

Statement of Donald R. Feser – Station Fire Response Panel – Rep. Adam Schiff

Pasadena CA – October 12, 2010

Thank you for the opportunity to participate in this discussion and to share my thoughts regarding the Station Fire of 2009.

I retired from the USDA Forest Service in 2007 as the fire chief for the Angeles National Forest following a thirty-four year career in Fire and Aviation Management with twenty-five years assigned to the Angeles. I have served on many complex incidents, and was qualified as a Type 1 Operations Section Chief, and Type 1 Incident Commander.

An aggressive initial attack with combined ground and air resources from the Angeles National Forest, and Los Angeles County Fire Department was successful in stopping the Station Fire at approximately fifteen acres on August 26, 2009. During the early morning hours of August 27<sup>th</sup>, spot fires developed below the main fire area below the Angeles Crest Highway.

The incident commander (IC) placed orders through the Angeles National Forest Emergency Communications Center for a type 1 helicopter and three air tankers, any type, to be over the fire at 7:00 a.m. on the morning of August 27<sup>th</sup>.

The IC realized that the spot fires were burning on an east-facing slope, which would receive the first sunlight of the day, with a corresponding increase in flammability. This situation if left unchecked would pose a significant threat to outflank the current lines of defense during the morning of August 27<sup>th</sup>.

The challenges encountered during the early stages of the Station Fire had more to do with human factors than the fire behavior or steepness of the terrain. There were four primary human factor related issues that were evident and contributed to a less than favorable response to the incident which resulted in the escape of the fire.

- Responders and support personnel failed to create a common operating picture, including a shared understanding of the incident objectives, priorities, resource support expectations and capabilities
- Situational awareness was hampered by the lack of a common operating picture and had a negative effect on decision making
- There was a failure to comply with National Incident Management System (NIMS) standard resource ordering principles in regards to aircraft
- There is a void in overall command and control related to unity of command and unity of effort.

A common operating picture is a single framework to collect and display relevant incident operational information. Operational information must be continuously updated and accessible to incident personnel in order to develop individual situational awareness and facilitate good decision making.

Situational awareness is the mental state of understanding what is happening, and the knowledge of how information, events, and actions will impact current and future objectives. Situational awareness is critical to decision-makers in complex, dynamic operations such as firefighting.

There are five principles of fire suppression action which provide a framework for developing fire suppression strategy and for conducting fire suppression operations.

- Objective
- Speed and Focus
- Positioning
- Simplicity
- Command

The principle of objective is to direct every fire suppression operation toward a clearly defined, decisive, and obtainable objective. One of the first responsibilities of the IC is to establish the incident objectives and identify the strategies to accomplish the objectives. This task is dependent upon having a common operating picture and situational awareness in order to be successful.

The IC must also create a vision of the successful outcome or end state, which defines the achievement of the incident objectives, and must be able to convey that message to all those involved in the incident.

The IC develops SMART objectives, in reference to an acronym designed around five leading measures of strong meaningful objectives.

- Specific – the objective states a specific outcome
- Measurable – the objective is measurable and the system is identified
- Achievable – the objective must be realistic
- Relevant – the objective supports the end state
- Time-framed – it is clearly stated when the objective will be completed

On August 27<sup>th</sup>, the IC established an objective to initiate suppression action on the Station Fire spot fires through a combined air and ground attack beginning at 7:00 a.m.

The IC also needed to convey a greater sense of urgency due to the critical need to achieve success in meeting this objective.

The principle of speed and focus maintains that rapidly deploying and concentrating firefighting resources in a calculated fashion, at the decisive time and place, increases the likelihood of successful suppression action.

The intent of the IC was to have air tankers over the fire at 7:00 a.m.; only the air attack plane reported as requested. The air tankers didn't report until 9:00 a.m.

The principle of positioning maintains that rapid, flexible and opportunistic movement increases the effectiveness of fire suppression resources. Positioning should always be undertaken with speed and focus in mind, and sufficient time for positioning to occur before operations begin.

The incident commander (IC) placed orders through the Angeles National Forest Emergency Communications Center (ECC) for a type 1 helicopter and three air tankers, any type, to be over the fire at 7:00 a.m. on the morning of August 27<sup>th</sup>. Instead of placing the air tanker order with the Southern California Geographical Area Coordination Center (GACC), ECC dispatchers decided to reassign air tankers from the nearby Morris Fire to the Station Fire.

The lack of a common operating picture hid the fact the air tanker crews would not be able to meet the 7:00 a.m. reporting time over the Station Fire due to work/rest limitations.

The lack of situational awareness failed for both the IC and ECC dispatchers. Had the IC known that air tankers wouldn't be available until 9:00 a.m., would he have ordered a different mix of aviation resources, or modified the objective?

Had the ECC dispatchers known about the air tanker crew rest/work issues, would they have followed normal procedure and placed the order with the GACC to secure air tanker from other air tanker bases within the GACC including other agencies like CAL FIRE?

The principle of simplicity is that clear, uncomplicated plans and concise orders maximize effectiveness and minimize confusion. Simplicity contributes to successful actions.

The plan was basically simple, but the execution was confused and ineffective due to the lack of a common operating picture and situational awareness.

Command – The act of directing, ordering, or controlling by virtue of explicit statutory, regulatory, or delegated authority. There is a basic tenant of command that states “for every objective seek unity of command and unity of effort.”

The incident commander of the Station Fire had operational control but not total command. The incident commander of the Morris Fire was in a similar situation, trying to achieve incident objectives as the ECC dispatchers reassigned his air tankers to the Station Fire. Are the dispatchers in command? They appear to be making command decisions.

The reality is that unity of command and unity of effort doesn't really exist given the Forest Service organizational structure of district, forest and regional fire suppression organizations converging on a single incident. The concept of operations relies upon

cooperation at the various levels of the organization to succeed, and cooperation requires that all levels share a common operating picture.