

Washington, D. C.
July 20, 1953

WHEREAS IS THE
INVESTIGATION OF
REPORT?

To : Board Members and Advisers
From : Richard K. McCardle, Chief
Subject: P-SUPERVISION-R-5-Hendocino Board of Review

You are one of those listed below who have been asked to participate, as indicated, in the Rattlesnake Fire Board of Review.

Edward P. Cliff - Chairman of the Board
Jay H. Price - Member
C. Otto Lindh - Member
Lawrence K. Mays - Member
H. Dean Cochran - Member
Carl A. Gustafson - Adviser (and Executive Assistant)
John Callaghan - Adviser
Jack D. Barrows - Adviser
Beth Jackson - Adviser

The review will be directed toward the disaster that cost the lives of 15 men working on the fire, rather than the entire history of the fire, except, of course, as it is related to the disaster. The scope of the investigation will cover the events and conditions having a bearing on the tragedy and will not become involved in the control operations otherwise. The results of your deliberation should be a report, as clear cut and brief as is consistent with the subject and your responsibility, but in any case complete and thorough.

First we want facts- what happened, how, and why. Second, we want these facts analyzed and evaluated in terms of sound conclusions and recommendations - how could the final outcome, or any of the occurrences or situations that led up to it, have been avoided? Third, and most important of all, how can we tighten up our safeguards against such a thing happening again? I feel strongly about this, and of course it will be uppermost in your minds. We can't restore these men to the 41 widows and orphans from whom they have been snatched away. But if ever an obligation was clear this one is - to see, to the extent that it is within our power to do so, that it never happens again. If it was caused by the negligence of any one in the Forest Service, or outside of it, we want to know it. If it was an act of God, and by any chance beyond our control, we want to know that.

2-Board Member, Mendocino Board of Review—July 30, 1953

We all realize that fighting a forest fire is dangerous. It can't be made a soft job. Despite that fact, or because of it, we must assure every precaution to guard the safety of those who take on this tough assignment. Human life must never knowingly or carelessly be subordinated to other values.

I expect the Board to develop its own plan of operation and carry it out without influence or interference from other sources. There is just one exception. Although the Board is being convened in San Francisco, I expect it to go also to Willows for at least a part of its deliberations. I want the Board to be familiar with the local scene there. I want it to see and meet the people of Willows and to be accessible to those who may want to appear before it. Above everything else, the Board must visit the scene of the disaster (on the ground) and have firsthand knowledge of details there. This provision should not be modified without my prior personal approval.

A full report by the investigating committee will be available to you before the Board convenes. The Committee started to work on July 10, the day after the tragedy. It was hoped their work could be completed by July 21. However, despite long, often strenuous, hours of work this was impossible. Hence the date was changed to July 27.

I think you know without my saying so that Regional Forester Hendea and his Staff stand ready to furnish you every assistance. Similarly, it is hardly necessary for me to say that you will of course want Mr. Hendea and members of his Staff to attend and participate fully in your meetings.

One final word, underlined, although I doubt if I even need to remind you of this: - it may be necessary for you to query some of the surviving members of the crew or some of the widows or relatives of the victims. Deal considerately with them and remember the depth of their sorrow. Imagine yourself, for this purpose, in their position. Nevertheless, within these limits, get the facts.

G. R. P. McArthur