

# Executive Summary

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The 24 Command Fire started on Tuesday, June 27, 2000, at approximately 1320 (1:20 p.m.), when a fatal car crash ignited a dry grassland and sagebrush area along State Highway 24 in Benton County, Washington. The land in the area is managed as the Fitzner-Eberhardt Arid Lands Ecology Reserve (ALE) by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service), under contract with the Department of Energy (DOE).

The ALE refuge was established in 1997, staffed in 1998, and is now a 120 square mile portion of the newly designated Hanford Reach National Monument (Monument). In June 2000 the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) assumed management responsibility for the entire Hanford Reach National Monument that encompasses 200,000 acres.

The wildfire spread quickly during the next two days, driven by prevailing winds, high temperatures, low fuel moisture, and low humidity. It burned 163,884 acres of Federal,

State, and private lands, including 11 homes and several other structures in Benton County. It threatened lands and facilities on the Hanford Nuclear Reservation and burned a significant amount of shrub-steppe habitat on the ALE portion of the Monument.

## Fire Progression

As a fire increases in complexity, incident management teams are assigned based on the team's level of qualifications and experience. A local Type 4 team normally makes the initial response. Additional teams may be requested, culminating with a National Type 1 team, which includes the most highly trained and experienced firefighters throughout the nation.

After escaping initial attack efforts, on June 27 at 2300 the Refuge Deputy Project Leader assigned a Type 3 Incident Management Team (IMT) to the fire. It was estimated to be 20,000 acres in size on June 28 at 0500, and 40,000 acres at 1630.

The fire continued to escalate and a Type 2 IMT took command on June 28 at 1800. At 2015 the Service's Regional Office requested help from a Type 1 IMT.

The fire grew the most from 1800 to midnight on June 28. By midnight it had increased to an estimated 151,000 acres. Since this had become a multi-jurisdictional fire, members of the local coordinating agencies established a unified command to coordinate the Type 1 and Type 2 teams and local fire chiefs.

The 24 Command Wildland Fire ultimately involved more than 900 personnel from multiple agencies. Committed resources, at one point in time, included 129 engines, seven helicopters, three airtankers, four bulldozers, 18 watertenders, 206 "overhead" positions, and 12 crews.



David Gonzales/USFWS

*The wildfire spreads quickly through the shrub-steppe habitat, with flame lengths of 10 to 15 feet.*

## Review Process

The 24 Command Fire was a multi-agency, multi-jurisdictional incident that involved significant national media coverage, congressional interest, and a substantial loss of property and natural resources. On July 13 the Service's Region 1 Director requested a national level review of the fire. The Service's Washington Office, Division of Refuges/Fire Management Branch, which is located at the National Interagency Fire Center in Boise, Idaho, assembled an interagency team to consolidate specific findings and make recommendations.

The team's primary objectives were to evaluate the actions taken to manage the wildfire and make recommendations to improve and guide future fire operations. Those findings and recommendations are the subject of this report.

To accomplish the review, the interagency team met during the week of July 24 at the Hanford Reach National Monument/Saddle Mountain National Wildlife Refuge (Monument) in Richland, Washington. After initial briefings and presentations, team members conducted personal and telephone interviews with key personnel involved with the fire, reviewed records and statements, and made literature searches in reference to the fire. The team reassembled near the end of the week to draft its findings. Emergency management officials directly involved with fire operations were also present at the final meeting.

Nine key focus areas were considered, which fell into four categories: Safety, Planning, Operations, and Coordination. The review team believes that many of the actions taken affected fire management.

The review team's final meeting on July 28 provided an opportunity for interaction among the cooperators involved with this incident. This meeting was also a beginning, a

first step toward establishing and renewing partnerships in a cooperative approach to wildfire protection and suppression.

After reviewing the events surrounding the 24 Command Fire, it is the hope of the review team that the Service and its local, State, and Federal cooperators will continue to strengthen these partnerships and commit the time, resources, and expertise necessary to implement the recommendations found in this report.



Thomas Skinner/USFWS

*An arriving Fire Management Officer captures an aerial view of the advancing fire.*



Bob Bravdy/Tri City Herald

*Firebreaks and roads help protect the DOE Fast Flux Test Facility Complex.*