Embers of blame still smolder beneath Cerro Grande Fire

THE NIGHT IT BEGAN An innocent burn creeps past pine trees May 4, 2000 on top of Cerro Grande.

Records cast doubt on LANL official's claim that Weaver was warned

By JOHN MARBLE
lanews@lamonitor.com
Monitor Staff Writer

On May 4, 2000, National Park Service employees ignited a controlled burn that ultimately led to the Cerro Grande Fire. The fire consumed nearly 50,000 acres and destroyed the homes of more than 400 families in Los Alamos.

In a letter to the Los Alamos Monitor on April 1, Richard Burick, Los Alamos National Laboratory Deputy Director for Operations, wrote: "Many people pleaded with Bandelier (National Monument) not to start its 'controlled burn'; many people knew about the unfavorable weather conditions, including Bandelier personnel."

In an interview with the Monitor in March, Roy Weaver, superintendent of Bandelier at the time the prescribed burn was ignited, said the monument never received any communication from another agency concerning the burn.

The Monitor recently obtained transcripts of testimony before the US General Accounting Office and the Cerro Grande Prescribed Fire Board of Inquiry in May and July of 2000, along with related testimony by Eugene Darling, LANL emergency Management Response team leader and fire management officer. It was necessary to request the testimony – which was not included in the public reports – through the Freedom of Information Act.

The Monitor also received the text of the question and answer period following Burick's testimony to the National Parks and Public Lands Subcommittee and the Forest Health and Forest Health Subcommittee of the House of Representative's Resources Committee on June 7, 2000. The question and answer period was not included in the testimony that was released and is readily available on the Internet. It was obtained with the assistance of reporter Dawn Keller, who works for a Maryland newspaper owned by the same company that owns the Monitor, Landmark Community Newspapers Inc.

The Monitor initiated the process to obtain these documents in May.

Different stories

In testimony before three federal entities, two Los Alamos National Laboratory officials gave different stories about warning Bandelier National Monument against initiating the prescribed burn that led to the Cerro Grande Fire.

LANL Deputy Director

Please see **FIRE**, *A8*

From Page A8

laboratory on May 31, 2000, the GAO was informed that since the Cerro Grande prescribed burn did not include any LANL resources, there was little involvement on the part of LANL.

GAO documents concerning the interviews also show that "Gene Darling did not know, on May 4, 2000, that the Forest Service had suspended prescribed burns. Mr. Darling said that he saw (two Park Service employees) at a tree that was torching on Unit 40 on the evening of May 4. He told them that he wished they wouldn't start the prescribed burn, because the lab had moved to extreme fire danger on the plateau, at an elevation of about 7,400 feet. Although Mr. Darling had Al King's cell phone number, he did not contact him directly to relay his concerns."

The GAO reported that "according to discussions with Mike Powell and (Al) King, they never received a call from Darling with his concerns. (The two Park Service employees) were on the fire, but did not arrive until late that evening, after the fire had been ignited."

The board of inquiry asked Darling whether he knew the source of media reports that officials from LANL warned officials at Bandelier about lighting the fire, including direct confrontational "You better not light it" statements.

"Do you know the source of that media?" Darling was asked.

"The only source that I know of is the comment I just made about mentioning, because we had went to extreme and, in a way, I wished they wouldn't light the fire," replied Darling. "And that's — as far as I know, that's the only comment that went out to the media."

The 'ad hoc' meeting

In his testimony before Congress on June 7, 2000, Burick said an ad hoc pre-fire meeting was held before the Cerro Grande prescribed burn. The laboratory and several agencies requested that the fire not be lit, he testified.

Congresswoman Heather Wilson, R-N.M., questioned Burick about the ad hoc meeting. He said he was not at the meeting, but that Darling was in attendance.

"It is my understanding it was a pre-fire, pre-burn meeting to discuss the conditions where the fire was going to be set at Cerro Grande," testified Burick.

"In attendance was my fire boss Gene Darling — as I understand it and also personnel from the Santa Fe National Forest and it is my understanding and I think Mr. Darling has testified to the (US) General Accounting Office (GAO) that his exact words were: "Please don't set that fire."

Burick said he didn't know what the exact words were from the Santa Fe National Forest. He said he would "let them speak to that."

Wilson asked Burick if it was his understanding that the Santa Fe National Forest also opposed the burn.

"No question about it," was his response.

The Monitor asked Santa Fe National Forest Supervisor Leonard Atencio about Burick's statements, and he said that Forest Fire Dispatcher John Romero would address any questions regarding whether the Forest Service "warned" Bandelier against setting the prescribed burn at a meeting.

In a telephone conversation, Romero said that "Santa Fe National Forest was not in attendance at any meeting before the burn," and that he "stands by what he said in (a May 20, 2000) New Mexican newspaper article" and had no further comment.

In an interview with the Monitor in May, Roy Weaver, Superintendent of Bandelier at the time the prescribed burn was initiated, said the Park Service was unaware of such an ad hoc meeting.

"We did have a regular Interagency Wildland Fire Team (IWFT) meeting, but no ad hoc meeting," said Weaver. "At the IWFT meeting we talked about routine fire management, but we did not talk about Cerro Grande prescribed burn. There was definitely no ad hoc meeting."

The board of inquiry asked Darling if he had any knowledge of an "ad hoc group" from LANL that begged Bandelier not to proceed with the burn. Darling replied that he ... knowledge of such a group.

"Any knowledge of any entity from the park, other than your passing comment, that advised the park to not go forward or highlighted fire danger as too high to burn?" Darling was asked.

"Not that I'm aware," replied Darling. "Nobody from the laboratory."

In the New Mexican article he referred to, Romero states that he "warned Powell against starting the fire on the morning of May 4."

"I mentioned that I had a concern, in that we were sending mixed messages to the Public," Romero is quoted in the article. "That we're aggressively fighting fire on one end of Los Alamos, and they're igniting fires on the other end. I said that the conditions out there are not conducive."

Weaver contends there is a difference of opinion as to when the concern was registered by Forest Service.

"We contend it was after the prescribed burn had already been initiated," said Weaver. "And we were told to be careful because of the dry conditions."