Forest supervisor defends effort on Thirtymile Fire

By Michelle Partridge
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Photo from Forest Service Thirtymile Fire report

Notebook found in the ashes of the Thirtymile Fire, dropped by a firefighter caught in the deadly burnover. Safety rules are inside.

WENATCHEE — The supervisor of the Wenatchee and Okanogan national forests says firefighters trapped by the deadly Thirtymile Fire "were acting responsibly and just got caught in a terrible situation."

Sonny O'Neal, the top U.S. Forest official in the two national forests, said: "I know that's counter to what's being said by other experts. But it's what I believe."

Sonny O'Neal

O'Neal's comments this week were his first since the release Wednesday of a Forest Service investigation into the July 10 deaths of four firefighters in the blaze near Winthrop.

The report concluded the four deaths were preventable and cited numerous mistakes made by fire managers and supervisors, including breaking or disregarding all basic safety rules and failing to recognize the fire danger.

O'Neal said accountability for the four deaths — and any lessons to be learned — rest primarily on his shoulders.

"I'm in charge," he said. "The buck stops here.

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O'Neal: 'I've decided I'm the best leader they could have right now'

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This has been a very hard thing for me. When I got a briefing on the report this week, it shook me to my very core as to my confidence as a leader."

But because of his firefighting and safety background, he said, "I've decided that I am the best leader they could have right now."

O'Neal represents all national forests in the Northwest on a nine-member national Forest Service safety team that was assembled in 1995 after 14 firefighters died in a Colorado wildfire.

He said the best lesson firefighters can learn from the Thirtymile tragedy is when to simply walk away from a fire.

None of the crew members who were caught in the burnover that killed four firefighters should be faulted for their actions, he said. Firefighters had no way of knowing that the fire was about to explode around them, he said.

"We need to find out what tools our firefighters need in order to come home safely," he said. "We need to provide them with better tools and knowledge to assess a situation and know when to disengage from a fire."

O'Neal said he believes the safety rules taught to all Forest Service firefighters are adequate.

The Wenatchee and Okanogan National Forest goes even further to stress safety, he said. Its firefighters are issued booklets with the safety rules printed on the inside cover, water bottles printed with the rules, and a pocket-sized card listing all safety concerns that must be addressed before crews begin working on a fire.

O'Neal said he does not believe firefighters ignored safety rules on July 10. In fact, he said, they did a lot of things right leading up to the deadly blowup that day. Supervisors went over the required safety points in the morning. They also made a good decision to pull firefighters back from the fire's edge at 3 p.m., and to use the road as a fire block.

"They just got overwhelmed by the situation when the fire suddenly blew up," he said.

He said he does not know whether more experienced firefighters or officials would have made a different decision that day.

"Some of the best people, most experienced people on our forest were out there that day," he said. "There was just no way of knowing early on that day that it would become that unsafe."

Fire behaviorists who have since studied the site believe a number of factors, including weather and dry forest conditions, and the fact that the canyon bottom had not burned in at least 200 years, came together around 4 p.m. to create an unpredictable firestorm.

Even though they were caught off guard, the majority of the 50 firefighters working on the fire that day were able to get out along the escape route before it was blocked by flames, O'Neal said.

The remaining 14 firefighters were too far up the dead-end road to make it out in time, he said.

He credited the trapped crew with choosing the best possible safety zone they could have found along the road to wait out the fire. He said he believes that they fully expected the fire would pass by them, rather than run over them.

But they should have prepared for a burnover anyway, he said, and that's another lesson to be learned. "Regardless of where they are, and how safe they feel, they need to be prepared to deal with the very worst," he said.

O'Neal faulted the investigative report for implying that some firefighters did not follow orders at the safety zone.

"It makes it sounds like the folks who ended up not coming home did something wrong," he said. "Whatever happened out there, it was not their fault. I don't think they disobeyed any orders."

He said he does not believe that a small group of firefighters who were sitting farther up the hillside made a conscious decision to separate from the group on the road.

"They were just surprised by the fire blowing up," he said. "I knew some of those folks well enough to know that their judgment is good.

"They're heroes in my mind, and always will be," he said.