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Firefighters' Group Releases New Interactive Report on the Largest Wildfire in California State History

The Mendocino Complex Fire Demonstrates the Need to Use Science-Based Risk Assessment Tools to Avoid Futile Firefighting Actions in Remote Wildlands

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EUGENE, OR – Firefighters United for Safety, Ethics, and Ecology (FUSEE) released a report in StoryMap format, ***“We Had to Do Something: Futility and Fatality in Fighting the 2018 Mendocino Complex Fire,”*** on Tuesday, September 10, 2019 analyzing the record-breaking Ranch and River Fires that burned across 459,123 acres mostly in the Mendocino National Forest in California. Fire managers felt pressure to “do something” to stop the spread of the Ranch Fire, attempting a hastily planned burnout along a bulldozer fireline. But this action contradicted the advice from Forest Service risk management experts who warned that aggressive firefighting tactics had low probabilities of success given record-level fuel dryness at the time. A crew of firefighters was nearly entrapped and had to run for their lives when, as predicted, the wildfire burned across a dozerline. On another section of the wildfire, a firefighter was killed and the rest of his crew severely injured when retardant slurry from a very large airtanker was dumped on top of their position.

"Firefighter safety is the highest priority on every fire management action, and one of the best means of safeguarding crews is to avoid putting them into harm's way when conditions make conventional firefighting both unsafe and unlikely to succeed," said Timothy Ingalsbee, executive director of Firefighters United for Safety, Ethics, and Ecology (FUSEE). "Incident Commanders on the Ranch Fire chose to ignore risk assessment experts who warned them of the folly of their plans that were knowingly futile and nearly fatal."

FUSEE's web-based interactive report features narratives, maps, and photos from official sources, including internal accident investigations and risk assessment analyses. It is one of the first efforts to combine a timeline of management decisions with risk assessments and

significant events on the Mendocino Complex Fire. The report critically examines the Forest Service's decision-making rationale in which fire managers placed firefighters at greater risk implementing an aggressive firefighting plan known to have a low likelihood of success due to inadequate preparation time, record-level flammability conditions, and rugged terrain features in the remote wildland area. In an area with fire-adapted ecosystems but few social values at risk, firefighters were exposed to a level of risk incommensurate with the minimal values needed to protect.

Key Points of the Report:

- The Ranch Fire of the Mendocino Complex burned largely in the Mendocino National Forest and Snow Mountain Wilderness Area--far away from homes or communities.
- Fire managers ignored science-based risk assessments of the costs and benefits of fire containment options, and pursued more aggressive suppression tactics despite record-setting fire danger over a crucial one-month period in August of 2018.
- The unified command of CalFire and Federal agency fire managers created ongoing tension and confusion due to conflicting organizational missions and management cultures.
- Federal fire managers must shift priorities from fighting fires in backcountry wildlands, and instead, focus suppression resources on protecting homes while helping frontcountry communities prepare for recurring prescribed and wildland fires.
- State and local wildland firefighters and the citizens they serve need to understand the human and environmental tradeoffs of attempting aggressive suppression for fire exclusion in fire-adapted ecosystems, and recognize that global warming has altered the fire environment and affected conventional firefighting strategies and tactics.
- A new paradigm of Ecological Fire Management offers more options and opportunities to protect rural communities and restore fire-adapted ecosystems for future generations.

The full report is available for download at <https://arcg.is/rSuWL>

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FUSEE is a nonprofit organization that conducts public education and policy advocacy promoting safe, ethical, ecological wildland fire management. FUSEE members include current and former wildland firefighters, fire managers and scientists, fire educators and students, forest conservationists, rural homeowners and other interested citizens. We strive to inform and empower fire management workers and their citizen supporters to become torchbearers for the new paradigm of ecological fire management.