

## Testimony of Mell Epps Herber-Overgaard Fire Chief

Let me begin by stating; I have no ill feelings or animosity toward any individual or groups as a result of these tragic fires. I believe I came away from this incident with a better idea of what we as individuals and organizations can do to make these types of situations a lesser threat and possibly eliminate much of their destruction. I can assure all of you this fire could have been prevented. I'm not interested in discussing or commenting a great degree on how the fires (Rodeo-Chediski) got started. I'm convinced they would have gotten started regardless: careless smoking, unattended campfires, motorized vehicles or even lighting strikes.

It's clear, there were two factors, which made this fire, the largest in Arizona history, (over 450,000 acres), the incident it was: 1.) The very dry conditions of the forest. We are in a drought, which causes conditions to be far more critical than normal. We have known for some time of these extremely hazardous and dry conditions, all of us, both local and national agencies. These severe dry conditions made ignition and combustion inevitable 2.) Over the past several decades cleaning the combustible debris out of the forest has become the exception instead of the rule. Our local forest is a prime example. We had an average of 25 tons of fuel per acre, which should for the safety of communities' such as ours and the health of the forest itself, be eliminated or at least reduced to an acceptable level.

This fire had entirely too much fuel in its path from its beginning until its arrival in our community. The fire fronts were in excess of two hundred (200) feet in height with temperatures in excess of two thousand (2000) degrees. I sincerely believe it's unfair for any community to be subjected to these kinds of unnecessary exposures and risks. Especially when they could have been eliminated. Somewhere at some date in time, some government body decided the US Forest Service would be the stewards for our forests. For a lot of reasons, some I'm sure are totally out of their control, they've kind of dropped the ball. I've been in forests all across the state of Arizona. I've yet to find one where the condition places it in the safe zones. I'm told there are some, I've just not viewed them.

I would like to give this group a description of the events, which occurred after the fire was started and discovered. On June 20, 2002 very early in the morning (I believe about 8:30 am) I was notified a fire was Southwest of Heber-Overgaard. The Rodeo fire had been burning for two days at this point so we were all a little jumpy. I made contact with a local resident Mr. Pat Mcleod at our local Air Park. We flew to the fire location near Chediski, on the Fort Apache Indian Reservation. We were under some flight restrictions; these conditions made viewing the fire difficult, which required us to stay above the ten thousand-foot levels. However, we got what I felt was a fairly good look at the fire and the area it had to this point consumed.

I saw a helicopter with a drop bucket. I assumed he was working to control the fire. It appeared he was working what I thought to the leading edge of the fire (uphill side). We estimated the fire had consumed approximately one hundred fifty to two hundred (150-200) acres. I commented to Mr. Mcleod, I felt as though this fire should not be a big threat to our area. Mr. Mcleod agreed and we returned to the Air Port located at the Air Park in Overgaard. At this point in time our primary concern was the Rodeo Fire which our neighbors in the communities east of us were experiencing.

We had three (3) of our units assigned to the fire team in Clay Springs and Pinedale, our closest neighbors on the east. They were recalled home a little later in the day, as conditions in our

community appeared to worsen. Approximately one and one half-hour after I returned to my office, I received a telephone call from the Forest Service dispatch center. They informed me the Chediski Fire had increased to over two thousand (2000) acres. I realized we were in serious danger. I notified the County Sheriffs Office and informed them we were setting up a command center in our fire station. I expressed my desire to prepare for evacuation of the community, which was their responsibility. I requested all our off duty folks both career and volunteer be summoned to the Fire Station for assignment. I notified the State Land Department we were in harms way and would need assistance. Once my staff was in place we made some very quick and complex assignments. We established our command center in the Fire Station. The Sheriffs Department joined us. Just after noon the Sheriffs Officers with assistance from our personnel made a street by street, house by house notification to all "to be prepared to evacuate within one hour after notification. This as well as the actual evacuation was accomplished by our using vehicle public address systems and door to door notification. There is no other means within our community.

We began to contact suppliers and request special supplies and equipment such as; tools, bottled water, Gatorade, Class "A" Foam and food. At around half past two (2:30) p.m. some support services began to arrive. Several structural protection crews arrived, as did a structural protection boss. Just before four (4:00) p.m. I made the decision to evacuate the residents of the community. My decision was based on reports I received regarding the fire behavior. Heavy smoke and tremendous amounts of ash began to enter the community. The vast majority of residents offered no resistance to the request to evacuate. Conditions within the community were rapidly changing. Community members could see we were most likely in the path of the approaching fire. By early afternoon television stations had discovered the second fire (Chediski) and began reporting its rapid encroachment on the communities of Heber-Overgaard and Forest Lakes. I believe that had some effect on residents in our communities. I believe it assisted us in our evacuation efforts.

Manpower, equipment and supplies continued to arrive. The next couple of days were spent triaging properties throughout our communities' neighborhoods. The triage was being performed by fire crews, which had current red cards and approved equipment (apparatus).

There were literally dozens and dozens of pieces of equipment staged in and around the Heber-Overgaard Fire Station. There were also as many operators. They were very upset we would not give them permission to enter the forest. We learned, as many of these folks checked in, they could not produce any documentation of their equipment passing inspection or their having personal Red Cards. The absence of either of these documents will disqualify them from working a Wild Land Fire.

In the first three days of the incident we did not have the expertise or the capability to inspect their equipment. The equipment consisted of bulldozers, log skidders, backhoes, water trucks, and a large variety of fire apparatus as well as support vehicles.

The purpose of these inspections and the red card is of course to not only qualify the equipment and the individual but also let us know what and whom we are dealing with. Our posture on this subject stirred a lot of discontent and anger with many of these individuals. I stood firm on the decision to exclude these pieces of equipment and individuals for safety reasons. We relaxed our policy only to those we knew to be qualified. My feeling on this decision was to "error on the side of caution" especially when human life is in the equation.

We found another problem on Thursday. We had well over one hundred fifty people to feed. We made contact with the Salvation Army camp within our community. We asked them if they would remain on their site and assist with food and food preparation. That proved to be a very vital decision to our entire operation.

By mid morning Saturday we were dealing with well over five hundred (500) people. Although many of these individuals were unable to work, they still had to be fed. We were receiving a tremendous amount of supplies. Some of which we ordered and some we still don't have a clue where it came from or why they sent it. We have seven (7) apparatus bays in our station, four (4) of which were used for feeding the crews. The remaining three (3) bays as well as numerous rooms throughout the station were used to store a wide variety of supplies. We are still dealing with a great deal of those items.

Saturday afternoon around five (5) p.m. the fire storm hit at least seven (7) neighborhoods in the Overgaard area. Most of our resources were directed to those neighborhoods and at the end of the night we suffered over two hundred thirty (230) structures lost to the fast paced fire.

As I visited with many of the front line firefighters many of which were veterans of literally hundreds and hundreds of fires, the comments were pretty much the same; "I've never witnessed anything like this in my entire career". I have to echo that statement. At midnight I met with the local Forest Service group. We mapped out a plan to cut a fire line through a very volatile section in our community. It was all our fear this would be the next target of the fire. The fire seemed to take a breather during the very early Sunday morning hours. This of course gave us the opportunity to complete the planned fire line, It worked. We were successful in diverting the fire within this particular section. I'm convinced we were divinely favored. If the fire had come through that section, I'm sure we would not have been successful in stopping it. We would have lost several hundred additional structures including our Fire Station. In fact we cut over thirty Ponderosas Pine trees adjacent to our Fire Station, as a fire prevention and protection measure.

Sunday morning we found ourselves with the responsibility to feed over eight hundred- (800) hungry people three (3) times a day. We were now using forcible entry into many of the businesses in our community to obtain the necessary essentials to keep this operation up and running. We were confiscating food, auto parts, tools, and equipment. I would like to add at this point there was no one in our operation that ever worked in an incident of this magnitude. We were all on virgin turf. Somehow we were pulling it off and not doing a half-bad job.

The reason I say that is because late Sunday morning a type II team arrived from Alaska. Up to this point we (local Arizona fire fighters) had been working on our own. There was a dozen or so that came to our command center. The team leader was a fellow named Kato Howard (I believe that's correct). He and his staff looked our operation over. He said he wanted to leave everything as it was. He said he was impressed with our operation and our command structure. I remained as the incident commander and Kato would stop in for briefings in the morning and a couple of times throughout the day. He was working to a great degree to the west of us, in the Forest Lakes area. Some of his people met with our staff. They said they could be of great assistance to our efforts, and they wanted to support our system. The following is not a criticism but merely a report of what took place:

- 1.) A fellow from this group said he would take over the food. He convinced us he was better equipped to handle the job than our folks were. We welcomed the assistance. The assistance he offered was coming

from Cibique. Approximately seventy (70) miles away. The food was late, cold and certainly of lesser quality than that our shift crews prepared and served. Several times when meals were unexplainably late our crew prepared meals. Many of the fire crews were vocally displeased with our newfound assistance. On occasion the food they supplied was thrown away due to the poor quality and/or because it was late and cold.

- 2.) A lady met with our financial chief and took several days sign in sheets. These sheets were lost in the system for several days. That caused a great deal of distress to our staff. We had hammered them from the onset of this incident of the importance of accurate record keeping.
- 3.) An inspection team was now inspecting some of the equipment, which had been standing idle for up to four (4) days. The problem we found with this process was too little too late. Seems the vast numbers of equipment and only one or two inspectors hampered this process making it slow. Tempers had a tendency to blow up very frequently.

If the infractions that kept a piece of equipment out of service was minor i.e. "no fire extinguisher" our personnel made extinguishers available.

On Sunday we lost one structure, which is bad enough, but compared to the previous day we felt really blessed. Fire crews spent all day Sunday battling spot fires over a very wide area. Which included over a dozen neighborhoods. Hot Shot Crews were deployed throughout the forest. They were desperately trying to build fire lines by hand in an effort to control the fire.

There were dozens of bulldozers building fire lines in attempts to stop the fires rapid spread. Some of their efforts paid off but much too often, there was just too much fire to stop.

Monday arrived with it's own set of problems. The fire was making an assault on another section of our community, west of its previous attack.

We deployed most of our structure crews, hot shot crews and slurry attack (air tankers) bombers. When the fire made its assault, it came on at least five (5) fronts. Each of these fronts came via small canyons and draws. All of which contained very expensive homes. At the end of the siege we lost over thirty (30) additional structures. This brought our grand total of loss to two hundred sixty eight (268) structures. That was the end of our structure loss, however, we did not realize our major losses were over. That knowledge did not come for over a week.

On Monday evening at about nine (9) p.m. I received a visit from a gentleman by the name of Kim Martin. Mr. Martin is a type I team leader. He had several people of his staff with him. He informed me he was taking command of the fire. He was very courteous and polite. He asked if I would work with him in a unified command structure. After our experience with the type II team, I was a little skeptical. He said he would assume command the following evening (Tuesday) at six (6) p.m.

He moved the entire command and operation center to a large local Salvation Army Camp. A visit to the new command center removed any skepticism on my part. It became very clear to me this team came to resolve the problem at any cost. A very large transformation was taking place, and I believe it was the best thing for us. The problem fire was a continual threat to our community for well over a week after the type I team arrived.

I have been in the fire service since 1968. I faced some very traumatic and volatile situations. I have however, never been in a situation so intense. (Pardon the use of a very over used term) and stressful in my career. I remember on several occasions in the early morning hours (2 or 3 am) just sitting down and thinking: "will this ever go away"? What can be done to prevent some other poor unsuspecting slob and his community from experiencing what we lived with for over two weeks?

1.) First and foremost, clean up the forest. We've gone from an acceptable condition to the far extreme. As I earlier stated, the US Forest Service is the organization selected to be the stewards over our forestlands. I'm not 100% convinced they do all they should and could to prevent the kind of thing we've recently experienced. I almost believe their excuse of the blockage by "special interest groups" has become more an excuse than a legitimate reason. Seems that's a pretty standard answer by all levels of Forest Service employees without even a hint of hesitation or research.

I believe a very aggressive attempt with some backing from lawmakers could go a long way toward eliminating the problem. It's not over. The same thing could and probably under our current conditions, will happen again very soon. After what our community has experienced and the destruction we are dealing with, I'm convinced if we do not repair our broken forest system, it's a crime and someone or something should be punished. It is broken so we need to fix it. I'm not exactly clear on what its going to take or how we need to go about correcting it. I honestly believe the beginning of the end came about when the logging and the cattle industry were eliminated from the equation of our recipe for a healthy forest. Cattle grazing can be and from what I know is easily controlled. The fast burning grass like fuels can be controlled by well managed grazing programs.

The lumber industry has at least proven to me, they are pretty darn good forest managers. The lumber forests they currently control do not look anything like what we are surrounded by. Those forests are healthy and beautiful. The trees are properly spaced and harvested at acceptable intervals. They are not overly stressed competing for the little amounts of moisture they receive or insect infestation. Those forests produce a useable product and serve all the other purposes as well, and in most cases look and feel better than those managed by the Forest Service. How is it private industry can and does make this work and we just can't seem to get the hang of it?

I'm not a logger or a cattleman nor do I have any special ties to anyone in those industries. However, I do know things were not in the state we are currently experiencing when these industries were a part of the solution. I am aware of most of what has brought us to this point. In simple terms it's called the "tail wagging the dog".

The result of this catastrophic incident has not only left some ugly visual scars on our community and surrounding area. It has a long lasting financial depression on it as well. A dollar loss of over forty million (\$40,000,000.00) dollars has been estimated for the Heber-Overgaard area alone. That estimate is structural damage only. The surrounding forest has it's own problems. Our Fire Department budget will be affected for an undetermined amount of time.

This small-unincorporated community was not at fault for this incident, however; they will be required in one way or another to pick up the tab for something or someone else's shortcomings.

I'm not implying the government picks up any additional costs. I'm aware these fires have cost more millions than I care to think about. That is specifically why I believe we must be proactive instead of reactive.

- 1.) During the initial stages of the Chediski Fire, as it seemed to be growing in astronomical leaps, I remember wondering several whys:
  - A. Why did they not take the fire serious before it got totally out of control? They were dealing with the Rodeo Fire. Same fuel, same terrain, same weather conditions, and same direction.
  - B. Why did those in charge believe the Chediski Fire would be slower, smaller or less devastating than the Rodeo Fire?
  - C. Why must a fire reach a certain size or meet certain criteria before the big guys take it serious and take steps to extinguish it?
  - D. Why were we left to fend for ourselves for so long before we got that much-needed assistance. Had our side of the fire been taken as serious as the Rodeo Fire, our losses could have been as small as those experienced by our neighbors to the east. It's become very clear to me fires of the nature we experienced, with the volume of fuel present in our forest, especially when conditions are as dry as they currently are should be extinguished at all costs as soon as possible. Regardless of their location be it: public lands, private lands or reservation.
- 2.) When a fire or similar incident of this size is in progress, it generates a lot of problems for local agencies. I'm referring to mostly financial problems. Some of which is long term. We have come to refer to this as the "**Second Disaster**".

We realized very early (day one) we would need to maintain a record of just about everything and everybody we dealt with. We appointed a finance officer to attempt to track our financial trail. This individual is our full time administrative assistant. She is totally familiar with our department or our day to day practices. Unfortunately we like most was not familiar with how incidents on this level are run. We did not know all the procedures required in retrieving payment from all the different government agencies. I'm relatively sure most organization in our situation would have similar difficulties. I'm positive, based on what we've experienced, with the financial side of this incident, we will be dealing with some of this for several years to come.

When an incident begins to look as though it has a chance to escalate into a major event; especially when a number of different agencies will be involved, I make the following request and recommendation. Dispatch a financial consultant familiar with all the different agency policies. We are currently searching for agencies, which will pay some of the expenses we incurred as a result of the fire. The following is a list of agencies we have and are currently dealing with:

1. Arizona State Land Department
2. Federal Emergency Management Agency
3. Bureau of Indian Affairs
4. Arizona Department of Emergency Management
5. Navajo County Emergency Services

6. U.S. Forest Service (Apache Sitgreaves) (Tonto)
7. Fort Apache Indian Reservation
8. Arizona State Governors Office
9. Bureau of Land Management

Each of these Agencies has their own set of rules and there is a wide variation from one to another. It becomes one more area where organizations such as ours are loaded with rules and regulations were unfamiliar with. They bog us down with the red tape of their bureaucracy. As we spend hours, days, weeks and months attempting to identify the proper agency for the right payment.

10. Another situation, which reared its ugly little head, was “Wage Disparity”. Two individuals working side by side doing the same job, drawing different wage scales. \$14.00 per hour opposed to \$26.00 per hour. The only difference we’ve been able to find is; the agency they are working through. Arizona State Land Department \$14.00 per hour Federal Government (FEMA) \$26.00.

The best we can figure, all the money comes from FEMA so why the disparity? This factor has created some very serious problems for our agency. I’m of the belief, all would have been fine with the wages established in contracts by the Arizona State Land Department (\$14.00 per hour) if FEMA had not come and paid over twice that. Seems they should do whatever is necessary to make sure there on the same pace with locals.

I certainly don’t profess to have all the answers to correct our current forest management problems. We obviously do have a serious shortcoming in our forest management skills. The problem should be determined and a solution should be conceived. Anything less will keep things as they are and to me that’s unacceptable.

It’s also unacceptable to me for legislation dealing with our forest in the west be rubber stamped by a legislator in the east. Especially if he/she has never walked or even seen what he’s/she’s voting for.

I submit this testimony to you and will try to answer your questions and/or assist in a reasonable solution to a problem I believe can destroy our forest system, as we know it.

Respectfully,

Mell Epps Heber-Overgaard Fire Chief

ME/ks