

LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE HERRIMAN FIRE OF SEPTEMBER 19, 2010

NOTES FROM A MEETING WITH ROSE CANYON STAKE LEADERS

21 OCTOBER 2010

SCENARIO

The Machine Gun Fire was started by military weapons practice on Camp Williams on Sunday, September 19, 2010. High winds (50 mph +) carried the fire northward to the community of Herriman, Utah. Late Sunday 1600 homes were evacuated in the Rose Canyon Stake on the south edge of Herriman. Fortunately only 3 homes were destroyed. Rose Canyon Stake was the only stake involved in the evacuation.

EMERGENCY PLAN

The Herriman City plan is based on LDS stake boundaries.

The 5 stakes in Herriman have a very good relationship with the City of Herriman and work together in their emergency planning. Rose Canyon Stake became the model for the other 4 stakes.

When developing the stake emergency plan, stake leaders prepared for a possible fire on Camp Williams. Also, they were inspired to plan and conduct an exercise to test the evacuation of their stake in a wildfire scenario. It was felt that this preparation was very helpful in their response.

Rose Canyon Stake has a block captain organization and many CERT-trained members. They felt that the block captain system works. One concern about the block captain organization is how well it will function during working hours when many of the block captains are not at home. This concern was not tested because the fire occurred on a Sunday when most block captains were at home.

The consensus was that block captains were more effective in responding to the needs of members than home teachers, because they were nearby. Of those attending the "lessons learned" meeting, 4 were contacted by home teachers, 6 by block captains. Some did not know who their block captains were. People generally did not think about their home teachers or home teaching families, but were focused on the needs of their neighbors.

Stake leaders asked about the Church attitude toward having a "sister stake" to provide mutual support and sheltering of evacuees in a disaster. In the past they have worked with the Sandy Willow Creek Stake as a "sister" stake. They felt the relationship was mutually beneficial.

LEADERSHIP

Pres. Davey stated that he felt very comforted and strengthened knowing that Church Headquarters was standing by to give his stake whatever support was needed. The 800 MHz radios, which gave the president direct contact with the Herriman EOC and with Welfare Services leaders, were highly valued.

The stake president does not want the bishops to be obligated to go door to door checking on members. That function should be performed by the block captains, leaving the bishop free to focus on decisions and more critical duties.

One bishop was serving his first day as bishop.

Within a one hour period 15 stake presidents contacted Pres. Davey offering assistance.

Pres. Davey commented that the magnetic signs (EMERGENCY SERVICES—LDS CHURCH) on his car were very helpful in getting through roadblocks. There were many roadblocks throughout the community, not just at the perimeter. Valid identification was essential to gain access to the area where the Herriman Emergency Operations Center (EOC), shelters, and responders were located. (There was no access allowed to the evacuated area)

Pres. Davey said that they were just at the point of trying to decide how to feed the emergency responders (firefighters, police, medical personnel, etc) when they received a call from Church headquarters offering to provide food service for the responders. The food service provided by the Church and the Southern Baptists removed a significant load from the shoulders of Church and community leaders.

There was a concern expressed about UFA (Unified Fire Authority) personnel brushing aside efforts of citizens to pass along vital information regarding the fire.

COMMUNICATION

Cellular phone and wired telephone service was generally non-existent from the time it was evident that the fire would require an evacuation until the situation had normalized the following day—basically the time period when communication is most needed. As the situation stabilized it became easier to make calls. During the overload period some residents were able to place landline phone calls to out-of-state locations when local calls could not be made.

FRS radios were not effective. Their range was too limited in the hilly terrain.

Basic community and Church communication was provided by an amateur radio network using simplex operation. The Rose Canyon Stake emergency communications specialist was net control and operated from the Herriman EOC, performing a dual role in Church and Herriman City communications. This arrangement was ideal for coordination between the community and the Church.

It was generally felt that communication of directives from Herriman Fire Incident Command to the citizens could have been more efficient. The weak link was between radio communication personnel and the block captains.

The stake president asked if it would be possible for Church headquarters to place several 800 MHz radios in the stake for future emergencies. This is not practical considering the hundreds of stakes on the Wasatch Front. (Church headquarters will maintain a small cache of radios that can be issued to stakes as needed for emergency communications.) President Davey stated that he wanted an amateur radio operator assigned to be with him at all times during any future disaster.

A list of trained ham radio operators in the community was available and could have been used to assign radio operators to assist with communications, but apparently was overlooked. Stake leaders resolved to better utilize this resource in future events.

There was a critical need for accurate and timely information during the event. It was suggested that an information net be established for future events.

Many rumors were circulated during the height of the fire. One rumor was that whole neighborhoods were seen going up in flames. Leaders and communicators wisely decided not to pass along this information without confirmation.

Before evacuating, some families posted their family status on Facebook, which was thought to be very helpful to concerned family members.

There were no power outages during the event. The internet remained functional, so responders and citizens were able to use internet-based communications.

INDIVIDUAL AND FAMILY RESPONSE

It appeared that most families had no evacuation destination identified. Evacuation plans were made at the last minute with little time for preparation.

Some families reported not having enough gas in the tank of the family car to evacuate. This situation confirmed the wisdom of the admonition to always keep a minimum of a half tank of fuel in your vehicles.

A list of members with special needs would have been very helpful to leaders charged with caring for members.

As the fire approached the community, families were notified to stand by for a possible evacuation. However, some families, instead of preparing for the potential evacuation, spent their time watching the fire. When the notification to evacuate came, they did not have sufficient time to organize and load their vehicles.

Many families chose to leave their 72 hour kits and focus on irreplaceable items, knowing that their home and its contents might be destroyed. It was recommended that gathering up irreplaceable items—documents, family history, photographs, etc.--be organized with each family member assigned to pick up and load specific items.

Stake and ward leaders felt that there is still work to be done to educate members on emergency preparedness and response, particularly on how to better protect their property from wildfires. (A DVD distributed by the US Forest Service on how wildfires spread and how to protect property was left with stake leaders.)