

It was the system that failed at Thirtymile

There is a great injustice happening in our Valley and I can't sit by without saying something. Many of you are following what is happening with the Thirtymile Fire investigation on TV, radio, newspapers, and magazines. Many of you believe you know what really happened there and think that there should be someone to blame.

People want justice! Someone must pay for this. You write in newspapers, you call the radio station and give your expert advice on what the Forest Service should do.

I was at Thirtymile and even I can't know all that happened there...no one could know all that really happened there. There are too many unanswered questions and too much politics involved. I am not able to say what we should have done or who should have done it. All I know is what the Forest Service, under pressure by the uninformed, is doing at this time.

In response to cries for accountability and justice they are looking right here in this Valley and targeting some of our finest people...people whose loss would damage morale and efficiency at the Methow Valley Ranger District.

Pete Soderquist, FMO (fire management officer) is a man who takes his job seriously, with great pride and integrity. He has a passion to see the job done safely and to the best that the American people could ever want. He has exhibited sacrifice behind closed doors and a genuine love for his people no matter how low on the pay scale.

Then there is Barry George, AFMO (assistant fire management officer); with a straight face his eyes carry the history and knowledge of this Valley. He freely shares this knowledge and puts it to use on every single fire ever to touch our forest. He is another man of integrity. Whenever one of us gets lost in what to do on a fire, there he is, guiding you and watching your back. Safety is his focus when getting the job done right.

Next comes Jack Ellinger, engine supervisor, the father of all the engines that patrol these forests looking for fires. What more could be said to someone of such character that makes his people want to work for him. Never in my time working with and for Jack have I ever felt that my safety was compromised. He is kindhearted and joyful, slow to anger and quick to forgive.

Harry Dunn is the foreman of Engine 704 and always ready if you need a good laugh or to hear a good story. Harry has been a major part of this valley's Forest Service. He is adamant about the safety of everyone that he works with, even making sure we haven't worked over our duty time. When I think of Harry I think of a person that shares his humor when people are down and someone that cares about the welfare of others.

Dave Laughlan, assistant foreman of Engine 704, has been an engine operator only for a short time here, but he stands out from many as a hard and honest worker. With his intelligence, detailed thinking, and constant analyzing of everything around

him, he could work for almost any university if he chose to do so, but his desire to work in fire brought him here. Strong-willed, confident, and precise are words that define Dave. He cares almost to a fault for his teammates and especially his engine.

These five people have served the people of the Methow Valley and have made an impact on all of us that work with the Forest Service. Because of their sacrifice and selflessness many employees come back year after year. They are the heart of the Methow Valley Ranger District fire division. Because of them we have pride. Many of you will never know what these people do to serve you. It is impossible to replace them.

It is a great injustice for them to be accused for what happened at Thirtymile. If they are blamed then I am blamed and you are blamed.

That fire came to test the system and that system has failed. Seek to know the truth.

The author is the assistant foreman of Engine 701, Methow Valley Ranger District.
