

Statement of William A. Derr - Station Fire Response Panel - Rep. Adam Schiff

Pasadena CA - October 12, 2010

Good morning. Thank you for the opportunity to participate in today's Station Fire Response Panel.

I am a retired USDA Forest Service employee and was the Special Agent in Charge of the Law Enforcement and Investigative program in California for 18 of my 38 year career. I held various positions in Fire Management including 12 years on the Angeles National Forest.

My remarks represent the opinions of Forest Service retirees with extensive experience and expertise in wildland fire management and leadership.

Shortly after the Station Fire began, retirees expressed concerns to the Forest Service Chief's Office regarding suppression actions on the fire. We recommended that a comprehensive review be conducted by the Forest Service and offered assistance and specific information regarding events on the fire. The Forest Service instead conducted an Initial Attack Review absent assistance from retirees. In the opinion of retirees the November 13 review did not meet long-established policies and procedures for conducting large fire reviews and lacked factual detail and objectivity.

Over the next 8 months extensive correspondence and meetings between retirees and representatives of Forest Service Chief Tom Tidwell occurred to encourage a followup review due to continuing concerns by the public, politicians, fire professionals, and the news media regarding numerous unanswered questions. By July, 2010, it was apparent that the Forest Service believed that no further review was needed.

From the outset, our goal was to urge the Forest Service to determine what lessons could be learned from this significant event and how those lessons could be applied to future Forest Service firefighting policies to enhance the protection of forest resources, public and firefighter safety, and reduce property losses.

The Angeles National Forest was established in 1892 as a Forest Timberland Reserve specifically to protect the critical watersheds of the Los Angeles basin from wildfires. Today the importance of protecting this critical watershed against the ravages of wildfires cannot be overstated.

Today's panel and the upcoming GAO broad probe of the fire will identify factors which may have led to the escape of the Station Fire and opportunities for improved future responses by the Forest Service and other fire agencies to wildfires.

The issues raised today do not diminish the outstanding performance of the firefighters who battled the Station Fire to protect life, property, and the vital watersheds of the Angeles National Forest.

We made a constructive and critical appraisal of those factors which may have led to the escape of the Station Fire absent a comprehensive followup review by the Forest Service. Here are some key unanswered questions and issues:

- 1) Was appropriate ground and air action taken before dusk on the 26th to extinguish burning fuels in an island within the burn above State Highway 2 which presented the risk of embers being carried by downslope winds below the highway and igniting spot fires? (Spot fires subsequently occurred which led to the escape of the fire.)
- 2) Should the Martin Mars Air Tanker which was under Forest Service contract, airborne, and minutes from the fire at approximately 6:45 p. m. on the 26th with 6,200 gallons of fire suppression gel to cover 3.5 acres been used on the burning fuels within the island instead of being turned away by Forest Service Air Attack and told to drop their load away from the fire?

Note: a) The Chief Pilot of the Martin Mars subsequently flew the location where the Station Fire started and stated that the Martin Mars would have been able to safely and effectively drop 6,200 gallons of fire suppression gel at that site.

b) The Forest Service Initial Attack Report failed to disclose that Forest Service Air Attack 12 who was coordinating air operations on the fire turned down the use of the Martin Mars per #2 above when called by Forest Service Air Attack from the Sikorsky S-76 which functions as the lead plane for the Martin Mars.

- 3) Why were water-dropping helicopters and retardant dropping air tankers not retained until dusk on the 26th since they had been so effective earlier in the day in knocking down the flame front to continue to cool the fire and reduce the spot fire potential?
- 4) Why were cooperators night flying helicopters not used during the evening of the 26th or early morning hours of the 27th when the spot fires became more active?
- 5) Once spot fires began to occur below the highway on the 26th, what strategies were developed to suppress and/or contain them and should efforts have been made to approach them from below during the night if it was unsafe to do so from above?
- 6) Were releases of Forest Service and Cooperator firefighting resources on the 26th prior to containment of the fire premature?
- 7) Should additional ground and air resources have been ordered on the 26th when it became apparent that spot fires below the highway were likely to escape?
- 8) Why wasn't Incident Commander Spyirson's requests between 00:30 and 00:48 hours on the 27th to Angeles Dispatch for three air tankers and one helitanker filled? (Spyirson requested that they be at the fire by 7 a. m).

Note: a) The Forest Service claims that due to rest requirements, pilots at Fox Field were not available and that use of air tankers below the highway would not have been feasible and/or effective.

b) Other air tankers including the Martin Mars were available and could have been over the fire before 7 a. m. (Angeles Dispatch failed to secure these).

c) Cal Fire Captain Hall's report states that he was flying air attack over the fire before 7 a. m. and made urgent requests for air tankers which in his opinion would have been effective in containing the emerging spot fires had they been used at that time. Hall assumed that air tankers ordered by the Incident Commander would have been on site at 7 a. m.

9) Why weren't the 5 water-dropping helicopters available 6 minutes away on the nearby Morris Fire on the 27th diverted to the Station Fire to drop at first light on the emerging spot fires?

10) What specific direction was given by the Forest Supervisor and/or Fire Chief to the Incident Commander relative to dealing with the spot fires and what plans were made to implement that direction?

11) Why weren't Cal Fire S-2's and/or the Martin Mars Air Tanker used on the spot fires below the highway at 7 a. m. on the 27th?

12) Should the Martin Mars been used above the highway after the fire escaped and ran towards Mt. Lukens as part of a full air attack and subsequently used more extensively throughout the fire?

Note: a) The Martin Mars was 30 minutes distance to the Station Fire. It was only used 2 days out of 52 between August 26th and October 16th when the fire was contained.

b) Because of lack of use of the Martin Mars the USFS paid \$440,160 for unused flight hours at the end of the 2009 contract.

c) The approximate unused 96 flight hours equates to 594,276 gallons of fire suppression gel that could have been effectively dropped on the Station Fire with only the cost of the gel added to the bill.

d) Had the Martin Mars or other air tankers been used on August 27 and 28 in the Big Tujunga drainage to pretreat homes and surrounding terrain, damage to homes may have been significantly reduced.

e) Forest Service Air Attack requested the Martin Mars several days in a row, but, the order was never filled.

13) Why wasn't the Sikorsky S-76 Firewatch Helicopter which was under contract to the Forest Service not utilized at all on the Station Fire?

Note: a) The Sikorsky S-76 was supplied at Forest Service expense with state of the art thermal imaging camera equipment with real time mapping technology costing \$300,000 and located 30 minutes from the Station Fire.

b) The Sikorsky S-76 was paid \$123,000 by the Forest Service at the end of their 2009 contract for standby and unflown hours.

14) Were written Delegations of Authority issued by the Forest Supervisor to Incident Commanders during the early stages and beyond providing objectives and direction relative to suppression of the fire and what were they?

15) Did Regional Forester Randy Moore's August 5, 2009 Fire Preparedness Budget direction letter to Forest Supervisors influence allocation of sufficient fire resources due to Forest Service Line and Staff Officer decisions in reducing and/or the non use of cooperator and/or contractor fire resources? (See excerpts below):

"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."

"By copy of this letter to the Director of FAM, I expect the same actions on part of the GACC's in terms of Agency fires."

In our view the above direction may have limited fire resources available to Incident Commanders at critical times when the fire could have been contained in the early stages and prevented earlier containment of the fire after it escaped.

The Large Fire Cost Review for FY 2009 requested by Congress and submitted in August 2010 states in part concerning the Regional Forester's letter of August 5:

"The decision on the Station Fire to initially order only Federal personnel delayed arrival of critical resources."

This Review also states:

"The fire area includes the main watershed for the City of Los Angeles. The Forest and the Incident Management Team pursued a major objective of allowing the fire to move up into the forest and wilderness areas, away from the Wildland-Urban Interface, by primarily employing an indirect strategy."

The Forest and Incident Management Team's "major objective of allowing the fire to move up into the Forest and wilderness areas" resulted in unacceptable damage to the critical watersheds of the Los Angeles basin and caused significant property loss, harm to recreational facilities and the loss of outdoor enjoyment opportunities to millions of forest users.

In conclusion, we have an opportunity to take a critical look at how and why the Station Fire escaped and how it was managed. This opportunity to uncover the facts must not be missed out of respect to the two Los Angeles County firemen who lost their lives in the fire.

Enclosed is additional detailed information that will be helpful to Congressman Schiff, the GAO, and others as this matter continues to receive further investigation. The Incident Management Team's individual After Action Reports and Narratives provide additional valuable information on overall fire suppression actions.

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Index of related documents attached to the hard copy of this statement:

- Regional Forester letter of August 5, 2009
- Correspondence with the Forest Service - 11/12/09 thru 2/12/10
- 4/19/10 letter to Mr. Paul Pringle, Los Angeles Times
- Emails to Tom Harbour re: 6/2 & 6/10 meetings in Arcadia & Davis, CA
- Cal Fire Captain Hall's Station Fire Report
- 13 Situations that Shout Escape
- Station Fire - Air Attack Perspective - August 26, 2009
- The ANF Station Fire - Another Look
- USDA Contractor Performance Report - Coulson Aircrane Ltd. - (Martin Mars)
- Station Fire - Martin Mars and Firewatch Talking Points
- 7/14/09 email to Tom Harbour, USFS, Director, Fire & Aviation Mgn.
- 10/14/09 email to Tom Harbour, USFS, Director, Fire & Aviation Mgn. (no reply)
- 12/ 21/09 letter to Forest Service Chief, Tom Tidwell re: Station Fire (no reply)