

# **NAME: PORTER WHARTON, III**

**TITLE: SR. VICE PRESIDENT OF**

**PUBLIC AFFAIRS**

**COMPANY: VAIL RESORTS, INC.**

On the morning of October 19, 1998, at approximately 3:30 a.m., the first of eight fires were set. At 4:00 a.m., the first alarms came into Vail dispatch and by 4:20 a.m., the first firefighters were on their way up the dirt road to the 11,200 foot ridgeline where the fires raged at two locations a mile and a half apart.

By 4:40 a.m., the first firefighters were on the scene. What they were confronted with was five buildings and three ski lifts engulfed in flames. Hampered by a lack of water on the ridgeline, six inches of fresh snow and fires that by that time had almost an hour's head start, their task was virtually impossible.

Eventually 195 firefighters from 11 fire departments and our company were engaged throughout the night and into the day. They came from six counties and stayed for over eight hours engaged in the battle.

When the morning sun rose over the Gore Range, it illuminated a shocking amount of damage. Foremost was the complete loss of the resort's flagship on-mountain restaurant, Two Elk. A 24, 000 square foot majestic log structure, with seating for 550.

Four additional buildings housing dining and ski patrol functions were also totally consumed. Three chairlifts were damaged. The total value of lost assets was over \$12 Million, making this the most costly act of eco-terrorism in this country's history.

Most fortunately, only one of the almost 200 firefighters involved was injured. And a hunter who had left his friends at their nearby campsite to sleep in a small restroom building for warmth awoke to find himself in the only structure not engulfed in flames. As one witness to the carnage said later, "The only thing we can be thankful for is that we aren't having services."

Former Colorado Governor Romer was the first to call the fires an act of terrorism. Then, on Wednesday October 21<sup>st</sup>, two days after the fires, an e-mail was received by Colorado Public Radio

The e-mail, purportedly sent by ELF, the Earth Liberation Front, an eco-terrorist group responsible for tens of millions of dollars of destruction across Europe and the United States, claimed responsibility for the fires.

Why had Vail drawn the attention of ELF? Three days before the fires, a federal court had given final approval for the construction of the Category III expansion of the ski area. The expansion had been controversial, with some environmentalists opposing it for reasons including possible impacts to Canadian Lynx habitat - even though no lynx had been seen in the area since 1973.

The expansion had been contemplated since the resort's founding in 1962. It was desired by our guests and

supported by an overwhelming majority of our community. The approval process took over seven years and five million dollars in expenditures by our company. It was the most scrutinized ski area expansion in history with over 65 studies conducted on soil, air, wildlife and water issues. Two administrative reviews and three court challenges all supported the expansion. It was approved by four federal agencies, one state agency and two local governments.

But ELF did not accept the results of this exhaustive process. The ELF communiqué stated the fires had been set, "... on behalf of the lynx. Putting profits ahead of Colorado's wildlife will not be tolerated. This action is just a warning." And then our guests were warned, "For your safety and convenience, we strongly advise skiers to choose other destinations."

The property damage has now been repaired. But the scars on our community and our company remain. A former Vail mayor said at the time, "This was not only an attack against Vail Resorts, this was an attack against the people who live and work in Eagle County." It is the wealthy visitors to Vail that are a part of it's image, but when the guests are gone, there are 30,000 hard-working very normal people that remain in the valley they call home. Those are the people ELF terrorized. The sense of violation and the feelings of outrage remain.

The investigation is still open. No arrests have been made

ELF boasts it is above the laws of this country and claimed they were, "... effecting social change." And that, "... decreasing profits by destroying property has been very effective." But let's call it what it really is. No matter what the supposed justification, this was terrorism. This is a fringe group saying in essence that they are more important than the laws that are the foundation of this society and this country. Any effort on the part of this administration and this Congress to assure homeland security must include a response to domestic environmental terrorism. These faceless, cowardly criminals must be stopped.

If they are not, more property will be destroyed. More threats of extortion and worse will be issued. More law-abiding citizens will live in fear. And eventually, inevitably there will be a loss of life. It's a miracle it hasn't happened already.

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