WILDLAND FIRE COMMUNICATIONS: LESSONS LEARNED

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Levels of Communications

Before and during a fire, there are several levels of communications that will likely need to occur.

- Mutual sharing of information between water utility and fire responders.
  - Fire status
  - Critical infrastructure
  - Potential impacts
  - Advance warnings, trigger points
  - Protection measures
  - Utilization of ICS

Levels of Communications

- Communications within the utility organization.
  - Employee safety
  - Water supply contingencies
  - Assignment of roles
  - Fire information: relayed from daily briefings
  - Keeping elected officials informed

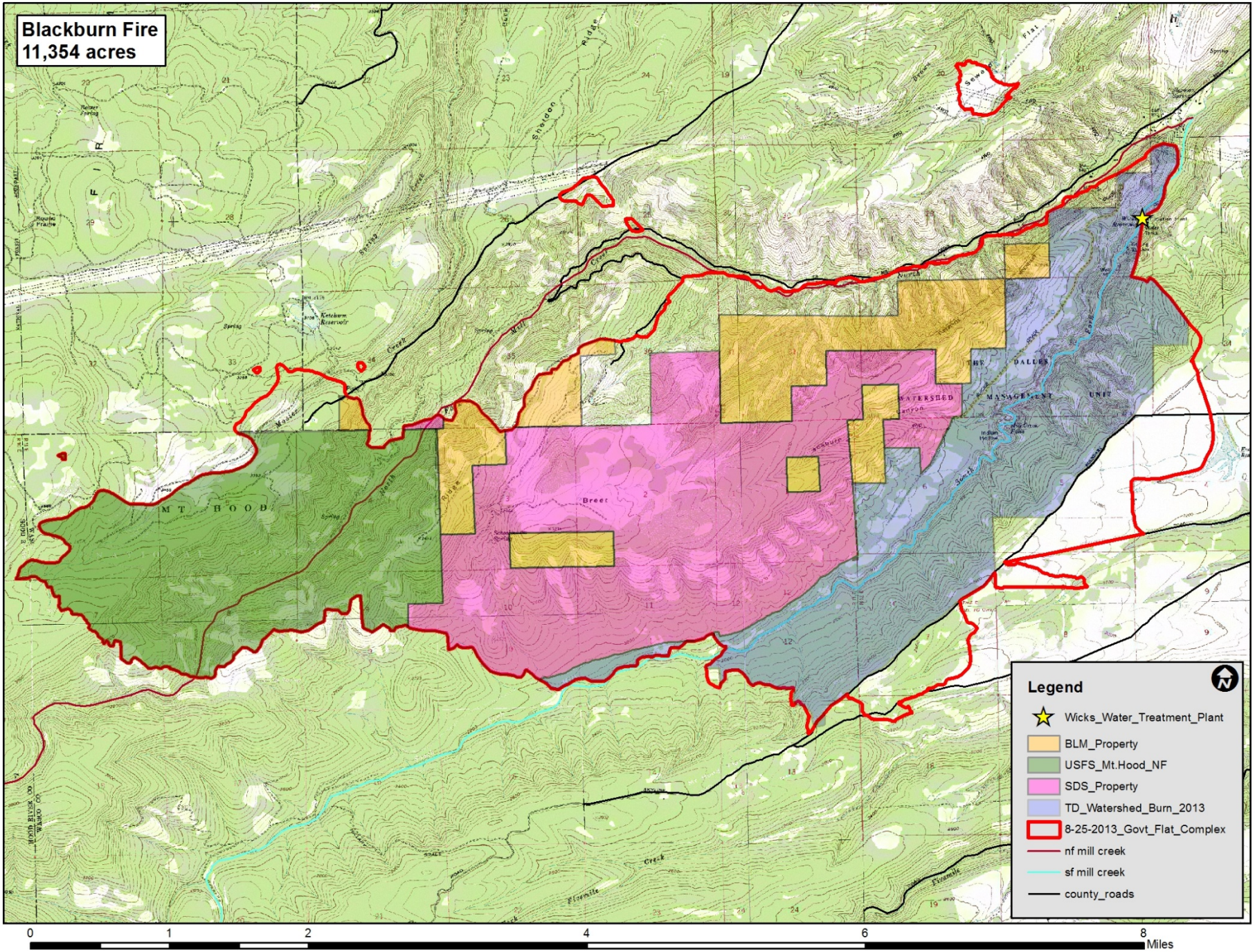
- Communications with water customers.
  - Water supply availability and safety
  - Water supply contingencies – both utility and citizens

Levels of Communications

- Communications with regulatory agencies.
  - Water quality standards violations, or potential violations
  - Public notifications
  - Water supply availability

Relationships/Partnerships

- Get to know your neighbors.
- Understanding adjacent land ownership will guide your relationship building.
  - Federal ownership, fire response will likely be led US Forest Service or BLM
  - State or private ownership, fire response will be from ODF (wildland), State Fire Marshal (structural), local fire department or district, mutual aid responders
- Developing relationships as part of pre-emergency planning will greatly facilitate emergency response communications.
- Be familiar with Incident Command System (ICS).


Blackburn Fire
11,354 acres
Legend
Wicks_Water_Treatment_Plant
BLM_Property
USFS_Mt.Hood_NF
SDS_Property
TD_Watershed_Burn_2013
8-25-2013_Govt_Flat_Complex
nf mill creek
sf mill creek
county_roads
0
1
2
4
6
8
Miles

Partnerships/Relationships

Existing relationships for City of The Dalles.

- 1912 Agreement with US Secretary of Ag
- 1972 MOU with USFS
- Close working relationships with local ODF, SWCD, NRCS, fire district
- Maintain open communications with OHA and DEQ
- Member of local Watershed Council
- Agreements with industrial forest and private landowners

2013 Initial Attack

First notice of lightning strike fire start in Watershed from ODF to utility.

- Cell phone call from on-scene ODF fire commander to Public Works Director (have numbers of partners in phones)
- Site-specific information shared by radio comms during initial attack (vehicle or portable radios with responding agency channels)

2013 Extended Response

- Joint ODF and State Fire Marshal Incident Management Team responded.
- City staff introduced to IC; received ICS contact info (Ops Section).
  - Shared water system info/concerns
- City attended daily/twice-daily IMT briefings.
- Information from briefings shared with affected City staff and elected officials.
- Advisory contact with OHA Drinking Water Program
- Shared fire status updates regularly with water treatment plant staff (evacuation concerns)

Water Supply Concerns

During the fire:

- WTP operation or evacuation –
  - Plan for back-up water supply if needed (City)
- Retardant –
  - Coordination with IC Aerial Attack planners (IC)
  - Field observation of retardant use (IMT/City)
  - Monitored raw water quality at WTP 3x/day during fire – visual, cyanide (City)
- Ash/smoke –
  - After a couple days of high-intensity burning and heavy smoke, received "smoky taste/odor" complaints
  - Conducted WTP and dist'n system sampling, increased blending with groundwater, added PAC at WTP (City)
- Fuel/lubricants from fire fighting equipment
  - Minimize creek crossings (IMT/City)
  - Secondary containment and spill pads for all pumps (IMT)

Public Outreach

- Issued press releases related to water supply/safety
  - Smoky water issue
  - Temporary water fill sites for affected residences
  - Messaging was limited to water supply issues, not fire status as that was the role of the IMT PIO
- Emailed regular updates to elected officials.
- Presented water supply information in Public Information Meetings conducted by IMT

Recovery Planning

- About 1 week into the fire, City began discussing watershed rehabilitation options with USFS.

- Convened Watershed Rehab Working Group immediately after the fire was contained; relied on existing relationships to facilitate outreach.

Lessons Learned

- Develop contacts and form relationships early, <u>before they are needed in an event!!</u>
- Maintain enough communication over time so that contact information is current – contact names, cell phone numbers, radio frequencies.
- Make communications within the organization as high of a priority as outside communications.
- Honor the public's need for information, especially as it relates to the safety of their drinking water.

Wildland Fire Communications: Lessons Learned

Questions

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