

**Statement of**  
**Tom Harbour, National Director, Fire and Aviation Management, and**  
**Jody Noiron, Forest Supervisor, Angeles National Forest**  
**U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service**  
**In Pasadena, California**

**On October 12, 2010**

Congressman Schiff, at your request, Jody Noiron and Tom Harbour are here today to discuss the actions taken by the Forest Service during initial and extended attack on the first and second day of the Station fire, which started on the Angeles National Forest the afternoon of August 26, 2009. The Station Fire eventually grew in size to over 160,000 acres, the largest fire in the history of Los Angeles County. The resultant loss of human life, important public forest natural resources, private property, and homes was a tragedy. The individuals of the Forest Service, active and retired, especially our dedicated wildland fire management professionals who were involved in the fire, still grieve for the loss of so much that was dear to them. The impacts and scars are still evident.

On the 200 million acres of which we have fire management responsibility, the Forest Service's 10,480 wildland firefighters suppress about 10,000 fires per year, mostly at very small sizes; only 2 percent escape initial attack, mainly due to heavy vegetation, difficult terrain, and hot dry weather. Based on past experience, training, the information at hand, and in consultation with our interagency partners, our fire managers use their professional judgment to allocate fire crews, helicopters, and other firefighting assets to wildfires. We are responsible for natural resources, public safety, and firefighter lives. We will never jeopardize public or firefighter safety by holding back appropriately needed firefighting resources. There are occasions when, despite using all available resources, a fire escapes. A century of firefighting experience has shown that, under certain conditions, some fires will escape control no matter how many firefighting resources we deploy.

In 2009, the Forest Service attacked about 200 fires on the Angeles National Forest. Of all those fires, only two escaped from initial attack, the Station Fire and the Morris Fire, which were happening simultaneously. In the area of the Station Fire, heavy vegetation had gone unburned for 40 years; the terrain was steep and inaccessible in places; and, with the weather so hot and dry, fire danger was extreme.

On August 26<sup>th</sup>, the Station Fire was attacked with Forest Service and Los Angeles County Fire Department crews, engines, helicopters, and air tankers. By the evening of the first day of the fire, 231 firefighters had responded, holding it to barely 15 acres. At night, fires typically die down, yet we kept 191 firefighters as well as engines on the Station Fire. This is a relatively large number of resources for a fire that was small and seemed so well at hand in the early evening. However, we wanted to increase containment and prevent the fire from spreading.

That night, despite continued efforts, the fire spotted into an area that was unsafe to attack. We know from decades of experience that approaching a fire from above in such steep terrain often puts firefighters in life threatening situations where the risk to firefighter lives is much greater than potential resource benefits from such an approach. Such was the conclusion incident commanders made this first night of the Station Fire. During the early morning hours of the second day on August 27, 2009, additional firefighting resources, including helicopters and air tankers, were ordered by the Forest Service. On that second day, under severe weather conditions, the fire established itself at 500 acres, and by early afternoon we had formally entered into unified command with our partners in the Los Angeles County Fire Department as the fire had grown past early containment efforts. In the days that followed, despite our best efforts, the fires continued to spread across tens of thousands of additional acres.

There are lessons to be learned as a result of the Station Fire. As wildland fire management professionals, we are dedicated to improving our service to America's citizens. It must be noted; however, bad outcomes do not in and of themselves indicate bad decisions.

The Station Fire has been reviewed by a number of knowledgeable experts. The reviewers have skills in fire operations, aviation operations, decision-making and risk management. Records, transcripts, interviews and site visits did not reveal a collage of bad decisions, cover-ups or any nefarious actions; in fact, our reviews to date have found that actions conducted by the Forest Service were reasonable and within the scope of their duties.

In the course of preparation for this panel, the Forest Service Chief instructed additional review of all agency records related to this matter. This review has discovered additional recordings of incoming calls to the Angeles National Forest's dispatch center. As a result of this new revelation, Secretary Vilsack has asked his Inspector General to launch an investigation into the nature of these recordings and why they were not discovered earlier. Additionally, the Secretary suggested that Congress ask the Government Accountability Office to review our actions in the initial attack on the Station Fire. The Forest Service welcomes this review as it will supplement the Inspector General's work and lead to continuous improvement in Forest Service firefighting efforts. The transcripts of these recordings were made available for you and the public on September 23, 2010. The recordings indicate fire managers and dispatchers understood the gravity of the situation and persistently strategized the best ways to provide firefighting assets as rapidly as possible in the midst of multiple ongoing wildfires on the Angeles National Forest and across southern California.

On the Station Fire, as on all fires, the Forest Service was fully committed to protecting people and their communities while simultaneously deploying firefighting resources in a safe manner. The Forest Service has already adjusted some of its policies based on lessons learned and will continue to work closely with

the Los Angeles County Fire Department to strengthen our existing procedures for coordination of our cooperative fire prevention and suppression efforts in the future.

Thank you for the opportunity to discuss this issue with you. We look forward to answering questions.