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United States Department of Agriculture



The South Canyon Fire

On July 2, 1994, during a year of drought and at a time of low humidity and record high temperatures, lightning ignited a fire 7 miles west of Glenwood Springs, Colorado. The fire was reported to the Bureau of Land Management on July 3 as being in South Canyon, but later reports placed it near the base of Storm King Mountain. The fire began on a ridge, which was paralleled by two canyons or deep drainages. In its early stages, the fire burned in pinyon-juniper fuels and was thought to have little potential for spread.

Dry lightning storms had started 40 new fires in BLM's Grand Junction District in the 2 days before the South Canyon fire started, requiring the District to set priorities for initial attack. Highest priority was given to fires threatening life, residences, structures, utilities, and to fires with the greatest potential for spread. At the time the South Canyon fire was first reported, all initial attack firefighting resources on the Grand Junction District were committed to the highest priority fires. In response to the BLM's request, the Garfield County Sheriff's Office and White River National Forest monitored the fire.

Over the next 2 days the South Canyon fire increased in size, the public expressed more concern about it, and some initial attack resources were assigned. On the afternoon of July 4 the District sent two engines. Arriving at 6:30 p.m. at the base of the ridge near I-70, the crew sized up the fire but decided to wait until morning to hike to the fire and begin firefighting efforts.

The next morning, a seven person BLM/Forest Service crew hiked 2 1/2 hours to the fire, cleared a helicopter landing area and started building a fireline on its southwest side. During the day an air tanker dropped retardant on the fire. In the evening the crew left the fire to repair their chainsaws. Shortly thereafter, eight smokejumpers parachuted to the fire and received instructions from the Incident Commander to continue constructing the fireline. The fire had crossed the original fireline, so they began a second fireline from Helispot 1 downhill on the east side of the ridge. After midnight they abandoned this work due to the darkness and the hazards of rolling rocks.

On the morning of July 6, the BLM/Forest Service crew returned to the fire and worked with the smokejumpers to clear a second helicopter landing area. Later that morning eight more smokejumpers parachuted to the fire and were assigned to build the fireline on the west flank. Later, ten Prineville Interagency Hotshot Crew members arrived, and nine joined the smokejumpers in line construction. Upon arrival, the remaining members of the hotshot crew were sent to help reinforce the fireline on the ridgetop.

At 3:20 p.m. a dry cold front moved into the fire area. As winds and the fire activity increased, the fire made several rapid runs with 100 foot flame lengths within the existing burn. At 4:00 p.m. the fire crossed the bottom of the west drainage and spread up the drainage to the east side beneath the firefighters and moved onto steep slopes and into dense, highly flammable gambel oak. Within seconds a wall of flame raced up the hill toward the firefighters on the west flank fireline. Failing to outrun the flames, 12 firefighters perished. Two helitack crew members on the top of the ridge also died when they tried to outrun the fire to the northwest. The remaining 35 firefighters survived by escaping out the east drainage or seeking a safety zone and deploying their fire shelters.

Storm King Mountain Memorial Trail

The Storm King Mountain Memorial Trail is a memorial to those who lost their lives here and a tribute to all firefighters. Its purpose is to help us understand what happened here and allow us to reflect on the lessons we have learned so we can prevent future tragedies. As you hike the trail you will also have an opportunity to experience some of what it is like to be a firefighter. You'll encounter steep slopes, sometimes unstable footing. It will be hard work, and you will be glad for the rest benches along the way.

The main trail will take you to an observation point from which you can see most of the events of the fire. Beyond the main trail is a path that will take you to these sites. This path is very similar to what the firefighters may have taken as they struggled up the ridge with 30 pound packs on their backs. Because it is not a constructed trail, you may stumble sometimes, you may fall, and you may be temporarily unsure of where you are going, just like the firefighters. This may not be the kind of hike everyone is used to, but we maintain the path in this condition specifically to pay tribute to the firefighters and acknowledge the conditions they work under.

We need your help protecting the fragile slopes and sites here and ask that you stay on the trails and paths. Because of the rugged terrain and unstable soils, hiking here is extremely strenuous. Be prepared with sturdy shoes, clothing appropriate to the weather and plenty of water.