

Looking at 'Dude' deaths

Report details communication problems in fatal fire

By Mark Shaffer
The Arizona Republic

Louis Sorrell said he often saw a helicopter flying overhead that could have warned the Navajo firefighting crew he headed that a deadly firestorm was approaching during the "Dude" fire north of Payson in June.

But Sorrell said no one ever informed the ground crew of how serious the situation was. The fire overran Sorrell's crew and killed six members of a nearby crew from Perryville prison in Walk Moore Canyon on June 26.

Accounts of such communications problems dominate a report on the deaths of Sandra Bachman, 43; Joseph Chacon, 25; Alex Contreras, 33; James Denney, 39; James Ellis, 34; and Curtis Springfield, 24.

The report capped a two-month investigation by a 10-member team impaneled by the U.S. Forest Service.

Other major findings were that, because of the lack of warning, firefighters did not have time to escape and safety zones were not designated to which firefighters could retreat. Also, shift changes in the command center created uncertainty about where the Navajo and Perryville crews were and what they were doing.

According to the report, the heat of the fire set up such strong wind currents that a natural storm system collapsed to the ground, spreading the fire in all directions.

Although the Perryville crew sometimes assigned members as lookouts for such problems, no one was serving in that role just before the conflagration hit, the report said. The physical condition of some of the Perryville firefighters also was open to question.

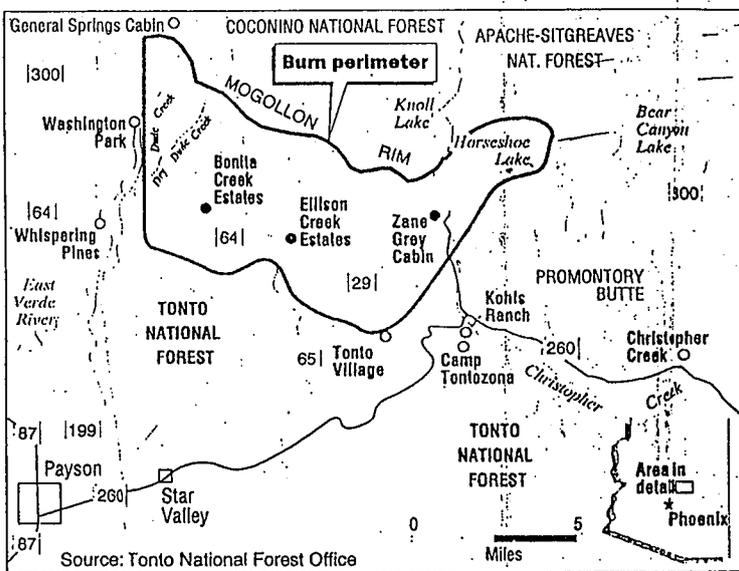
Many of the 25 firefighters and supervisors interviewed for the report said they had no idea, because of poor communications, that the crews were about to be engulfed in an inferno as they built a fire line near Bonita Creek subdivision, where 52 homes later were destroyed or damaged.

Glen Dundas of the Prescott National Forest said that at one time, he attempted to call for an air attack on the fire, but the command center was "monitoring the wrong frequency."

Dundas also said one of the air-attack pilots "didn't sound quali-

THE 'DUDE' FIRE

Arizona's worst wildfire ever consumed more than 25,000 acres.



Gus Walker/The Arizona Republic

fied" and had difficulty clearly locating targets.

Also because the wrong radio frequency was being monitored, a request for medical evacuation was not received, said Mark Spann, a Tonto National Forest spokesman.

"Everyone was complaining about not being able to talk to anyone," Spann wrote in the report.

Phil Gill of the Bureau of Land Management's Kingman office said the communications problems were caused by too many people trying to use the same frequency. Gill also said that changing shift supervisors during a hot burning period "was asking for it."

Identification of the problems is expected to lead to changes in how communications are conducted during future fires, said Joyce Hassell, public-information officer for the Tonto National Forest.

"These problems are part of every fire," Hassell said. "But the larger and more complex the fire is, the worse the problems are."

The Dude fire, named after Dude Creek, in the area where the blaze was started by lightning, "involved a lot of people from a lot of jurisdictions working in a large, remote area," she said.

At the height of the blaze, which burned more than 45 square miles of

forest in the area of the Mogollon Rim, almost 2,500 firefighters were on duty.

The six firefighters died despite lying on the ground under their fire shelters, the report said. The fire moved so fast that those who died had too little time to shelter themselves properly, according to the report.

The report also may lead to changes in firefighting training, Hassell said.

All Forest Service firefighters are required to pass a "step test," in which cardiopulmonary fitness is measured through medical tests after a person steps on and off a box for five minutes.

Larry Terra, supervisor of the Perryville fire crew, wrote that he and four of the firefighters who died had not taken the test this year but tried to stay fit by exercising for 30 minutes to an hour every day.

All contributors to the report agreed that there was nothing firefighters could have done to stop, or even slow down, the fire.

Ed Hollenshead of the Prescott National Forest called it a "once-in-a-lifetime fire-behavior situation."

In retrospect, Jim Mattingly, foreman of a hotshot crew from Utah, asked rhetorically, "Should we have been in there at all?"