

Southside Trailer Fire

Texas A&M Forest Service (TFS) resources were requested for assistance on the South Side Alpha Fire in Childress County in early November. Upon arriving at the incident, resources identified a staging area and unloaded their equipment. Shortly after unloading the dozers, the fire began to impact the staging area, which resulted in damage to one transport unit and two trailers.

“Bad things seem to happen on small fires” TFLD

Narrative

Due to local COVID-19 impacts, resources were requested to backfill the Childress Task Force equipment on November 12, 2020. Resources ordered were one Task Force Leader (TFLD), one Heavy Equipment Boss (HEQB), two Initial Attack Dozer Operators (DZIA), and one Firefighter Type 2 (FFT2).



Picture 1: Smoke column from Southside fires as crews were approaching.

On November 14th, 2020 the National Weather Service issued a Red Flag Warning for the Childress area due to the cured fuels and impending fire weather conditions. At 12:58, TFS was dispatched to a fire seven miles south of Childress off of Highway 83. Observed weather conditions at that time:

Temp: 82
Wind Speed/Direction: 25-40, W/SW
Relative Humidity: 14%

Fuels in the area of the fire consisted of tall grass, intermixed with Juniper and Sage. When the TFLD received the request for assistance, he traveled directly to the fire location. The remainder of the resources retrieved the equipment before going en route.

At approximately 13:10, TFLD arrived on scene, tied in with the Incident Commander (local IC) from the Childress Fire Department (CFD), and began to size up the fire. The local IC informed the TFLD that there were two fires. One fire was on the north side of FM 2103 and the second was located on the south side of FM 2103. The local IC also identified an area to stage transports and unload the dozers. The potential staging area was located on the north side of FM 2103, in the black, and near where a CFD water tender was staged. The local IC requested that the TFLD separate the two dozers and engage one on each fire. Due to the high fire behavior spreading rapidly and the threat to residential structures on the northern fire, the decision was made to keep both dozers in tandem working the left flank of the fire heading north.



Picture 2: TFS staging area after fire burned through.

However, TFLD requested that a local engine monitor the fire on the south side of FM 2103. This was a direct request from TFLD to a local engine. The initial size up of the southern fire was approximately 2-4 acres with minimal fire behavior. At this time, the TFLD made the decision to name the southern fire South Side Bravo and the northern fire South Side Alpha.

At 13:35, the HEQB, FFT2, and both DZIAs arrived on scene, with two tractor-trailer transports, each hauling a Type 2 Dozer. The HEQB was in a $\frac{3}{4}$ ton pick-up, and the FFT2 operated the service truck. Upon arriving on scene, the HEQB was briefed by the TFLD. During this briefing, HEQB was informed by TFLD that South Side Bravo was not a huge concern

at the time, with minimal fire activity, and the priority would be South Side Alpha where structures were threatened and the fire was very active. It was also relayed to the HEQB that there was a possible area to stage transports behind the CFD water tender. Due to the ground being uneven, which could potentially create issues when coupling/uncoupling the trailers, it was determined by HEQB and the DZIAs that it would not be feasible to unload both dozers at that location, and they continued west along FM 2103 to find an alternative staging area.

“You have to be real careful about where you put those bigger transports. It takes more time.” -DZIA

After travelling west $\frac{1}{2}$ mile, the HEQB and the DZIAs identified an area to unload on the north side of FM 2103. Although the site had continuous short grass, their plan was to unload both dozers and construct line around the transports. The crew could see the South Side Bravo fire and minimal fire behavior was observed. CFD also informed the crew that South Side Bravo had already been managed and there were only a couple heavies burning interior.

After unloading the dozers, both DZIAs had trouble unfolding the VPAT folding blades on the dozer and pinning them into place. These specific models of dozer are equipped with a collapsible blade to reduce overhang when loaded on a trailer.

At this time, multiple members of the task force noticed fire activity on South Side Bravo intensifying. The fire advanced out of the draw and into fine fuels, being pushed by winds that were quartering towards

the transports. The fire began spotting across FM 2103, with multiple embers landing under the vehicles in cured grass.

There were multiple attempts to notify command and request assistance from an engine. One of the DZIAs was able to contact CFD on their primary channel and informed them of their location and the need for water support. With fire underneath the transports, the HEQB took action to extinguish the flames. HEQB inquired about using Tractor Operator Protection System (TOPS) but was informed that there are no TOPS units on the D6 dozers. The HEQB grabbed the fire extinguisher from his pick-up and began to take action. At this point, much of the damage had already been done to the transports, and the fire extinguisher was only able to take care of a few of the spots.

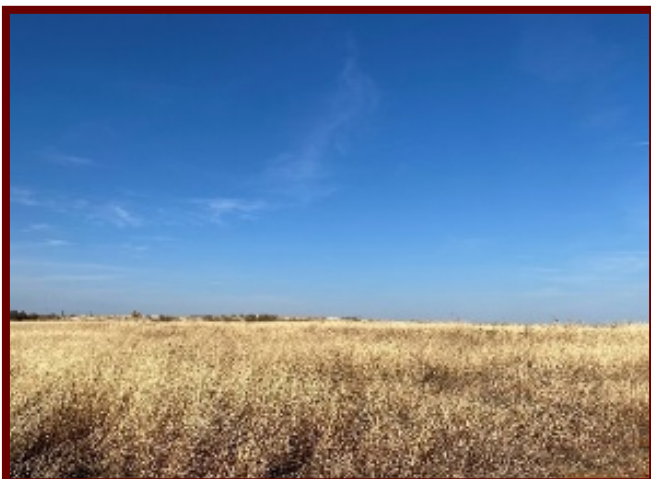


Picture 3: The disabled Trailer after fire was suppressed.

While the HEQB worked to suppress the spot fires, the DZIAs were able to finish securing their blades. DZIA 1 began to push a check line around the transports, but noticed a code on the dozer that required him to shut down. At this time, he noticed that a mud flap was on fire on his trailer, which allowed the fire to establish around the tires and eventually the rest of the trailer. DZIA 2 walked his dozer on to the road to escape the fire.

The Local IC arrived at the transports and began to spray them down with a CFD engine. Shortly after, DZIA 2, continued to track on the road past the transports and began constructing line. DZIA 1 with the dozer that threw a code was able to turn his dozer back on and clear the code. He then fell in behind the other dozer pushing line.

The time between arrival of the units and the conclusion of the transport incident was no more than 15 minutes. With this incident within an incident occurring upon arrival, the task force was still able to commence initial attack operations in a timely manner. Final acreage for the South Side Fire was 232 acres.



Picture 4: Fuels representative of Southside Alpha and Bravo Fires.



Picture 5: Fuels representative of TFS staging area.

Lessons Shared

How do we backfill another office without local support?

The use of strike teams made of up of resources from across the state is very common to support the locals during times of elevated activity. With the local office under quarantine, the strike team was comprised of solely out-of-region personnel staffing the local office's equipment. This was the first fire the TFS resources responded to. This was the first time many of them had worked together. Although they had performed equipment checks, the dozers were unloaded for the first time on the South Side Fire. Many of the resources that made up the task force were experienced with fires and environmental conditions in the Panhandle. How are you setting yourself and assigned resources up for success when back filling an office in another region?

- Familiarity of local terrain, weather, condition of fuels and cooperators.
- Are you asking the right questions when an in person in-briefing is not available?
- What are the available resources in the branch, branch and local office expectations, local cooperator expectations?
- What is the notification process to branch leadership, and back down to resources regarding requests to incidents on the fire line?
- What is the condition of the equipment?
- How thorough are you performing equipment checks when asked to staff another office's equipment?
- Other than starting the equipment and checking fluids is there anything additional you should be doing / checking?

Are we factoring in the chances of spotting into the staging area?

Although it is always the first choice to avoid parking in unburned fuel, the crew determined there was not an adequate area to do so. Given the low fire activity on the Bravo fire, the crew felt that their parking spot was sufficient. Constructing line around staging areas is a common practice. The plan was to construct a line around the transports prior to engaging. Similar to safety zones, there are various factors that influence what we consider sufficient. Fuels, current and expected fire behavior, topography, land use considerations, and human factors should all be considered in the decision-making process. Common practices include parking in cold black or a cleared location, building a safety zone for equipment or building a line around the equipment. If needed, transports can be relocated to a separate location once the dozer has been unloaded. Refer to page 8 in the IRPG for safety zone considerations.

How do we verify information that is given to us when we arrive on scene?

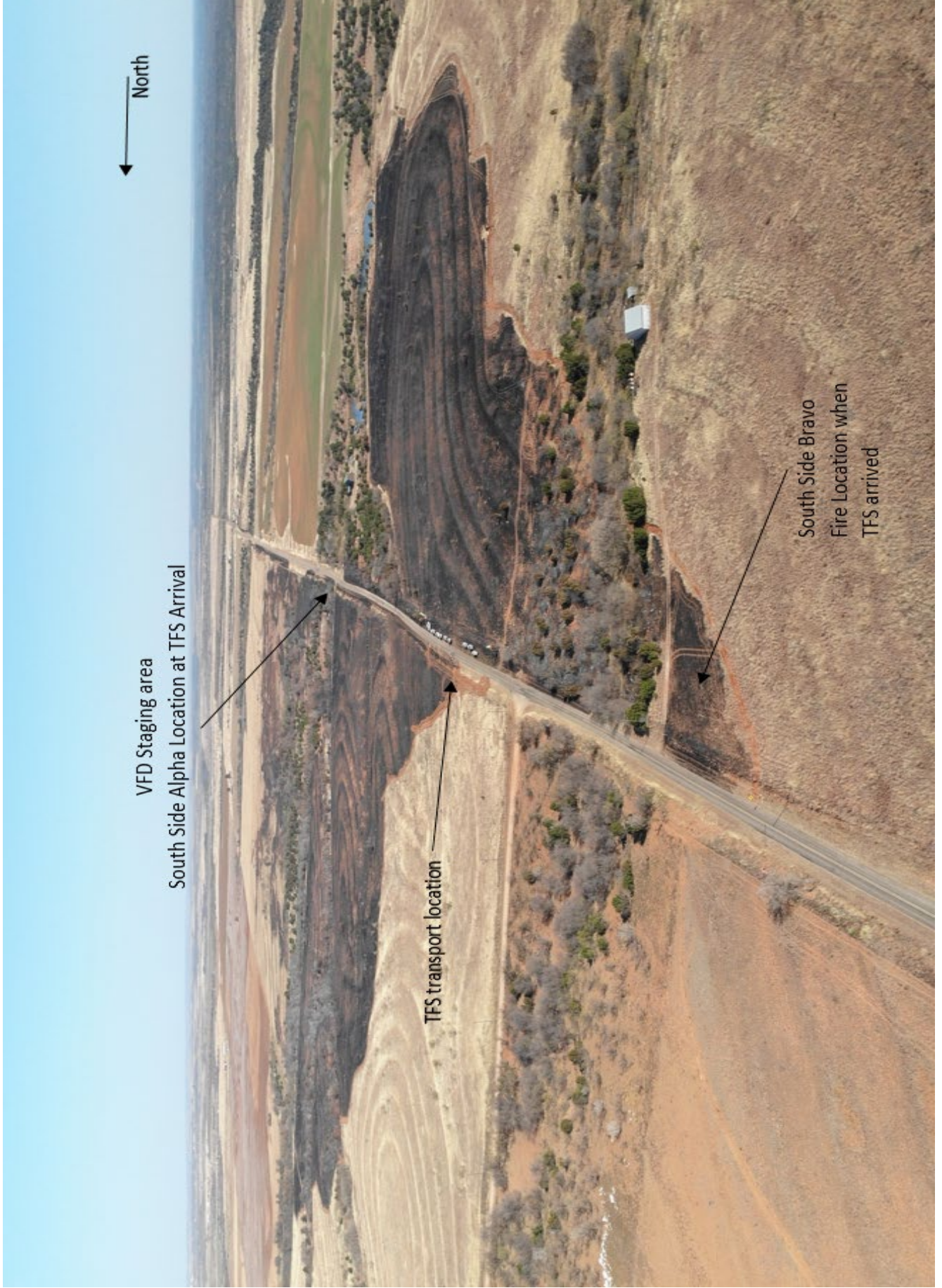
The crew's decisions on when and where to engage were guided by several observations upon arriving on scene, as well as information that they were given. Are we allotting appropriate time upon arrival to size up the fire and scout for staging areas and anchor points? Are we allowing outside pressures to force us to make hasty decisions? Are we basing our decisions on what we are told or what we see?

Other Considerations:

What role are you taking in establishing LCES? Although we are taught to always maintain LCES, we often rely on the IC, or someone who is already on the fire to provide that info. We should remind ourselves that in certain situations, when the stability in our surrounding environment is deteriorating, it is solely our responsibility to make sure that we place ourselves and our equipment in the safest area possible.

How are you using the Risk Management Process to mitigate hazards? The Risk Management Process assists in ensuring that critical factors and risks of the fireline work environment are considered during decision making. The process encompasses the Look up, Down, Around and tactical watchouts to ensure we are identifying high-risk hazards. Are there additional risks to consider when identifying appropriate staging areas? Are we considering the potential of a low intensity fire to become more active? Is there unburned fuel between you and the fire? Could the fuel loading pose a potential threat to resources and equipment?

Have you ever made the decision to park equipment in unburned fuel, based on assumption about the current fire activity and/or fuel loading in the surrounding area?



North

VFD Staging area
South Side Alpha Location at TFS Arrival

TFS transport location

South Side Bravo
Fire Location when
TFS arrived