

Prepared Statement for the Record
of
Duncan L. Baird
Victim of the Station Fire, August 29, 2009

Representing the Vogel Flats Fire Recovery Alliance
Big Tujunga Canyon

Retired Fire Battalion Chief, Pasadena Fire Department

Before Congressional Representatives
Adam B. Schiff, California District 29
Judy May Chu, California District 32
Brad Sherman, California District 27

October 12, 2010

Executive Summary

- My home destroyed by the Station Fire
- Retired Fire Battalion Chief, 37 year career
- Remained in Big Tujunga Canyon through the passage of the fire and destruction of homes
- Noted no presence of fire suppression prep of Big Tujunga for 48 hrs. prior to 40+ homes destroyed
- USDA fire cost review suggests that homes in Big Tujunga were sacrificed to meet the overall control strategy
- USFS Incident documents show pattern of ignorance or disregard for Big Tujunga Canyon homes until too late
- Complete *independent* review of the management of Station Fire must be done

Statement

I am here today as a representative of the Vogel Flats Fire Recovery Alliance. I represent a coalition of about 22 private homeowners, all of whom lost their homes and everything they owned on August 29, 2009 in the Station Fire in Big Tujunga Canyon. We also represent over 40 homeowners within the Big Tujunga watershed who also lost their homes.

I have a unique perspective on the entire event from several points of view. Let me explain.

First, and most important, I lost my privately owned home and I lost everything that I owned on August 29, 2009. I, along with 22 of my immediate neighbors, all suffered the exact same fate. I have been an owner of my home in the Vogel Flats / Stonyvale area of Big Tujunga Canyon for 27 years. I raised my family in my home there and loved the beauty of my wonderful home and the surrounding canyon.

Second, I am now retired. I spent 37 years working for the City of Pasadena Fire Department. The last 17 years of my career I served in the position of Fire Battalion Chief.

Third, during the later years of my career, I served for over 5 years as a member of an Interagency Southern California Regional Fire Management Team for the United States Forest Service. As a member of Fire Team Operations we fought wildland fires in Wyoming, Nevada, New Mexico, Northern California and Oregon, as well as many in Southern California. As a team member, I served as a Division Supervisor and finally as a Structure Protection Branch Director.

People often ask me, "How could someone with your experience lose their home in a wildfire?" My response is usually the same, "When you are all alone, by yourself, with no help, under very extreme fire conditions, there is not much you can do, even if you are well prepared."

The first few days of the Station Fire, which began on August 26, 2009 were very frustrating for me. It became obvious to me that no effort was being made to keep the fire out of the Big Tujunga watershed. It was apparent to me that the management personnel of the incident did not know that there were dozens of homes in Big Tujunga Canyon that were in direct jeopardy, in front of the fire. This condition existed for at least 48 hours prior to the ultimate destruction of our homes on August 29.

Fourth, I stayed in the Canyon during the fire event as all of our homes burned. At the very last moment, as my neighbors' houses were burning, I retreated to an area of safety in the Canyon. I returned to my former house a couple of hours later to find total destruction.

Fifth, since the fire I have obtained official documents via Freedom of Information Act requests. The documents are from the Forest Service and were generated at the incident command post during the Station Fire. Among these documents are Incident Status Summaries and Incident Action Plans that are published every 12 hours during any large fire. These documents provide written proof that the homes in Big Tujunga Canyon were completely ignored until just a couple of hours before the actual arrival of the fire front. Further, the documents show that the incident management did not even know about the loss of our homes for at least 48 hours after our smoking house foundations had finally cooled!

Official incident documents show that incident managers were paying close attention to homes and infrastructure assets in La Canada-Flintridge, Altadena, Clear Creek, Mt. Lukens, Mt. Wilson, Mt. Harvard, Mt. Disappointment and even cabins in the Arroyo Seco. On the contrary, fire suppression resources were not assigned to Big Tujunga Canyon until it was already far too late. The resources arrived only a short time before our houses were on fire and these firefighters were unable to do anything but save their own lives.

The Forest Service has a mandate to plan for the fire defense of homes and other improvements within the forest boundary. The local Forest Service unit in Big Tujunga Canyon did this and had formal written plans for their use. It appears that this information did not get to the Station Fire incident management, or worse yet if it did get communicated, that the fire management did not use the information. From my viewpoint as a trained observer, it appeared that the incident management was unaware of the presence of our homes. At best, it seems that the incident management was informed of, "only a few 'recreational cabins' in Big Tujunga Canyon."

The USDA August 2010 "Large Fire Cost Review For FY2009" revealed that, "The Forest and IMT [Incident Management Team] pursued a major objective of allowing the fire to move up into the forest and wilderness areas, away from the WUI [wildland-urban interface], by primarily employing an indirect strategy." This indirect strategy means that after the fire escaped the initial attack it was allowed to burn to established control lines, such as the forest boundary. It seems that our enclave of homes was therefore sacrificed for the sake of the overall control strategy.

Fuels in Big Tujunga Canyon were in the 40 year old class. The fire entered the Big Tujunga watershed on Thursday, August 27th, a little more than 24 hours after its start. The flame front was witnessed in our Canyon by dozens of Canyon residents for almost 48 hours prior to it reaching our homes. Yet official incident fire progress maps failed to document its advance into our Canyon in our direction.

Air tanker drops of fire retardant are a major factor in wildland firefighting. While fire retardant does not extinguish the fire, it can dramatically reduce the fire intensity as the fire moves through the pre-treated brush. An intense air tanker assault was made to save homes in La Canada-Flintridge, North Pasadena and Altadena. Yet no areal fire retardant chemical application was ever made to the fuels in Big Tujunga Canyon at any time

prior to our houses burning.

Almost one month after our tragedy, at a public meeting on September 28, 2009, at the Sunland-Tujunga "City Hall," Mike Dietrich, the Incident Commander of the Station Fire, displayed his ignorance of any homes lost in Big Tujunga Canyon. The meeting room was filled with dozens of angry families, all of whom had lost their homes and Dietrich never once acknowledged what had happened to us. He even joked about how he was still confused about the difference between Tujunga versus Big Tujunga. As he should have known Tujunga is a suburb of the City of Los Angeles, while Big Tujunga Canyon is a rural scenic area in the Angeles National Forest.

We have a copy of a Forest Service memo, dated August 5, 2009 (just 20 days before the fire). The subject of this memo is, "Mitigating potential impacts to the Region's fire preparedness budget." The memo is to Forest Supervisors. It is from, James M. Peña, Deputy Regional Forester. The memo states, "As appropriate, direct dispatch organizations and incident management teams under your authority to order agency assets for fire suppression events in lieu of contracted and State or local government fire resources, and to replace non-agency resources with Forest Service assets as quickly as possible." Could this directive have entered into the decision making process about the protection of Big Tujunga Canyon?

I hope that this has given you some information about me, my background and my experiences related to the Station Fire.

My goal, and that of the Vogel Flats Fire Recovery Alliance, is to see that similar errors are never made again. We support the bipartisan Congressional call for, "...a full and complete accounting of the events surrounding the response to the Station Fire..." As we know, last fall, the Forest Service did a cursory look at the management of the Station Fire during its first 24 hours *only*. Publically, Los Angeles County Supervisor Mike Antonovich called that review a "Whitewash." We the people of Vogel Flats agree with Supervisor Antonovich's characterization of that review. Recent revelations now have shown that this inquiry may have been tainted by information that was withheld from the investigating team as well as an assortment of misleading and untruthful statements issued by USFS managers.

Congressman Buck McKeon represents the area where our homes were before the fire. We are pleased that he could be here today. Now that all of the Senatorial and Congressional representatives that represent all of the people affected by the fire have asked for a comprehensive review by the GAO, we appreciate all of your and their support as well.

Thank you all for your support and thank you for this opportunity to speak here today. Now, so that our Congressional representative can see some of the people who lost their homes, could I ask the people in the audience who are victims of the Station Fire to please stand momentarily? Thank you.