and ensure everything was being done to contain and suppress the fire. They reviewed two alternative plans with the Incident Commander should there be a need to alter suppression tactics. There was adequate oversight of this fire by District management. Sanchez spoke with the Incident Commander, at a minimum in the morning and evening of each day, by cell phone to determine fire status and crew supply needs.

At the fire site Sanchez and Seewald proceeded down the southeast side of the fire. Even though line rehabilitation work had occurred, it was easy to see where the line had been built.

The remaining volume of downed fuel was substantially less within the burned area. Much of what had burned was covered in needle cast from the Douglas fir trees. It was estimated the average tree height to be around 70-90 feet, with most of the crowns remaining. Sanchez and Seewald discussed the use of both fixed wing retardant drops as well as helicopter water drops. Seewald concurred with the assessments made by Sanchez. (See Finding Numbers 4 & 5)

(Tree height and canopy)

The width of the fire near the top of the ridge was somewhere around 600 feet. This is an estimate based on the trail length on the northeast side of the summit. The south-southeast side dropped off at somewhere around a 60-70+ percent slope. This area was extremely rocky. These were medium to large granite rocks/boulders. They were also unstable. Several large boulders were dislodged as Sanchez and Seewald walked down the fireline. This condition was consistent through approximately 2/3 of the fire area as they proceeded to the northwest across the fire face. The north western section of the fire was less rocky, but nonetheless steep. Seewald estimated the distance from the top to the bottom of the fire (bottom was anchored into rocks) was approximately 1200-1500 feet with an elevation drop of some 400+ feet.

Finding 3 – Terrain. The terrain was extremely rocky and steep. Medium to large boulders were easily dislodged and created a serious hazard for firefighters. The inability for the firefighters to move quickly was also severely hampered by the heavy slash on the ground, which was estimated at 70 tons per acre. As noted in the Unit Log for the Sacramento Hotshots on 6-5-12, there had been several close calls with rolling rocks, so lookouts had been posted.

(Steep and rocky slope on the western side of fire – looking upslope)

(Slash just outside the southeast fireline – representative of slash buildup inside the Little Bear fire)

Finding 4 – Use of fixed wing retardant drops. Seewald has directed retardant drops on large fires. Seewald believes that they could not have effectively been used with crews on the ground. The amount of dead limbs, the steep terrain, the small area they would have had to drop on, and the surrounding terrain would have led him, based on his experience, not to order them once personnel were on the ground. In addition, he believes fixed wing drops would have had little positive effect on the fire, based on surrounding topography, prior to firefighting personnel arriving on the scene.

> **Note: Due to the crash of airtanker T-11 on June 3, 2012, Neptune Aviation was on a stand down and there were no airtankers available.**

(Remaining slash on ground, steep slope and rocks)

Finding 5 – Use of helicopters for water drops. While this may seem like a feasible alternative to fixed wing use, the use of helicopters to make water drops would have created a different set of problems. To be effective the water would need to be dropped from an altitude of around 100-150 feet. This would have created rotor winds on the fire, spreading it in all directions and the hazard to personnel on the ground would be significant. Again, there would have been limbs knocked off standing trees and potentially snags knocked over. Due to the steep and rocky terrain, it would have created a safety issue every time a drop was to be made because of the inability to move very fast in the rocks and fallen debris on the ground.

Finding 6 – Additional personnel. Due to the steepness, rocks and vegetation, Seewald believes additional personnel would not have been advisable. The fire dropped off steeply and narrowed from around 400 feet at the top to approximately 50 feet at the bottom within the 1000-1200 feet distance from top to bottom. With the potential of large boulders being dislodged and rolling downhill (where additional personnel would have been working) this would have created the potential for serious injury.

(Rocks, steepness and slash on the Little Bear Fire)

Finding 7 – Weather forecast. Spot weather forecasts were requested and received on the fire each day along with the general weather forecast. Nothing found in those forecasts predicted the winds that apparently surfaced on the Little Bear Fire the afternoon and early evening of Friday, June 8, 2012.

(Interior tree torching area where fire blew out on 6/8/2012)

Unit logs from the Incident Commander and Incident Commander Trainee for the period of 6/5/2012-6/8/2012 were reviewed and the information contained in them is consistent with what had been provided to Derr and Seewald and matched what was found in the origin area for the Little Bear Fire.

It is believed that appropriate decisions and actions were taken to suppress the Little Bear Fire.

ATTACHMENT 2 – Sean Stafford Responses

These questions were asked of Sean Stafford by telephone on September 5, 2012, and then an draft was sent to him for review. This is the final after his review.

What was your role in Fire Management on the Lincoln – on June 4, 2012?

I was the Acting Fire Staff Officer on the Forest. I was performing those duties in the absence of Chad Stewart, the Fire Staff Officer. In that position I supervised the Forest Fire Management Officer who was Bob Lippincott. Bob was on a detail from Region 1.

What was your involvement – based on that role on June 4, 2012?

I was aware of the fire because dispatch would send a text message to fire management personnel on the forest whenever there was a fire. Myself and Bob Lippincott reported to the Smokey Bear Ranger District in the evening of June 4, and we had direct dialogue with Anthony Sanchez and facilitated getting approvals with Forest Supervisor Robert Trujillo via phone call, for use of mechanized equipment in wilderness, including; Chainsaws, helicopter landings and bucket work. I waited until the initial attack helitack personnel gave a fire size-up report before departing for home.

What was your involvement from June 5 through June 7, 2012?

I had dialogues with District Ranger Dave Warnack and Acting Fire Management Officer Anthony Sanchez. They keep me updated on the status of the fire. Based on the information I was getting from them, I felt comfortable with the decisions they were making. Anthony had a number of years on the Smokey Bear Hotshots and a lot of fire experience.

I was aware that District Ranger Warnack and Acting DFMO Sanchez had hiked to the fire on June 7th, 2012 and discussed the suppression strategies and accomplishments with the Sacramento Hotshots. This made me comfortable with the decisions being made on the ground.

What was your involvement on June 8, 2012?

I was on my day off and received a call from Dave Warnack. He asked me to come to the District Office and provide some assistance. I did and prepared delegation letters, and started preparing the Wildfire Decision Support System or WFDSS. This is a software program that aids fire managers and line officers to evaluate risk, complexity and values at risk, which in turn help aid in setting objectives.

Did you mention to anyone that the Little Bear Fire was not a prescribed fire?

I mentioned to several people from the onset of the fire the tactic had been suppression. Early on there was a rumor floating around the community that the District/Forest was allowing this fire to burn or fire for recourse benefit. That just is not the case. Approximately two weeks before the Little Bear Fire District Ranger Dave Warnack had said that all fires on the district

would be put out. There was no question in my mind that this meant we would take the necessary and appropriate safe action to suppress fires on the district.

How long on the Lincoln/Smoker Bear RD?

I was on the Smokey Bear Ranger District for approximately 2 years as the District Fire Management Officer. During this time I studied past large fire occurrence in this area and learned that most of the fires on the Lincoln NF are wind driven. This fire was unique as several things came into alignment that made it resistant to control and predict rates of spread. This included;

- Enormous amounts of downed trees from a wind event from several years prior
- Insect infested stands of trees causing high mortality rates
- Intense multi-day record cold temperatures during the winter of 2010 that stressed healthy trees to the point many did not recover causing large amounts of trees with red, dead needles.
- Below average monsoonal rains and snow pack during the winter of 2011.
- Single digit (7%) relative humidity readings at 0200 in the morning at an elevation of 10,000 feet.

These conditions caused the fire to be fuels driven and difficult to control spreading in multiple directions at the same time.