

Why GAO Did This Study

In 2009, a wildland fire in the Angeles National Forest in California known as the Station Fire led to the death of two firefighters, destroyed 89 homes and dozens of other structures, and burned more than 160,000 acres. The Department of Agriculture's Forest Service played a key role in managing the firefighting response. Some firefighters, area residents, and others have raised questions about how the Forest Service responded to the fire. GAO was asked to evaluate the response to the Station Fire. Accordingly, this report (1) describes key events in the Station Fire and the Forest Service's response, including strategies, tactics, and assets used; (2) examines key issues arising from this response; and (3) identifies lessons the Station Fire offers for wildland fire management in the future, including lessons specific to Southern California. GAO reviewed agency documents and interviewed officials from the Forest Service and from nonfederal firefighting agencies involved in the response, as well as other parties.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that the Forest Service (1) clarify when it expects agency firefighting assets be used instead of assets from other sources and (2) document the steps it plans to take in response to the lessons identified in its review of the Station Fire. The Forest Service generally agreed with GAO's findings and recommendations.

STATION FIRE

Forest Service's Response Offers Potential Lessons for Future Wildland Fire Management

What GAO Found

The Station Fire started on the afternoon of August 26, 2009, in steep terrain covered with highly flammable vegetation during very dry conditions. After escaping initial containment efforts, the Station Fire underwent periods of rapid growth and extreme fire behavior over the following several days, ultimately threatening thousands of homes in nearby communities. In response, the Forest Service and local agencies, such as Los Angeles County, deployed thousands of firefighters and hundreds of firefighting assets, including fire engines, helicopters, and air tankers. The fire's extreme behavior, however, often prevented firefighters from attacking it directly, instead leading them to employ tactics farther away from the fire in their efforts to protect life, homes, and natural resources. The fire was contained on October 16, 2009.

Among the key issues raised by firefighters, area residents, and others regarding the Forest Service's response to the Station Fire were questions over the adequacy of firefighting assets, strategies, and tactics used. For example, some observers questioned (1) why the Forest Service did not use certain aircraft that were available, including night-flying helicopters operated by Los Angeles County; (2) whether the agency followed appropriate procedures in ordering firefighting assets, including whether it mobilized its own assets rather than local ones in certain instances, even though its assets were located farther away and would take longer to arrive; and (3) whether more action could have been taken to protect homes in Big Tujunga Canyon, an area where dozens of homes were destroyed. GAO's review of available information was able to clarify some of these issues by, for example, identifying the location and availability of certain aircraft and other assets. In other cases, insufficient information was available to fully ascertain the facts—such as the exact procedures followed when ordering certain assets. Also, for those concerns that centered on a difference of opinion, such as whether additional actions could have been safely taken to protect homes, GAO was able to review the various perspectives of observers but had no method for addressing these differences through analysis. While some observers were critical of the Forest Service's response to the Station Fire, others commended its response, highlighting the difficult conditions confronting firefighters and the thousands of threatened homes that ultimately were protected.

The Station Fire offers several important lessons that may help improve wildland fire response in the future, including in Southern California. These lessons include the importance of (1) determining the appropriate role of night-flying aircraft, (2) having transparent processes for ordering and mobilizing firefighting assets, (3) tracking aircraft water and retardant deliveries, (4) predicting fire behavior under a variety of conditions, and (5) having systematic methods to identify needed firefighting assets. The agency has taken action to implement some lessons, including changing its night-flying policy and the asset-ordering practices at the Angeles National Forest. The agency has not, however, clarified its expectations about when its own assets are to be ordered instead of other agencies'. In addition, while the agency prepared a "lessons-learned" report after the fire, this report does not fully describe other actions the agency expects to take to implement lessons from the fire or time frames for doing so—potentially representing a lost opportunity to capitalize on the Station Fire's lessons.