



Frying Pan Fire Review

Purpose

To facilitate objective after-action reviews of significant wildfire responses carried out by Virginia Department of Forestry personnel and maximize learning opportunities that increase safe and efficient emergency operations across the organization.

Incident Details

Name: Frying Pan

Fire Number: DIC21003

Size: 500 acres

Date: 3/10/21-3/12/21

Location: 37D 02' 50.37", -82D 11' 56.99"

Personnel: Cumpston, Vest, Perry, Vinson, Fleming, Wood, Austin

Weather: Class 3, CSI: 25, Diurnal winds upslope upvalley 8mph, 69F, 12% RH

Fuels: Grass, Hardwood leaf litter, Brush

Topography: Steep mountainous terrain

Number of Personnel (max): 7 full-time VDOF and 313.5 part-time firefighter man-hours

Equipment Utilized: Dozer (2), ATV, handheld power equipment

Personnel Present for the Review

Wood, Fleming, Austin, Proctor, Carico, Thomsen, fire staff (2)

General Narrative

The Frying Pan fire was reported on Wednesday, March 10, 2021 at 1230 hours in the area of Rabbit Ridge Rd in Dickenson County. Local initial attack forces from the agency started control work one hour later at 1330 hours and during the initial size-up, the Incident Commander noted a well-established wildfire burning in steep ground with wind/topographic alignment making a significant run towards the ridgetop. Additional resources were ordered to achieve containment and control of the fire. The Frying Pan fire was under control 2 days later on March 12, 2021 at 0900 hours.

Significant Challenges to Control

The month of March is a critical time in the southeast in terms of elevated wildfire occurrence probabilities absent late winter/early spring rainfall, coupled with typical weather patterns of low relative humidities and significant topographically enhanced diurnal winds, all present challenges to control of wildfires in the area. While at first look, a Cumulative Severity Index reading for this day at 25 may indicate a day of benign fire activity, but the dry air mass in the area along with daytime radiant heating of ground fuels contributed to very low fine fuel moistures. These fine fuels available for combustion created a situation for higher than average rates of spread.

Access to the parcel of land consisted of a road system maintained by a gas company with several active wells on the property. Notwithstanding the hazards of gas well infrastructure on the land, the road system served as a good opportunity for utilization as natural barriers for control.

Area(s) for Agency Improvement

1. Meals for firefighters were a challenge due to purchase restrictions and/or covid-19 induced limitations. Line personnel were not provided with timely food and water replenishment. Local VDOF is purchasing their own food to keep with them to attempt to provide food but this was not enough on this fire. This is a serious safety issue for the well-being of our firefighters.
2. The Incident Commander claims that he should have called for additional dozers sooner but he knew they were committed to other fires in the area.

Significant Events during Operations

1. 4 active fires at the time, short-handed on personnel
2. Fire jumped control lines multiple times due to fire behavior
3. Poor RH recovery. 2300 hrs = 25%, winds still high through the night
4. Both dozer operators unavailable from Buchanan county at the time
5. Drone worked well for intelligence gathering, locating natural barriers, etc.
6. A 4-wheeler had a mechanical malfunction eliminating the firefighters ability to scout the fire at critical times.

Recommendations for the Future

1. Work toward possible solutions to providing meals to line firefighter forces on long-hour initial attack wildfires that are transitioning to multi-operational periods
2. Pre-fire season staging of pallets of bottled drinking water and sports drinks at key office locations that have logistical challenges to providing these supplies on a consistent basis.
3. Continue to order supplemental personnel right away, from within or outside the region as necessary, to assist with fires such as the Frying Pan.
4. Continue to support and expand the agency's drone program. Consider a drone and pilot for each work area as a goal.
5. Investigate the purchase of appropriate cell-phone boosters for personnel in identified poor coverage areas.
6. Investigate the purchase of a 4-wheeler for the Headwaters work area. Their unit had a mechanical malfunction on the fire and is needed to access the terrain they work in routinely. Fire Branch is willing to provide the funds for and setup demonstrations with multiple manufacturers for testing to ensure the right vehicle is provided to the work area.
7. It was mentioned by field staff that the latest John Deere 450K crawlers are having traction problems in certain situations due to the narrow pad width. RF agreed to ask the regional mechanic (Doss) to investigate the parts and/or labor required to increase the pad width on one unit for testing. This process is underway.

Closing Comments by Fire Staff

Overall, the Frying Pan fire was managed well by local forestry personnel especially being in a short-staffing situation covering 5 counties with 2 full-time VDOF. Decisions to disengage and re-evaluate tactics occurred which indicated a feedback loop was in place to determine if tactics were effective. Firefighter safety was a priority consideration in decision-making. It should be commended that regional staff did not delay ordering inter-region personnel to assist with the fire. The primary issue that needs to be corrected is providing and maintaining a consistent mechanism to pay for meals for firefighters committed to long hours on a fire such as the Frying Pan.

_____ Incident Commander	_____ Date
_____ David J. Houttekier	_____ 05/28/2021
_____ Fire Staff Representative	_____ Date