

Staff Ride

Resources



Wildland Fire Leadership Development Program

Loop Fire – Audio Transcript

Interview With Cliff Johnson, Stand #1

[Interviewer] These are excerpts from a December 2003 interview with Cliff Johnson, who was the Bear Divide helicopter foreman at the time of the Loop Fire.

[Cliff] About 5:30 in the morning the phone rang, and usually if it's that early or that late, very late in the evening generally we tend to think it's a fire, an accident, or some other emergency. Everybody was up trying to find out what was going on. When we were informed it was a fire up at the Nike base at Los Pinetos, we tried to gather everybody together and get on the engine. Being that early in the morning still dark, and very windy, 40 to 50 miles an hour, it was hard standing up getting from the barracks out to the garage. We decided to load everybody up on the engine that was there and available. I believe the patrolmen also rolled out of there with one of the crewmen with him. As I said it was very windy, it's about three and a half to four miles up to Los Pinetos site, and maybe half way up there we could see the flames coming over the ridge, just east of the Nike site. As we turned the corner, just west of Contractors Point, we saw the area burning. My guess it was three to four acres at that point, burning very rapidly. Squirrely winds that still, strong Santa Anas but the wind was, the fire behavior was in all directions, and mainly upward, it was like a cauldron there burning in a small canyon, ahead of a small canyon. Our first response was to get to the head of it on the north side upwind of the fire, and see what we could do on structure protection at that point. It appeared that the fire as it bumped up against the road was holding at that point, because the Santa Ana winds, the roads were right on the ridge top. Santa Ana winds coming out of the north and northeast were blowing against the fire at that point. We proceeded west past the admin site to the first ridge we could find, cut a hole in the fence and proceeded out there just to take a look, it was obvious that the fire was flanking us from below. We backed out of there and went another five or 600 feet to the next ridge, cut through the fence again, and with the same scenario, by the time you get out, a little bit out on the ridge, we could see that the fire was again growing south and west. Backed out of there and went approximately 1000 feet west to the launch site, where the missile silos were. There was a large ridge heading south, and mainly south out of there. We actually rolled out a little bit of hose, got ready to put a hose lay in there while they scouted out ahead of us. They came back within a few minutes and said no that's not a good spot, the fire's really spotty downhill and to the west. At that point we decided to make a stand, it was holding pretty much on the ridge, Los Pinetos Peak, and Santa Clara Divide. So we decided to hold it there at the ridge, and just catch the fire as it came up and bumped along the ridge. The launch area

was pretty devoid of vegetation. It was a good safety zone, and that's where we started our engine hose lay going down to the west.

One significant thing was when we were first building line on the fuel break, west of Los Pinetos Peak, the fire was backing up very as I said from the south up to the break, we hadn't burned anything at the break off so we weren't really building a safety zone. I think that contributed to the slop over, but what really impressed me was when the Santa Ana winds stopped from the northeast and the local slope driven winds took over, that fire just came roaring up hitting that fuel break, and just pounding that fuel break and right over us. So that was, we get a little bit complacent sometimes about what the fires doing at that time, not realizing that when some abnormal conditions like Santa Anas stop, the local weather is gonna take effect, and that's exactly what happened, that was a classic case and it just came ripping up on both sides.

When we started out, when I was assigned over there, they had already made some progress from Contractors Point. The last point you could drive. My guess is six, 800 feet down the ridge, when I got there we continued and made another 1000 feet down that ridge. Past the point where it flattened out, and we weren't to the point where you could see over into the main part of the fire at that time, but the area we were in was pretty well coaled it was a lot of burned area to the west of us. And so at that point I was not concerned so much about our safety or communication, because we had visual communication back to the engine, and we had people running back up and down the ridge all that morning.