Jesusita Fire – Final Summary

Incident Complexity and Incident Command Decisions The Santa Barbara front country historically has been a challenging location to fight a wildland fire. Based on the mid slope location of the Jesusita Fire, potential winds, and proximity to urbanized areas, the decision to order an Incident Management Team very early was an excellent decision. Unified Command was initiated very early as well, and the ordering of the CAL FIRE Incident Command Team was based on predicted fire spread.

Extended Attack Incident Management Challenges The early decision for a Type I Incident Command Team illustrates the challenges for the Extended Attack incident management on the evening of May 5 and during the day on May 6, 2009. Ramping up quickly, and providing incident management prior to the full Incident Command Team was a challenge. Setting up an Incident Base, producing the Incident Action Plan (IAP), resource ordering, incident staffing, frequency coordination, correct weather forecasts, and allocating staged resources were challenges for the Extended Attack management. The contingency plan developed for this area during the 2008 Zaca Fire was not utilized.

Operations Section and Branch Director Interaction The Operations Section Chief directed the actions of two perimeter branches and one structure protection branch. As the fire behavior increased on the afternoon of May 6, 2009, and the fire began moving quickly down slope toward the Mission Canyon area, the functions of perimeter control and structure protection became in conflict. Perimeter control branches directed their resources out of the area due to the extreme fire behavior, and into a safe area. The same increased fire behavior increased the threat to the structures in Mission Canyon, and at the same time perimeter control forces were leaving, additional structure protection resources were being requested and placed in the area.

Fire Behavior was Underestimated The early May time period as well as the observed fire behavior prior to the surfacing of the winds on May 6 led many fire suppression resources to believe control objectives could be easily met. The backing fire that was completely consuming mature stands of chamise illustrated the low fuel moistures in the fuel bed. This was observed by many, but this did not trigger any concern over fire suppression operations.

Structure Protection Resource Deployment Decisions The structure protection of Mission Canyon and other surrounding areas was a priority for the extended attack incident commanders. Fire suppression resources assigned to structure protection had opportunities to survey or triage the areas, and develop a resource deployment strategy. In most cases, inadequate safety zones were

identified or travel times to a designated safety zone were unrealistic due to the narrow roads and congestion. Trigger points or decision points were met for withdrawal of resources, but conditions had deteriorated or time was now inadequate to move to the safety zones.

Structures Utilized as Primary Safety Zones Due to the lack of or distance to a true safety zone, various structures were identified by fire suppression resources as a safety zone.

Decisions to Stay and Defend Structures The decisions by company officers and chief officers to "hunker in" or stay and defend structures in untenable conditions led to the burnover and near misses. Tactical decision to utilize hydrants and lay supply line also led to loss of mobility and the lack of ability to move out of the area to a safety zone.

Use of Breathing Apparatus During Structure Protection Breathing Apparatus were used by fire suppression resources during structure protection. To remain in a position that a breathing apparatus must be used to provide structure protection is a situation that places wildland firefighters in an untenable condition. Movement of personnel and resources to an appropriate safety zone would be warranted. It is understood that there may be times when multiple structures are burning that appropriate airway protection can include breathing apparatus, but only within the capability and training of the firefighters. There is no doubt that the wearing of the breathing apparatus by VNC FC-54 and VNC FF-54 protected their airways and saved their lives. But, to preplan the staging of breathing apparatus inside the structure for usage as a last resort should never replace the removal of personnel and equipment to a safety zone.