

Section 1

Background

On July 4, 1999, the Superior National Forest, Minnesota, was hit with a wind and rainstorm about 1:30 in the afternoon. The National Weather Service called the event a “derecho,” a term seldom used because of the rarity of such storms. Basically, a straight line storm with winds in excess of 90 mph – much greater than hurricane force. Hardest hit was the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness. The most severe blowdown area was within the Wilderness with more than 70 percent of the trees broken, bent, or up rooted. Preliminary estimates of wind damage show that nearly one half million acres of forest have been damaged. The estimate as of mid-August is as follows: 180,000 acres received light damage, 158,000 moderate damage, and 140,000 received heavy damage.

The region has been hit with windstorms before. Earlier this decade, a storm hit hundreds of thousands of acres from Bemidji to north of Grand Rapids, Minnesota. Several years ago in Northern Wisconsin, a windstorm hit with greater effect over a larger area than the Independence Day Blowdown. These storms were in fuels different than the Independence Day Storm in the BWCAW, yet managers could use information used by other managers addressing these events as learning tools so as not to reinvent the process.

Of possible interest to forest managers is a recent windstorm that hit the Medicine Bow-Routt National Forests, Colorado, October 1997. Easterly winds in excess of 120 mph hit a large area of the forests and are comparable in size to the heaviest worst hit area in the BWCAW. Some of the actions taken by forest managers on the Medicine Bow-Routt National Forests could be a possible model for managers on the Superior National Forest.

Following the windstorm, reactions from wilderness users, local and seasonal residents and, forest personnel were nearly all equal -- awe struck. The power of the storm was evident as people spoke of their experiences. Each spoke of the impact as being “unreal” and “unbelievable.”

Section 2

The Prevention / Education Team

The management of Superior National Forest made a decision to order a National Wildland Fire Prevention / Education Team to assist with the predictable concerns of forest staff and residents. The team was ordered on Monday, July 26, 1999, and was composed of a Team Leader, two Prevention Specialists in training for leadership roles and, a Public Affairs Officer. Each team member has had previous experience with this type of assignment.

A Prevention Team Charter was provided to the team by Forest management. The charter lists a number of specific elements management wanted addressed by the team including: Work with public agencies to facilitate current or new evacuation plans; develop and implement a public education program to help people reduce fuel hazards in the interface; develop a human caused fire risk plan for visitor use within the BWCAW; and develop fire safety related messages for use by cooperators.

Team Actions – Two Locations

The full team was in place by Wednesday, July 28, 1999 in Grand Marais headquartered at the Gunflint Ranger Station. Meetings with District personnel and other key agency contacts were conducted for a day and half. Other meetings were coordinated and held with city and county officials such as the Cook County Sheriff and Department of Emergency Management. The team also met with the Gunflint Volunteer Fire Department and home and association organizations. These meetings were conducted to seek cooperation, open lines of communications, and provide information to assist those contacted with dealing with the fuel build up and possible fire danger as it relates to property and life protection following the windstorm event.

Several meetings over the three-week period were held in the Gunflint and Kawishiwi Ranger Districts. The team met with Cook County officials and others in an open forum discussion arranged by the county regarding the aftermath of the windstorm. The Fire Safe Community Awareness Program (FSCAP), a primary program of the team, was presented at several meetings in Cook, and St. Louis Counties. Worked with Arrowhead Electric Cooperative, Inc. to include a Fire Safe Home Checklist insert in the October issue of the cooperative newsletter. Met with Cook County Sheriff, Gunflint VFD Chief, and Cook County DEM Director to address the current evacuation plan used for the Gunflint Trail. Met the St. Louis and Lake Counties in an open forum discussion to address the “initial attack” response of possible future incidents.

A meeting with three regional Volunteer Fire Department (VFD) Fire Chiefs, Cook County Sheriff, and a Cook County Commissioner was held with the FSCAP presented. An evacuation plan for the Gunflint Trail homeowners, designed in 1994 and used in 1995 by the Gunflint VFD, was shown as a good example to other departments in attendance. Discussion centered on all VFD's in the county having similar plans or one that fits their situation. The Gunflint Fire Chief had put a great deal of time and energy in the development of their plan, and he was encouraged to update it and communicate with residents about the plan. A continuation of these discussions must be maintained with updating of plans and operations as the outcome. More importantly, is the need for regular communications with forest neighbors.

The Fire Safe Community Awareness Program was utilized at several homeowners and other association meetings. Gunflint Trail Association; Gunflint Homeowners Association; Seagull Homeowners Association, and Clearwater Lake Homeowners Association. The program was shown at the Kawishiwi Ranger District to Ely Fire Chief, FMO, AFMO, and Forest Law Enforcement Officer. A field trip was conducted to Sand Land Guard Station to survey two subdivisions and a special use home track.

The team also met with local news media, Public Access Channel 13 (Grand Marais), Boreal Access Internet Provider (Grand Marais), and the Arrowhead Electric Cooperative, Inc. Local media contacts generated two news stories. One addressed the prevention team and the other showed some of our contacts and accomplishments.

The team designed and built a display for the annual Fisherman's' Picnic at Grand Marais and made contact with an estimated 500 visitors (two six hour days at an average of 40 plus contacts per hour). Team members provided limited input on the now established fire restrictions (as of August 11, 1999, fire restrictions are in place. A final draft script was completed and is suggested for use in the five minute BWCAW user videotape that is shown at various locations. The same draft can be used in the 21-minute video produced in cooperation with the outfitters and others.

An information flyer about the blowdown and the potential created for wildland fire was designed for the public. The informational flyer was converted to html format, ready for web site placement, and sent it out to several web sites. Only three web sites picked it up. The web site locations are - Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, the Gunflint Trail web site and the National Interagency Fire Center in Boise, Idaho. Some of the text can be used in other material such as the information that is mailed to potential BWCAW users.

Curiously, the Superior National Forest has lagged behind with current, accurate information on the Forest web site. The team monitored the site on a regular basis anticipating additions to the site.

The team did provide the html formatted informational flyer regarding the windstorm and it appeared several days later and suggests that easy links be made. The team suggests that the web site for the Forest be used as the most expeditious means of conveying current happenings to the public. A minimum of six to eight hours following an event or major management move, the web site should have a posting. This is the quickest manner of communicating information to an interested public.

For four days beginning Sunday, August 8, 1999, the team relocated to Ely, Minnesota, at the Kawishiwi Ranger District. In this timeframe, the team toured portions of the affected storm damaged area via motor boat on Moose Lake.

We visited Prairie Portage with stops at many campsites and portages. A large quantity of the informational flyer was provided to the Forest wilderness permit office staff at the International Wolf Center.

Two meetings were held at the District office. The first meeting was with local outfitters and resort owners and the regional news media. The other meeting was held with representatives from law enforcement, emergency management from Lake and St. Louis counties and the Fire Chief from Ely. Both meetings proved to be informative with important thoughts exchanged. Follow up to the comments need to be considered by Forest staff (these comments and suggestions are attached as an addendum to this report). Two team members spent 20 minutes with Gil Knight on the local radio station (WELY 92.1 FM and 1450 AM) talking about the windstorm, the team and what it does, and what folks need to be considering to protect property.

A trip was taken to the Sand Lake Guard Station to review the wildland urban interface in the area that has potential as a fire problem. The work done by Dan Koachak, AFMO, has brought measurable awareness to the residents and should be continued there and elsewhere.

Two members of the team traveled with Jim Hinds to the Kawishiwi summer homes site while the team was in Ely. Jim worked with the homeowners in this area to reduce vegetation around their homes. Prescribed fire has been used on Forestlands near the homes with great success and support from the homeowners in the area. Another unit is to be burned this coming year in the same general area. Contact was made during the trip with a homeowner and they seemed very positive about the work that has been done.

The team strongly recommends that these types of work that of Dan and Jim continues and is modeled in other areas of the Forest.

Section 3

Commendations

The team would like to extend their individual thanks and appreciation to the following employees of Superior National Forest. Their help made our stay more productive and rewarding:

Gunflint Ranger District

Tim Norman, FMO

Tom McCann, GIS operator

Donna Hart, Information Assistant

Carrie Anderson, Information Assistant, Tofte

The Engineering staff and the use of their photocopy machine (the better of the two machines!)

The staff of the visitor center for they're ongoing input

Kawishiwi Ranger District

Jim Hinds, FMO

Tracy Richards, Supervisory Information Assistant

Betty Shufelt, Information Receptionist

Lona Yakich, Budget Assistant

Supervisors Office

Kathleen Wilkinson, Secretary

John Daugherty, PAO Detailer

Observations and Recommendations

Public Affairs / Interpretation

Observations

- a. District staff appeared to lack a structure or system to make "final decisions." This was evident during the production of materials that were produced by the team.

- b. The “conservative understanding” exhibited by staff members regarding outfitters and resort cooperators appears more conservative than what is real. Observations and comments the team heard from these people about the blowdown event at meetings did not confirm forest employee understandings. With regular and on going communications and dialog with the public and cooperators, critical to a forest of this size, a more focused and accurate understanding would be realized and more accomplished.

Public Affairs

- a. Maintain regular and open communications with local and regional media emphasizing seasonal conditions in the blowdown through editorial updates.
- b. Staff must maintain open contact with associations and organizations that have been affected by the blowdown with a minimum of seasonal updates and possible meetings.
- c. Continue to develop dialog in planning sessions with city and county officials regarding emergency management operations with emphasis on the initial attack – the first 24 hours.
- d. Provide available expertise to the above groups, organizations and officials – a community gesture.

Interpretation and Visitor Services

- a. Develop a Blowdown Interpretive Plan to interpret to the public the blowdown event using various available interpretive media and formats. Include new entry point “bulletin board” exhibits, visitor center exhibits, a “blowdown” booklet, and a 10 to 12 minute videotape for general visitor viewing and outreach programs.
- b. Consider working in partnership with The Gunflint Trail Association and others to establish vehicle pullouts at points along the Trail that, following the blowdown, now have vistas. Provide for at least three cars with interpretive wayside exhibits. Show these pullouts on the next addition of the Forest map.
- c. Add text regarding the storm blowdown to all mailing devices sent to the public with emphasis on potential users of the BWCAW.
- d. During the next printing of the Official Forest Map, add a section regarding the blowdown.

Interagency Cooperation

George Meadows of the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources made the team aware of the MNICS Fire Prevention Working Team. George shared some products produced by the MNICS group. The team tried to contact the Superior representative, Debbie Kramar, and her replacement. Both were not available. Without an agency representative available, the team and the Forest lost important involvement and possible assistance. We recommend a stronger working relationship with this group as the potential need for their products and assistance is acknowledged regarding the blowdown and possible fire.

Conclusion

The Independence Day Storm of July 4, 1999, brought fundamental changes to the Superior National Forest. These changes are not short lived, but represent long term modifications. These modifications will now dictate by their very nature major operational and management style changes among the Forest staff. The Forest Supervisor is encouraged to revisit Forest plans followed by a strategic planning session with key staff members. The Team recommends an outside facilitator for this planning session so as to allow full participation by all staff members.

The following subjects are recommended in the strategic planning process:

- Staffing and Budget
- Internal and external management communications procedure
- Create partnerships with local and regional businesses (could offset costs and increase a “feeling of community”)
- Fully exploit interagency cooperation
- Fully revise the Fire Management Plan to include a Fire Prevention Plan based on the assessment process
- Establishment of a Superior Community Advisory Council to provide an outside view for Forest management

National Wildland Fire Prevention and Education Team