

Events of the Station Fire

The Station Fire broke out on August 26, 2009 near and above the Angeles Crest Highway at approximately 3 pm. It evaded initial attack and burned into an area that had not burned in 40 years. It ended up consuming 160,000 acres, becoming the largest wildfire in Los Angeles County history, before it was contained on October 16, 2009. The Station Fire destroyed 89 homes and many other structures, and cost the lives of two members of the Los Angeles County Fire Department, Captain Ted Hall and Firefighter Specialist Arnie Quinones. Fighting the fire cost almost \$100 million.

Events of Aug. 26, 2009

(All times are approximate, based on transcripts and logs.)

The fire was reported at 3:06 pm and confirmed at 3:10 pm as a 3 acre brush fire. A full brush fire response was assigned by the Angeles National Forest and the LA County Fire Department, including 9 aircraft and many engines. By 4 pm, most of those resources were on the scene. At 3:42 pm, access to the fire was described as “difficult due to fire behavior and heavy fuels.” At 5:26 pm, the Incident Commander (Will Spyrison) requested LAC Helicopter 14, a night-flying helicopter (entered in the record at 5:53 pm). At 6:10 pm the aircraft was released—the Forest Service reports it was diverted back to LA County for EMS response. The aircraft did not return.

Firefighters continued to fight the fire from air and ground through sunset at 7:05 pm. At that point, aircraft were released and ground crews continued to fight the fire. Throughout the evening, the fire above the Angeles Crest Highway appeared to be well-contained and was small, but spot fires due to burning embers broke out below the road. In the period before midnight, the incident commander reported that the fire’s growth potential was “low” and transferred incident command to a night commander at 10:35 pm.

Events of Aug. 27, 2009

At about 12:30 am, Will Spyrison, reported a spot (small area of fire) below the highway that the ground crews couldn’t reach and requested additional aircraft over the fire first thing in the morning, nominally at 7:00 am. An excerpt from the conversation:

Operations: “... You’d like them over the fire at a specific time or first light?”

IC: “I know it’s not possible but, you know, 0700.”

Operations: “Okay. Copy. That’s – that’s the shoot-for is 0700.”

At 12:33 am, the dispatcher and operations control had a long conversation about how to fulfill the tanker request, and mentioned conversations with someone (presumably Spyrison) about it being fine to take tankers from a base further away (Sequoia). They decided that would take too long, and that they should get tankers from the Morris Fire. [Those tankers still would not be able to make it to the fire before 8:30 or 9 am because of required rest periods for the pilots.] They also discussed how to get an air attack plane from the Southern Operations Command Center (SouthOps), which does regional aircraft coordination for all of the wildland firefighting agencies. They discussed engines and ground crew, and they opined that the original analysis that the fire was under control was bad:

Dispatcher: “It’s turned into a huge issue. And it’s kind of turning out exactly like [redacted] thought it might with, you know, [redacted] kind of playing it down like, oh, we got this thing taken care of, and it’s not been the case.”

And:

Dispatcher: "... I don't know. I think this thing is going to go to shit. So --"
Operations: "I -- that's what I think, too."

Towards the end, they discussed the fire, and how it was going and the problem with down-canyon winds, and said:

Operations: "-- we'll try to get as much on it in the morning as we can."

Between that point and 7:00 am there were several conversations between the Incident Commander and the Angeles National Forest Emergency Command Center (ANF-ECC) about what aircraft would be available in the morning. The ANF-ECC tried and failed to obtain aircraft from several local sources, and ended up with just aircraft from the Morris fire. Based on logs and statements from the dispatchers, the dispatcher entered the midnight call for aircraft into the ROSS resource order system at approximately 12:50 am. When the day shift dispatcher came on, she didn't see the order and entered new orders for the planes as they were leaving at 8:40 am. She then saw the old orders and noted that they were duplicates in the log and cancelled them.

At 7:30 am the Incident Commander (Will Spyrison) ordered an additional helicopter, and transferred incident command at 8 am. At 8:21 am, the new Incident Commander ordered an additional four tankers. The tankers from the Morris fire arrived over the fire at about 9 am. Additional tankers arrived throughout the morning. In the end 6 tankers were on the fire on August 27.

CalFire says that in principle they had tankers that could have been on the fire somewhat earlier. For that to happen, the request would have had to go SouthOps and then to CalFire. That didn't happen. However, in conversation with personnel at SouthOps and elsewhere, it appears that getting tankers over a fire earlier than 9 am is very rare, due to atmospheric conditions and required rest time for pilots.

Contents of the Station Fire File:

The Forest Service tick-tock of the events of the first two days of the fire.
The Forest Service review of the fire.
The LA County review of the fire.

The LA County study of technology for detecting and fighting fires.

Why was it more difficult to attack spot fires below the road, rather than the fires above the road?

Attacking a fire from above on a steep slope is dangerous for firefighters because the fire will burn in that direction, the heat and smoke from the fire will flow in the direction of the firefighters, and if the fire should approach the firefighters, escape is difficult up the steep slope. There was no immediate way to access the fire from below.