

Blackhawk Ranch South Mountain Drive - Fire May 7, 2024

After Action Report

Summary

- **A FIRE** believed to be on Blackhawk Ranch (BHR) was reported to Huerfano County Dispatch ~11:00. Huerfano County Fire Protection District contacted BHR EMC immediately, requesting location, fire behavior and weather behavior.
- **EMC response:** Fire Located within 5 minutes, location, fire, wind, and forest description transmitted to HCFP. Location directions transmitted to HCFP in route.
 - **Location:** BHR Lot 129. 50ft slash pile fully engulfed, wind driven spotting.
 - **Cause: Improper Disposal of Fire Place ashes during a RED FLAG Warning.** Ashes blown into a nearby slash pile. Slash pile, fueled by 40 mph winds, burst into flames.
- **BHR EMC and landowners** attack and contain fire 11:05 - 11:40, HCFPD Wildland Truck Crew arrives 11:45.
- **HCFPD + BHR** Continue to douse hotspots and search out and quench spot fires. La Veta Wildland Truck Crew arrives 12:15 and assists with spot fire searches. Mop up 12:30 - 13:00.
 - **Impact: ~ 0.25 acre small but intense fire with wind driven spot fires in steep thickly forested downwind areas. No injuries, no home damage, no outbuilding damage. Property damage was minimized to a <0.25 acre burn scar.**

Many thanks to the BHR Crew, the Huerfano County Fire Protection Wildland Truck Crew and the La Veta Fire Protection Wildland Truck Crew. These folks averted what certainly could have been a disaster for BHR.

Detailed Account

We are indebted to the quick and effective actions of all who responded and/or fought the BHR South Mountain Fire (Art and Wendy Jackson, Jim Nance, Brad and Marian Brooks, Cody and Ayla Julian, Cricket Sutter, the Huerfano County Fire Protection District, the La Veta Fire Protection District and the Huerfano County Sheriff Office.

- **Contact, Fire Location, Fire Description, Code Red, Fire Attack**
 - 11:00, May 7, 2024 HCFPD received notice from Dispatch that a caller reported a “fire burning somewhere on Rugby Mines Road on Blackhawk Ranch”.
 - 11:01 HCFPD Lieutenant Roy Britt notified BHR EMC Chair as per BHR’s standing agreement with them. Lieutenant Britt requested BHR EMC to locate the fire, assess the fire behavior, wind behavior, and provide directions to the location. A relatively small but intense fire was located on the north side of the driveway on lot 129 (Julian family). Flames fully engulfed a slash pile (approximately 50’x3’x3’) driven by 30-40 mph winds blowing to the North. The blowtorch effect of the heavy winds caused ember showers to be driven to the North beyond the slash pile and into the thickly wooded descending hillside where 4 spot fires were located in the duff and trees.

- Lieutenant Britt was briefed on the fire and given directions to the fire's location. Lieutenant Britt then triggered a Code Red Warning for BHR (placed BHR on Pre-Evac notification).
- BHR EMC member, Marian Brooks called out additional EMC resources to the fire location at 11:02.
- BHR EMC Incident Command determined that the fire was fightable and attacked it beginning 11:07, with an initial 4 person team (Art Jackson, Wendy Jackson, Marian Brooks and Brad Brooks) soon joined by three landowners (Cody Julian, Ayla Julian and Crickett Sutter) and EMC member (Jim Nance).
- The initial attack was two pronged, with the majority of resources fighting the slash pile fire and another two people attacking and containing the wind driven spot fires downhill and downwind from the slash pile. Along with 350 gallons of water from the Julian's property, we used rakes, McCleod tools, a Cutting Mattock, a Backpack Sprayer and about 10-12 hand carried fire extinguishers in the initial attack. This hybrid BHR attack knocked down the flames and contained the spread of the fire.
- 1st Wildland Fire Truck Crew from HCFPD arrived at ~ 11:45. BHR EMC Incident Command stood down and then joined the now established HCFPD Incident Command team. HCFPD firefighters then began dousing the slash pile hot spots and duff areas, flooding the remaining smoldering spot fires below the slash pile. The BHR team continued to hunt for and extinguish downhill spot fires.
- 2nd Wildland Fire Truck Crew from La Veta arrived at approximately 12:15. They joined the HCFPD Incident Command structure and began a thorough spot fire search of the steeply descending, thickly-wooded hillside North and downwind of the fire. The fire was extinguished by approximately 12:45, with the Fire Protection District firefighters remaining to search and flood hotspots on, and downhill from, the slash pile fire location.
- Huerfano County and La Veta firefighters cleared the scene about 13:15.
- Colorado Division of Fire Prevention & Control Battalion Chief, Joe LoBiondo, arrived on scene at approximately 14:00. EMC Chair assisted him with answers to several routine questions and invited him back for a more detailed recon of Blackhawk Ranch.
- Land owner, Cody Julian, was left in charge of inspecting the fire area for flareups or hotspots during the next 36 hours.

- **What Worked On BHR's South Mountain Fire**

- **The Responding EMC Team - some with prior experience**
Jim Nance, Art Jackson, Wendy Jackson, Brad Brooks, Marian Brooks
- **The Responding Land Owners - jumped in with additional resources**
Cody Julian, Ayla Julian, Crickett Sutter
- **Communications** - as expected, our use of a hybrid system of both radios and cell phones was sufficient for both intrateam communications, as well as interteam communications with Huerfano County Fire Protection District.

- **Speed** - the alacrity with which we were able to deploy, locate the fire, assess the fire and brief HCFPD was another crucial factor in our success with this fire. This was more luck than skill, but certainly something we want to continue to foster - *fast on the fire*.
- **Attack Strategy** - fire / weather behavior attack positioning and strategy based both on keeping all involved safe, but also accounting for spot fire spread and containment.
- **Huerfano County Fire Protection District and La Veta Fire Protection District Response**
 - HCFPD made it here in about 45 minutes and LVFPD made it here in an hour.
 - **Two very important realities need to be shared widely among our BHR residents: 1) You cannot wait for the CAVALRY... YOU ARE THE CAVALRY that will first engage; and 2) WE will likely be each other's FIRST Responders in emergency incidents.**
 - Their water and manpower was very important to finish off the smoldering fires.
- **What Was A Little Sketchy on BHR's South Mountain Fire**
 - **PPE and TOOLS** The speed of the initial discovery and callout, left a lag in getting all firefighting tools and PPE to the fire site. These flowed in rapidly, but most of the team felt like we could have grabbed more of everything before arriving... this has to be balanced against the fast attack model that was a key part of our success. Most of us have resolved to put together a grab and go toolset, PPE, etc stash ready to throw into our vehicles. Equally important is the need to discipline ourselves to bring the minimum PPE and Tools no matter what, not wait for others to catch up and bring them.
 - **LACK OF WATER** - If it had not been for the Julian's 350 gallon tank of water, all present agreed that the outcome of our work on this incident would not have been nearly so successful, even accounting for the additional water supplied by the two Wildland Trucks who sortied, the EMC involved believed that the ability to mobilize hundreds of gallons of water is essential in future callouts. This is both an individual responder and EMC problem to solve.
 - **GATE ESCORTS and LATER ARRIVING ASSETS** - it was noted by one of the EMC team that while HCFPD crews had no trouble finding the fire, later arriving assets such as LVFPD and the HCSO got lost on the way in. We need to strengthen our Gate Escort strategy to account for the secondary waves of assets coming onto the BHR and assure they have an escort to the fire location.
 - **CODE RED WARNING** - did not provide the timeliness nor coverage promised or expected. While part of the problem may be user error in applying for coverage, or not updating phone numbers, etc, the failure rate and the lack of timeliness in receiving messaging, seems to indicate that there are major issues with their system. The EMC cannot register for individuals so each property owner must register themselves and request a test of the system if possible. The EMC members involved in this incident view this as a significant item to follow up on in our planned execution.
 - **TRAINING** - While some of us have moderate to extensive experience in first responder duties and an understanding of the Incident Command Structure, most of us believe we would benefit from some cross training with State and Federal Fire Organizations, EMS Agencies, and Law Enforcement. Additional training would also allow us to expand our pool of capable responders on the ranch.

- **Resulting TO Dos**

- Review our current “Fire Rollout” gear list - minimum tools, supplies and PPE - **Jim**
- Consider a 2nd wave of support bringing drinking water, hot/cold drinks and snacks -?
- Investigate the ability to use small trailers and UTVs by fire responders when deploying to a fire. Even 50-100 gallons would be a huge help if several responders brought that along in their vehicles. Several small trailers exist for this use on the ranch - **Art and Brad**
- Investigate the acquisition of a used Wildland truck for gear and water delivery - **Jim**
- Code Red - investigation. Understand the reason for the failures, who actually is in charge of Code Red management and what we can expect from that technology going forward - **Marian and Wendy**
- Reevaluate Our Current Gate Escort practices to account for late arriving assets - **Marian**
- Train
 - **Self Recovery 101** - Cody Julian May/June
 - **Basic First Aid + AED** - Brad to Arrange
 - **Fire Fighting Training Needs Assessment** - **Jim Nance & Brad**
- Build Relationships - Map Discussions and Recon sessions with EMS, LE, LFPD and HCFPD **Brad +**

In conclusion, with speed, luck, water and basic strategy, we were able to deploy resources to locate, contain and extinguish a relatively small but intense fire with the help of the BHR EMC, HCFPD, LVFPD and affected BHR land owners. We learned some lessons and will proceed to execute on listed TO DOs.

Respectfully Submitted 5/11/2024

Brad

Brad Brooks, Chair
BHR Emergency Mgmt Committee