

Incident Summary Page for the 100 Fires Project

Incident Name: Romero Fire	Incident Date & Time: 10/07/1971 @ 21:30
Incident Location: Los Padres National Forest, Santa Barbara County, California	Incident Size: 14,538 acres final size 3,500 acres estimated at the time of the entrapment
Types of resources involved: Contract dozers and US Forest Service firefighters	# of Fatalities/injuries: 4 fatalities / 2 burn injuries
Reasons this fire was selected for the 100 Fires list:	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Fire made a notable impact within the wildland fire service ➤ 3 or more firefighter fatalities by entrapment 	
Conditions leading up to the event:	
<p>The Romero Fire was first reported at 15:45 on October 6, 1971 in the southernmost part of Santa Barbara County within the Los Padres National Forest. Weather that day included temperature of 100 degrees, relative humidity of 9%, a 10-hour Fuel Stick of 1%, and an Ignition Component of 99. The fire was burning through 50 year old chaparral fuels in mountainous terrain. The initial attack response was an engine from the Montecito Fire Department and two US Forest Service air tankers. Additional resources arrived through the afternoon into the night and the plan in the early hours of October 7 was to build direct line and hold the fire edge to prevent it from reaching residential areas and developed ranches. This effort continued through the morning and into the afternoon of October 7 using four contract dozers with a US Forest Service Tractor Boss and four swampers. They were working a flank of the fire with several of the fire overhead, along with a handcrew and tankers from the California Department of Forestry.</p>	
Brief description of the event:	
<p>At 15:00 on the afternoon of October 7, the plan for the contract dozers was changed to build indirect line east of the fire to the bottom of Santa Monica Canyon and the night crew would fire it out once completed. The Line Boss acknowledged at the time the plan did not have a high probability of success. But this strategy was chosen because if the fire got past Santa Monica Canyon it was four miles before there was another good location to make a stand. The four contract dozers were equipped with blades for road construction and were not very efficient working in uneven terrain and brush, so the construction of the line took longer than anticipated.</p> <p>Due to predicted Sundowner downslope winds, a decision was made at 19:00 to hold off on the firing operation, bring the dozers out for refueling, and to wait and see what happened with the downslope winds. The Tractor Boss was informed of the change in plans at that time. However, he said they would not be pulling out until 21:00 because of extra work that needed to be completed on the line. There was no urgency felt at the time, by those involved, to pull out prior to 21:00. This quickly changed at 19:30 when the Sundowner downslope winds began to surface and the overhead observed the fire intensity increase more quickly than anticipated. However, the Line Boss could not contact the dozers because they only had two older radios; one had quit working and the second was a 1950s vintage pack set radio with a telephone type handset receiver requiring the user to have it to their ear to communicate...the Tractor Boss did not hear the call.</p> <p>At 20:00 the Tractor Boss decided to head the dozers out, widening the line as they went, and one dozer was sent out to improve the existing access road (known as the Edison Road). At 21:00 the three remaining dozers began to realize they were in danger and discussed their best way out. The Tractor Boss directed them back up the line they had built in hopes of reaching their safety zone. The dozer going out the Edison Road was able to escape with no injuries. The other three dozers traveled up their fire break on the ridge towards their safety zone, but halfway up the ridge they noticed fire on both sides of their fire break. Very quickly the dozers encountered a flare-up that hit the fire break at their location. One dozer operator had his hands burned, and had to abandon his machine and jumped onto the lead dozer. The two remaining dozers attempted to continue up the fire break. Both dozers were soon completely overrun by the fire. The two operators on the lead dozer were critically burned but survived. The Forest Service Tractor Boss, a Forest Service firefighter, and the operator with the trail dozer did not survive. A third Forest Service firefighter with the trail dozer survived with severe burns but died later.</p> <p>In 1971, fire shelters were optional by agency policy and generally not issued to contractors...there were no fire shelters or fire-resistant blankets with any of the dozers or firefighters involved. Additionally, there was some controversy during the aftermath regarding the fact that no Safety Officer was assigned on the fire. An inquiry that involved the US Forest Service Washington Office and Regional Office was conducted regarding this issue.</p>	
Fire behavior factors that were present during the event:	
<p>Foehn wind event (Santa Ana winds) Strong evening downslope wind reversal (Sundowner winds) High temperatures and low relative humidity</p>	

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Dense chaparral fuels (over 50 years old)
Low fuel moistures
Steep terrain with chutes and narrow canyons

Operational lessons available for learning from this incident:

Be informed on fire weather forecasts, especially regarding unusual local weather factors.
Ensure equipment and tools are properly functioning and adequate for the assigned task.
Place resources in areas realistic to their wildland fire experience.
Utilize proper personal protective equipment.

Notable impact or historical significance for the wildland fire service from this incident:

The Romero Fire was the catalyst for the US Forest Service Pacific Southwest Region (Region 5) to establish the Safety FIRST Program. This effort was championed by the Regional Forester Douglas Leisz. The first phase of the program was to interview over 900 employees across the region during the winter and spring of 1972 in order to collect their concerns and suggestions. By all accounts the changes from this effort were the foundation for revamping and professionalizing the fire organization in Region 5. Some of the notable outcomes included: dedicated fire radio caches; agency employed dozer operators with dozers equipped for firefighting; additional permanent fire supervisory positions; and agency policy regarding the use of the Safety Officer position.

Links to more information on this incident:

<https://www.nwcg.gov/publications/training-courses/rt-130/case-studies/cs221>
<https://wlfalwaysremember.net/1971/10/07/romero-fire/>
<https://wildfiretoday.com/2019/09/11/romero-fire-memorial-site-rebuilt-to-honor-4-killed-in-1971-blaze/>
<https://lessons.wildfire.gov/incident/romero-fire-entrapment-fatalities-1971>

Video:

➤ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z6kf3d6Y9Ok>

This summary page was proudly provided by:

Los Padres Interagency Hotshot Crew with review by:
Mark Linane, former Superintendent Los Padres Hotshot Crew and
Foreman for the Redding Hotshot Crew on the Romero Fire

September 2023

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The memorial for the Romero Fire was rebuilt in 2019 honoring the 4 firefighters that perished:

Thomas H Klepperich, 34, Tractor Boss from the Inyo National Forest
Richard Lee Cumor, 26, Dozer Swamper from the Inyo National Forest
Delbert Dale DeLoach, 26, Dozer Swamper from the Inyo National Forest
Leonard Mineau, 43, Dozer Operator from Arroyo Grande, California

