Office of the State Fire Marshal

SLO Toro Creek Fire – Fire Plan Success Story

At 10:30 am on November 8, 2013, CAL FIRE San Luis Obispo Unit mounted a full-scale wildfire response to a 20 acre fire near Toro Creek Road and Highway 41, west of Atascadero in San Luis Obispo County. This area is characterized as mountainous terrain that is heavily covered in brush, set within the northwestern tip of the Los Padres National Forest.

During the operational planning of this fire, the West Atascadero Wildland Fire Pre-Plan map (Figure 1), created by the SLU Unit Pre-Fire Division was utilized. This topographic map, displayed at 1:16,000 scale, was completed in November 2009. The topographic lines are displayed at 40 ft intervals and are overlying a hill shade. Incident commander, Battalion Chief Phil Veneris, successfully utilized this map and explained that the map helped in "gathering situational awareness on the same operating plan". He also stated that he has utilized this and other pre-attack plan maps for a variety of other plans and incidents, such as planning vegetation management projects and search and rescue missions. He reflected that the maps are clearly marked with symbology that incident commanders need to see on fire planning maps. In particular, he was pleased to see that home address points were also included, which allowed him to immediately identify homes that needed to be evacuated. Chief Veneris further praised the SLU Unit Pre-Fire Division's creation of the pre-attack plan maps, because he noticed that other firefighters understood what they were looking at on the pre-attack plan map when he was communicating his operating plans. He said that, rather than dealing with the confusion of trying to coordinate an operating plan with various maps from various sources, Chief Veneris now has the ability to have everyone look at the same thing.

Once the operating plan was set in motion, firefighters aggressively attacked the fire from the ground and air. According to the Toro Fire Incident report, 15 fire engines, 5 fire crews, 4 air tankers, 2 helicopters and 3 dozers, and required a total of 219 fire personnel. The Toro Creek Fire burned 51 acres before it was 100% contained by 5:00pm November 9, 2013. All in all, no structures were damaged or destroyed by the fire, and no injuries were reported. Cooperating Fire Departments included Atascadero City Fire, Paso Robles Fire, San Luis Obispo City Fire, Templeton Fire, Morro Bay City Fire and Cayucos Fire, and other cooperating agencies included the US Forest Service, San Luis Obispo County Sheriff's Department, and the California Highway Patrol. Investigators later found that the Toro Creek fire was caused by an off- road vehicle. Vegetation built-up under the vehicle was ignited by the hot motor, causing the fire.

Another equally important component in this success story was the presence of the West Atascadero Fuelbreak which was completed in 2012 just north of the Toro Fire location. This fuelbreak was conducted under the CAL FIRE HFT2 grant program which was funded by the USFS. The fuelbreak was constructed using mastication equipment and a limited amount of hand crew work.

During the Toro Fire, this fuelbreak was used exactly as it was designed, to offer a strategic location from which to conduct aggressive control operations. Fortunately, the fire was stopped

by dozers and aircraft prior to reaching the fuelbreak, due in part to easy access via the fuelbreak. Quick access at the head of the fire was made possible by the fuelbreak, which allowed suppression resources, especially dozers, to quickly access the ridge on the east side of the fire and build a control line down the gas line.

The local knowledge gained through building the fuelbreak and having accurate maps and firsthand knowledge of exactly how to safely and quickly access this area was why the fire was held to just 51 acres. Were it not for the existence of the fuelbreak and the knowledge of the local road system, the dozer line would not have been constructed nearly as quickly and the fire would likely have grown substantially larger.

As a result of the Pre- Attack Map and the presence of the W. Atascadero Fuelbreak, coupled with aggressive suppression operations, the fire was held at a small size, despite significant potential due to heavy fuels and steep topography. This significantly improved firefighter safety, and greatly reduced suppression costs and resource damage.