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Thirtymile survivor calls for fire safety

He says Forest Service fails to change 05/15/02

TIM ENGSTROM – Ellensburg Daily Record

The general lack of concern for fire safety exhibited by the U.S. Forest Service firefighting leaders is a problem that has yet to be addressed properly, said Thirtymile Fire survivor Bruce Hagemeyer of Thorp.

It is a problem, he said, that plagues the entire Forest Service and is why the agency is resistant to outside investigations into firefighting deaths, such as the four young firefighters who lost their lives in the Thirtymile Fire. He said he appreciates the effort made by U.S. Sen. Maria Cantwell and Rep. Doc Hastings to call for Congress to establish an independent oversight of the agency.

“There was no reason to justify risking life,” he told the 30 people in attendance Monday at the Kiwanis Club of Ellensburg. “It wasn’t fire behavior that trapped those kids. It was human behavior.”

Hagemeyer, a building contractor, and his wife, Paula, drove up the road that led into the Chewuch Canyon July 10 of last year.

That day —the day of the infamous Thirtymile Fire —would mark the beginning of their relationship with the U.S. Forest Service and its firefighters. It is a relationship that continues to this day.

The couple were camping in the canyon and had been seeing the nearby sights from their car, he said. Returning to the canyon, they drove past three Forest Service firefighting vehicles near the entrance into the canyon but met no barricade. It was around 1 p.m.

Hagemeyer said he has since learned that the order had gone out that morning to barricade the entrance but it wasn’t done until 3 p.m.

“We had no idea this fire was burning,” Hagemeyer said.

They drove up the road to the dead end and, by now realizing a fire was raging, decided to drive back and four miles down met 14 firefighters. The firefighters, who already had been there for 15 minutes, and the Hagemeyers were trapped. It was about 4:30 p.m.

Nonetheless, no thought had been given by the incident commander to a burnover occurring, he said. It wasn’t until the last moment that he ordered people to deploy shelters.

“Paula and I looked at each other and said, ‘What shelters?’” Hagemeyer said.

They jumped into firefighter Rebecca Welch's one-person shelter, and she protected the campers. They survived while firefighters Tom Craven of Ellensburg and Jessica Johnson, Devin Weaver and Karen FitzPatrick of Yakima perished.

Following the deaths, the Forest Service "made it sound like it was erratic fire behavior," Hagemeyer said.

In fact, there was no reason for firefighters to be risking the lives of a crew meant for fighting smaller fires, Hagemeyer said. The most obvious, he said, was it was an area with nothing but timber — no human settlement in the remote region.

Furthermore, the chief of the 21-person crew (of which the 14 who became trapped were apart) had made the right decision earlier that day to pull them off the fire because it was out of control, Hagemeyer said

"By 2:15, the IC said 'We've lost this fire,'" Hagemeyer said.

The firefighters wet down their escape route and were having lunch by 3 p.m., he said.

"But things were about to change," Hagemeyer said.

Around 3:30 p.m., two engines and a truck showed and at the canyon drove past the crew and began engaging the fire.

Hagemeyer said it seems incomprehensible that they did not stop to be briefed on the fire's status. It hasn't been confirmed by the Forest Service's own investigation who gave the orders to directly engage but, he said, "someone must've given the orders."

It wasn't long until that new crew called for help with spot fires, according to Hagemeyer, and then the commander of the 21-person crew decided to engage the fire fully.

That, said Hagemeyer, was a grave mistake — a human error, not an erratic fire.

"The engines making the call for help were least knowledgeable about this fire," he said.

Robin DeMario, an information assistant for the Okanogan and Wenatchee National Forest, said in a phone interview Tuesday that the investigation into the Thirtymile Fire continues. She said any information "other than that is pure speculation."

"From the report I have been able to ascertain, there was extremely erratic fire behavior happening at the site," DeMario said. "That can't be overstated."

Hagemeyer said the crews went to fight the massive fire while violating Forest Service safety rules regarding escape routes and safe zones, Hagemeyer said. By 5:30 p.m., four people were dead.

And then the Forest Service followed similar insular practices it used after previous killer fires, such as 1994's South Canyon Fire in Colorado, he said. It refused to

speak to the public or the media and offered an investigation report that left the family and friends of the dead without complete answers and, most importantly, failed to institute meaningful changes when it comes to safety, Hagemeyer said.

The Forest Service sets safety standards so high, he said, that they disregard them throughout the agency top to bottom. He said the "simple, effective" solution is to set achievable safety standards and then do what the airlines do: If someone is caught not reporting a safety violation, it becomes a reason to be fired.

In the Forest Service "people who violate safety aren't disciplined," Hagemeyer said. "This really seems like a blueprint for disaster."

DeMario said Hagemeyer is comparing apple with oranges. "Fighting fires is different than flying an airplane."

She said after the South Canyon Fire, many safety issues were addressed and after Thirtymile Fire, more safety issues were addressed.

"Safety is our No. 1 concern for our firefighters and for the public," she said.

DeMario said people must realize that firefighting is a job with inherent hazards completely different from any other line of work.

She said the Forest Service calls on its employees to report any safety violations, whether they are cleaning campgrounds, marking trees or fighting fires.

Hagemeyer said he has reviewed Thirtymile Fire investigations, researched past fires and spoken with Forest Service firefighters and a former Forest Service fire investigator.

The parents of the four who died, he said, reject the notion that their sons and daughters were "heroes." Instead, he said they view them as "victims" of Forest Service practices.

DeMario said the Forest Services feels "they were heroes doing a job that they wanted to do. They were important. Their lives were important. We should remember them."

"I think something that has gotten lost in all this is firefighting is a hazardous job no matter where it might be," she said. "We want everyone to come home safely at the end of the shift."

