

2012 CHIPS PONDEROSA FIRES AFTER ACTION REPORT

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Beginning July 23, 2012 through September 4, 2012, six wildfires (Reading, Chips, Fort Complex, Rush, Bagley, and Ponderosa Fires) were ignited in Northern California that became significant conflagrations burning approximately 494,926 acres of wild land terrain in the counties of Shasta, Tehama, Lassen, Trinity, Siskiyou, and Plumas. These fires burned for weeks prompting local health officials to request the deployment of air quality monitors by the California Air Resources Board (CARB) over concerns of diminished air quality for the counties of Shasta, Tehama, Plumas, Butte, Lassen, and Siskiyou. Two of the fires that raged became a priority for fire fighters as the path of destruction began to threaten lives and property. These were the Chips Fire in Plumas County and the Ponderosa Fire in Shasta and Tehama Counties for which the Governor proclaimed a State of Emergency and is the focus of this report.

Chips Fire

On July 29, 2012 the Chips Fire was ignited in the Plumas National Forest in Plumas County by an unknown cause. This is a Federal Response Area (FRA) and the initial attack was done by the United States Forest Service (USFS). The fire consumed 48,297 acres of the Plumas National Forest, 18,372 acres of the Lassen National Forest and 8,762 acres of private timberland.

Because of the rough terrain, the initial USFS strategy was to build a fire line and let it burn within a time-frame of one month. Initially, the Plumas County Emergency Operations Center (EOC) was inactive due to the remote location, direction of travel of the fire, and the low populace threatened. As the fire progressed, threats to life and safety heightened. The threat of fire, smoke, ash and fire suppression operations resulted in many road closures and mandatory and voluntary evacuations.

Although the Chips fire did not cause a major loss of structures the fire caused significant economic injury to private industry. Timber company losses were great, gold mining facilities were destroyed and small businesses in the area were heavily impacted. People that normally flock to the Lake Almanor/Chester area during the summer months cancelled reservations and cut vacations short. Weddings were cancelled as well as lodging and camping reservations. Many jobs were lost as the summer revenue that normally carries these full time residents through the winter was never regained.

Ponderosa Fire

On August 18, 2012 the Ponderosa Fire began as a result of a lightning strike and burned approximately 27,676 acres before the fire was fully contained and extinguished. Water quality was a concern during the fires due to fire suppression activities for which five water quality monitor stations were deployed within the burn area. A number of critical infrastructures were threatened including power lines, gas pipelines, and water delivery systems to which Pacific Gas & Electric (PG&E) and the California Utilities Emergency Association (CUEA) responded to minimize or eliminate any failures of these systems.

Statistical Summary

	Chips Fire	Ponderosa Fire
Acres Burned	75,431	27,676
Firefighter Injuries	16	7
Residence Destroyed	1	52
Outbuildings Destroyed	8	81
Evacuations	155	2,500
Shelter Populations (at peak)	57	62

Incident Period

August 18, 2012 through September 4, 2012

Summary of Key Findings

This report has identified several areas in need of improvement. The following summarizes the key findings of this report:

- Unreliable cellular communications continues to be an issue in mountainous and remote regions.
- State agencies and local jurisdictions continue to avoid using the Response Information Management System (RIMS) which impedes the development of situational awareness and a common operating picture.
- Air monitoring equipment failure was noted by CARB.
- Coordination and communications between the region and local emergency managers are often impeded because local emergency managers are assigned too many responsibilities, leaving them little time to deal with emergency management issues.
- California Emergency Management Agency (Cal EMA) region field found it difficult to maintain the use of vital equipment (i.e. computers, cell phones, etc.) during long deployments in remote areas where commercial power was not available.
- A lack of coordination between the Northern Region Emergency Operations Center (REOC) and Operational Areas (OA) often led to scheduling conflicts for OAs, especially when the REOC scheduled conference calls with the OAs.

Organizations Contributing to this Report

State Agencies and Departments

California Emergency Management Agency (Cal EMA)
California Highway Patrol (CHP)
Emergency Medical Services Authority (EMSA)
California Environmental Protection Agency (Cal EPA)
California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection (CAL FIRE)
California Department of Transportation (Caltrans)

Local Government/Operational Areas

Plumas County
Tehama County
Shasta County

Public/Private Partnerships

California Utilities Emergency Association (CUEA)