

February 17, 2006

**Initial Report**

**North Central Texas Initial Attack**

**Hildreth Road Dozer Accident**

**February 9, 2006**

*This report is intended to inform interested parties, for a safety and training tool, and as an aid to preventing future occurrences. Because it is published on a short time frame, the information contained herein is subject to revision as further investigation is conducted and additional information is developed.*

## **SUMMARY**

On Thursday, February 9, 2006, at approximately 1943 hours, firefighter Steve Burns, age 43, was run over by a Tractor Plow while directing the dozer through a wooded area with dense brush. The dozer operator called for help using his handheld radio. Upon arrival at the scene one crewmember called 9-1-1 using a cellular telephone. The crewmembers initiated first-aid and kept the injured firefighter comfortable until the ambulance crew arrived. Upon initial assessment, the EMS crew determined that the injuries warranted immediate medical evacuation by helicopter. The firefighter was transported by ambulance to a landing zone approximately 300 yards from the accident site. At approximately 2040 hours he was flown to the hospital where he is currently receiving treatment for his injuries.

This accident happened during the North Central Texas Initial Attack of the Hildreth Road Fire in the vicinity of Decatur, Texas. Mr. Burns is an employee of United States Forest Service (USFS) from the Deschutes National Forest. He was in Texas assisting with the fire season of 2006 as a Field Observer (FOBS).

## **SEQUENCE OF EVENTS**

On the afternoon of February 9, at 1530 hours, Mr. Burns was dispatched and arrived on location at 1615. He tied in with the local Incident Commander (IC) on the fire at 1630, and completed traversing (GPS) at 1800, determining the fire was 50.7 acres. Official sunset for that day was 1810 hours.

Two dozer units were assigned to put in a fire break starting along the east flank working toward the north in tandem. Dozer unit E-287 was the lead dozer with dozer E-346 improving line behind him. Swamper E-346 was leading dozer E-287 along the north flank and Swamper E-287 was trailing dozer E-346. A decision was made by the Taskforce Leader to have dozer E-346 back track the east flank mopping up. When the task was completed; dozer E-346 was directed by the Division Supervisor to return to the staging area and remain there. Swamper E-287 remained behind to help engine E-345 mop up hot spots on the east flank.

The Division Supervisor, Safety Officer, Taskforce Leader, dozer E-346, and the Field Observer (Steve Burns) were all present at the staging area. At approximately 1830, the Division Supervisor and Taskforce Leader directed dozer E-346 to improve a line that a local dozer had put in on the west flank. According to witness statements, Mr. Burns stated since he had been around the fire twice, he knew where the existing dozer line and fence were located, and would show dozer E-346 where to start. Mr. Burns was directing the dozer and had stopped E-346 near a dry creek to find a crossing. Mr. Burns then radioed E-346 to come toward the light (on his helmet) and wait for him on the dozer line. According to witness statements, after crossing the creek bed, Mr. Burns directed dozer E-346 to create a new line instead of improving the old line. Dozer E-346 decided to knock down brush to the fence line and then improve the line back to the

north. Mr. Burns was directing from the front of the dozer through thick brush consisting of post oak, cedar, elm and green briar.

At approximately 1930 hours, dozer E-346 received a radio transmission from Mr. Burns to again, come toward the light. E-346 dozer started in first gear toward the light of the helmet. The operator of Dozer E-346 indicated that the light appeared intermittent either from the thickness of the brush or from Mr. Burns turning his head. The dozer operator lost sight of Mr. Burns' light and thought that he had cleared the area. The operator of dozer E-346 continued forward approximately 25 feet then stopped and called for Mr. Burns, since he had lost visual contact. Dozer E-346 operator then turned and saw a light on the ground behind the dozer, and got off the dozer to look for Mr. Burns. The dozer operator found the helmet belonging to Mr. Burns and noticed him lying on his back approximately ten feet behind the dozer. At approximately 1943 dozer E-346 operator used his radio to ask for emergency assistance. The Safety Officer and Taskforce Leader arrived at the scene at 1945 hours. The Taskforce Leader then called 9-1-1 for emergency medical assistance.

A first responder from E-345 (Engine) arrived at the accident scene and monitored vital signs until EMS arrived at approximately 2010. After an assessment by EMS, Life Flight was requested for immediate evacuation. EMS crew secured Mr. Burns to a backboard and transported him by ambulance to a suitable landing zone. Soon after Life Flight arrived Mr. Burns was transported by helicopter to the hospital, departing at approximately 2040 hours.

According to witness statements and evidence at the scene, the investigation team concluded that the injured party passed underneath the dozer between the tracks.

## **FUEL**

Fuels for this fire were dense pockets of Cedar, Post Oak, Elm, and Green Briar (vines with thorns) with scattered openings of short grass.

Local resources were in place by the time fire crews arrived on scene and the fire was at approximately 80 percent containment.

Witnesses stated fire behavior included intermediate torching, with heavy fuels burning in the interior.

Weather predictions indicated a cold front to enter the area with high winds expected. If the fire were to reignite, in these conditions, fire could move at 240 feet/minute with 6 to 7 foot flame lengths in the grass fuel types and 120 feet/minute with 20 foot flame lengths. Probability of ignition in both fuel types was 40-50%.

## **TOPOGRAPHY**

The accident area is a generally flat area with some low ground toward water sources. Vegetation in the area consists of dense to sparse wooded areas and intermittent open fields.

## **WEATHER**

The temperature: 61°F  
Relative Humidity: 30%  
Winds: 11 MPH gusting to 18 MPH

**Photograph showing thickness of the understory vegetation**



Photograph showing clearance under dozer

