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The Cedar fire: a question of blame?

By Richard W. Halsey
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On your next excursion to Julian, stop at the Inaja Memorial just up the hill from Santa Ysabel. Take a moment and read the bronze plaque listing the 11 firefighters who were killed while battling the Inaja fire on Nov. 25, 1956. The incident report published after the disaster recommended "that a better knowledge of fire behavior must be developed as an essential means of preventing future fire tragedies."

The Cedar fire of October 2003 started approximately five miles southwest of where the Inaja fatalities occurred, in the same type of vegetation and rugged terrain. Consequently, San Diego-area fire commanders knew the risks involved when they arrived on scene with approximately 350 fire control personnel within an hour of the Cedar fire being reported: impenetrable, 12-foot-high chaparral, steep canyon walls and approaching Santa Ana wind conditions. Not a lot could be done without risking the lives of hundreds of firefighters. Then the winds picked up, blasting an explosive inferno across 18 miles by early the next morning. It was an unstoppable force.

Nine months later, after listening to grandstanding politicians, ill-informed radio commentators, and now attorneys of the Allstate Insurance Company who are considering suing local firefighting agencies for not "dispatching appropriate firefighting efforts at the incipient stage" of the Cedar fire, one would think the entire disaster was caused by the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection. According to one of Allstate's lawyers out of Chicago, "Little or nothing was done in the process when this fire was very, very approachable." Really? One wonders if this attorney has ever confronted 100-foot flames screaming down on him during a California brush fire.

The Cedar fire was reported at 5:36 p.m., Oct. 25. Claims of earlier calls have never been corroborated. Being able to assemble 350 fire control personnel into the backcountry within an hour of the report is hardly an inadequate response.

The debate over calling back the Sheriff's Department helicopter with its thimble-full bucket of water demonstrates more about political hype than understanding how fires are fought. No fire in North America has ever been put out by aircraft alone. To be effective, aerial water drops need ground personnel to complete the work.

In the case of the Cedar fire, ground crews could not safely reach the fire site. Based on the detailed computer modeling performed by the U.S. Forest Service, assuming 100 percent accuracy of helicopter water drops, aerial support would only have been effective in knocking down a third of the Cedar fire at best.

Those criticizing the decision to call back the sheriff's helicopter due to safety regulations really have no idea what they are talking about. Flying at dusk with a 1,000-pound bag of water dangling 15 to 25 feet below an aircraft, with electrical lines strung across the landscape, uncertain wind conditions and a next-to-zero chance of the mission producing desired results are not the variables conducive to acceptable risk.

So is there anyone we can blame for the Cedar fire? Firefighting agencies are easy targets because they have been charged with the task of protecting us, but at what cost? A resident from the Mussey Grade community, north of Poway, shouted out during a Ramona Water Board meeting that there should have been more firefighter fatalities if they had been doing their job right. Some folks in the Crest area claimed the fire department let their homes burn.

Let's make something perfectly clear. We live in a fire-prone environment. Nothing we can do will change that. Fire officials constantly warn us about the risks, yet we typically choose to ignore them.

One reason San Diego Fire Chief Earl Roberts resigned in 1984 was due to his frustration over the community's lack of concern of the severe fire danger present in the city. It does not take much imagination to see what could happen to Clairemont Mesa under conditions similar to the 1991 Oakland Hills fire. During a few hours, 2,900 homes were lost, one igniting every 11 seconds. During that type of event, pushed forward by Santa Ana winds, it won't matter how many helicopters San Diego County has on line.

If there is any blame for the lives and homes lost during the Cedar fire, it initially falls on the developers who built communities in high fire-risk areas and those government leaders who permitted it. But blaming doesn't get us anywhere in terms of trying to solve the fire danger we are facing today.

The ultimate responsibility for fire safety lands squarely with individual homeowners. It is their duty to do everything they can to retrofit existing structures with low fire-risk features: boxed eaves, double-glazed windows, ember-resistant attic vents, sealed gaps between roof tiles and deck, and no exposed wood surfaces, including fences and roofing.

In areas with extreme fire danger, rooftop misters or sprinklers supplied by an independent, on-site water source will also help. And most importantly, regularly maintained defensible space around the home to prevent ignition by direct heat.

The structure of defensible space, however, is critical. Simply "clearing" the land as San Diego County has recommended may create a worse situation by encouraging the growth of weedy annuals, considered flashy fuels due to their ease of ignition. It is best to reduce fuels in the 30-to 100-foot zone (depending on the situation) away from the home by heavy trimming rather than disturbing soil with aggressive clearance. And keep the pine and Eucalyptus trees far from any structure; they can be explosive. Don't put the lives of firefighters at risk trying to defend the indefensible.

We've learned a lot since the Inaja fire of 1956. Fires, when they come, are often multiple events taxing fire management resources. Chances are, firefighters are not going to be able to get to your home in time during a large event. Make it safe. Make it defensible. Let the fire burn around you. It's your responsibility.

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