

Sadler Fire

The BIG PICTURE

Fire Activity Elko District BLM: August 5-9, 1999

Date: March 21, 2011

To: Gabe Donaldson: Sadler Staff Ride Team Leader

From: Steve Dondero: ATGS Sadler 8/4 – 8, 1999

Gabe,

Thanks for the opportunity to comment on the outstanding Staff Ride you and the team have assembled for Sadler. What I will attempt to do below is to reconstruct the Bigger Picture of all of the other fire activity that was occurring in the Elko District at the same time we were trying to manage the Sadler Fire. Hopefully this will give future participants an appreciation for all the other Initial and Extended attack that was occurring simultaneously with Sadler as they try to put themselves in the shoes of the people associated with Sadler: from firefighters to overhead teams to Agency Administrators. Most of the narrative below is what I was able to lift out of the 8mm video (which I transferred to VHS tape) of footage I shot of Sadler and other fires from the ATGS plane during the period 8/5-9/99. The video is yours to use in whatever way you wish.

The Sadler Fire, and dozens of other fires in SW Elko county and northern Eureka County started on August 3-4 from a series of dry lightning storms that passed through the area; followed by a dry cold front (clear skies, low Relative Humidity's, temperatures in the 90's, and negligible overnight humidity recoveries). Anything in **bold print** will designate new fires that occurred during the period 8/5-9/99.

8/4/99:

- Early afternoon: I launched out of Elko headed to an area north of Battle Mountain to do ATGS work. About 5 minutes out of Elko, we were diverted to investigate a new smoke report "near the Garcia Flats; east side of the ~~Sulpher~~ Sulfur Springs Range" (hereafter SSR). When we arrived in the area, the Table Fire (west side of SSR, south of Union Pass) was already going and being managed by the Battle Mountain District. We did find two new smokes (1/10 ac. and 2 ac.) that would eventually be known as the Sadler Fire.
- All resources were committed, but Elko Helitack was able to respond about two hours after detection. They were pulled off either the Ajax or Bacchaus fires north of Carlin. The two smaller fires had merged; Sadler Fire was now 100+ acres on their arrival; running NW up the Union Pass Road.
- At the end of the day, I recall sizing up Sadler and calling it 3,000+ acres and running N-NW up the Union Pass Road.

8/5/99:

- Sadler was now #1 Priority for Elko. We ran retardant primarily on the west flank of the fire working closely with crews doing structure protection for the many ranches that are in Pine Valley along the west flank.
- The fire was generally running due north along both flanks of the SSR. Our priority continued to be the west side of Sadler to protect ranches.
- I do have footage of the few retardant drops that we did on the east side of the fire at a place called the Red Rocks Ranch. Visibility was terrible on the east side. As I recall, and from watching the tapes, this was the only action taken by air resources on the east side of Sadler while I was involved with it through 8/8/99. We did some estimates here of Rates of Spread as we timed the fire between landmarks on the ground. ROS of 2-3 mph. were observed.
- In the early afternoon, **another fire: Frenchie (Crescent Valley)** took off and we were diverted over there. Before we left Sadler, I recall that I estimated Sadler was now 18,000+ ac., still running north, and the threats were to ranches in Pine Valley and the oil field just north of the Union Pass Road. The Table Fire was still very active and moving north the join the SW corner of Sadler near Union Pass Road.
- Frenchie Fire went to 50,000+ in one afternoon. Fuel was cheatgrass / tumble mustard. We diverted all the airtankers and the one helicopter that we did have to the north end of Frenchie to protect structures and the railroad, along the NDF engines and volunteers that were there.
- Another fire, **Piney Fire**, shows up in my logbook but I found no footage of it. This is one that was eventually consumed by the perimeter of the Sadler Fire. I cannot find any notes to pin point the location of the Piney Fire.
- Hefner's Type II Team was ordered that afternoon to take Sadler.

8/6/99:

- Hefner's Team has taken Sadler early this day, and I flew ATGS for their Team. We launched very early that day, and I can recall working closely with several of Hefner Team DIVS, along with NDF and BLM engines focused on the west side of Sadler near the ranches.
- That plan lasted until about 1100 hrs. **Another new fire, Horse Creek**, popped up at the south end of the Cortez Range. The IC and the only resource on this fire was Tom Bingaman (NDF, Eureka) in his Type 6 Engine. I diverted a portion of the air tanker show from Sadler and as I recall we put 2-3 loads in just west of the Horse Creek Ranch to protect the structure. After that... Tom was left there as the lone ranger until reinforcements could arrive.
- ATGS headed back into Elko for fuel and short break. We launched again at about 1300 and were head south to resume work at either Sadler or Horse Creek, when we were **diverted to yet another new fire in the Spring Creek Mobile Home housing area.**

- When we arrived, two homes were already fully involved and dozens others were threatened.
- **This fire (Holiday Drive) now became Priority #1**, and all of the heavy retardant that we were loading out of Battle Mountain for Sadler was diverted here.
- Within 30 minutes I had the first retardant on scene. Over the next 1.5 hrs. we put 7 loads of retardant onto the Holiday Drive fire.
- We ended up with an extra load of retardant that was not needed for Holiday Drive, so I sent that load due east to the east side of the Rubies to help the guys out on the **Baxter Fire** (in the big scheme, Baxter was burning concurrently with Sadler but was a low priority compared to Sadler).
- We made a fuel stop in Elko; changed out pilots; and then headed back to west side of Sadler and were working the fire with retardant doing more structure protection by 1640 hrs.
- At 1730, we are now flying over yet **another new fire: Rose Fire**. Interstate 80 is choked out with smoke; traffic congested; and communication sites on top of Emigrant Summit are threatened. This is now Priority #1, and all the retardant is being sent to Rose.
- We spent the rest of that day working the Rose Fire.
- Sadler went BIG this day. As I recall when we did a pass by on the way back to Elko that evening, I estimated Sadler was now at 50,000+. Still running due north up both sides of the SSR.

8/7/99:

- The day must have started fairly slow. In the morning I just recorded footage of the south and west sides of Sadler. It was yet another clear day... winds out of the south at 10-15 mph (estimate, based on smoke laying over on Sadler).
- Table Fire still active and moving north to join Sadler.
- At 1320, we are back over the Rose Fire and working to protect the communication sites, as well as a ranch located near Palisades Canyon.
- I don't have any footage nor do I recall spending any of that afternoon working retardant on Sadler. Focus on Sadler was with ground crews and dozers trying to secure the west and northwest sides of the fire.
- * There is a distinct break in the tape for the remainder of the day starting at 1640 hrs. when we are still over Rose Fire. To the best of my recollection, the remainder of that afternoon we spent on the **NW corner of Sadler** trying to come up with an offensive game plan for the north and northeast sides of Sadler.
- ** I do vividly recall trying to fly over the north end of Sadler (east of the SSR), but the visibility was nil (way under VFR minimums), so we were never able to approach the area. We climbed to about 12,000 ft. to get near the top of the haze layer and tried to estimate where the head of Sadler was on the east side of the SSR. I can remember being

on the cell phone talking on speaker phone with Sean Cross (Elko FMO) and Gary Zunino (NDF Regional Forester). Collectively we were trying to come up with an offensive plan to address the head end of Sadler since it was now getting close to the Lucky Nugget subdivision.

- *** As I look back now in my old beat up Delorme Atlas & Gazetteer, and turning to Map 31, I can only find two penciled in notations that I made that give me a clue as to what was going on during our phone conversation. This was the map that I was speaking from, and that Sean and Gary were using back in the office so that we were all looking at the same sheet of music.
 1. There is a small circle with a ? mark in the middle; and arrow above it pointing north, the date 8/7/99; and right below it the word “head ?” As I recall, as we circled at 12,000 ft. over 10 miles to the west, we used the large “bulge” or rise in the ambient haze layer to approximate the latitude of the head of Sadler.
 2. The only other notation I can find on the page is about 10 miles north of where I approximated the head to be. There is a squiggly line running west – east, and below it is written “ ← dz line ? →”. I remember the conversation with Sean and Gary and how I talked about needing to build a west – east dozer line at least 6 blades wide; and that we’d need to get it burned out at night before the head of Sadler made it to that location.
 3. After that I have no recollection on if or when the dozer line was actually put in place (whether it happened that night or the next day 8/8/99).
 4. I will include a .pdf of my Delorme Atlas, Map 31 for illustration.

* I should note at this point no one had ever flown over the northern or northeast portions of the Sadler Fire... the area where the proposed dozer line would be placed. Perhaps some low level helicopter flights, but for fixed wing aircraft it was a no fly zone.

** I recall working with a second Air Attack this day. Sadler was so big that we divided it into West Sadler Air Attack and East Sadler Air Attack, with separate Air to Ground FM frequencies. I was the West Sadler Air Attack.

8/8/99:

- We had experienced some additional IA, and the first piece of footage I shot that morning at 0945 is of the **Dry Canyon Fire**, located about 40 miles N-NE of Wells (NE side of Delano Mountain). The fire was only a couple hundred acres... and the jumpers on it were getting ready to pack out. We just did a perimeter flight checking for smokes and scouting the shortest pack out route for them.
- At 1308, we launched to the west side of Sadler and did more retardant work there.
- At 1453, I made a clear commentary on the tape, referring to what we were witnessing on the Sadler Fire: “That’s just flat going to town” (S. Dondero).

- At 1542, I took some shots of the surrounding country while we were working Sadler. I am amazed at how clear and cloudless the sky is; indicating to me that we were still under the influence of the cold dry front passage.
- Rest of that day, from 1620 – 1830 there are several shots of the Sadler Fire. At 1624 is a very good view (finally) of the NE and E sides of Sadler; starting with the large column at the head of the fire (in close proximity to Lucky Nugget subdivision I am guessing). Then a nice panoramic of the entire east side of Sadler from Twin Bridges area all the way down to Jiggs.... Over 20 miles of open fireline.

8/9/99:

- 0712: On my way to work that morning from Spring Creek, I stopped along the highway and took a distance shot of Sadler (approximately 20 miles southwest of my location on the video). Skies are generally clear, and it appears the wind has already picked up at that point. The smoke from Sadler is headed directly north.
- 1020: I was at Elko Airport, now back on IA since ATGS coverage on Sadler was now being done by Air Attack from Storey Team. I grabbed one last shot from the airport that shows SEATs launching to Sadler, and the smoke from Sadler in the background.
- Did yet another new fire that afternoon: **East Canyon** (40+ miles north of Wells, NV).

Hope this helps with future Sadler Staff Rides!

Attachment: Sadler .pdf scan. It is a portion of Page 31 from the Delorme Atlas with my pencil notations on it.