INVESTIGATION REPORT

CASE NUMBER: 17CABTU015954
CASE NAME: La Porte
DATE: October 8, 2017
INCIDENT TYPE: Vegetation Fire
INCIDENT INVESTIGATOR: Tom Kluge – Fire Captain Specialist - BTU
1  1 - VIOLATION:
2  None Observed
2 - SUMMARY:

On October 8, 2017, between the hours of 10:30 pm to 11:00 pm, a vegetation fire (La Porte Fire) started near the community of Bangor, CA. The La Porte Fire burned 6,151 acres and burned into the Cascade Fire (Yuba County). The La Porte Fire was managed as part of the Wind Complex, a series of fires that began burning within 24 hours of each other in the foothills of Northern California.

The La Porte Fire was a wind driven fire influenced by both terrain and fuels. My origin and cause investigation led me to the property located at 167 Darby road. It is a mostly wooded parcel with a natural drainage bisecting the property from west to east. PG&E distribution lines follow the drainage through the property and terminate at 171 Darby Road.

Near the origin area, as determined by methods described in the narrative of this document and the Origin and Cause LE-71 supplemental report, I observed a broken distribution pole with a broken cross arm and bent cross arm support. I also observed distribution conductors that had fallen to the ground. The conductors were covered by a seven-inch diameter limb that had broken off a nearby Valley Oak tree. The oak limb had been charred by fire but did not burn. I observed a tall standing oak tree with minimal fire damage at the base of the tree. The tall standing oak had a new break which appeared from the ground to match the broken limb on the conductor wires.

The La Porte Fire was caused when the valley oak limb fell upon energized conductor wires. The pole supporting the conductors catastrophically failed, as did one of the conductor wires, causing an energized fault to ground. The fault to ground occurred within a receptive fuel bed and started the fire.
3 - SUSPECT:

None identified at the time of this report.
4 - VICTIMS & WITNESSES:

Home: [Redacted]

Owners of the property where the fire started

Cell: [Redacted]

Was home when fire started. Stepped outside between 10:30 and 11:00 pm and saw fire in the drainage to the northwest of his house

See attachment f for list of victims
5 - EVIDENCE:

E1 - Length of conductor wire with several arc burns along its length
E2 - Section of tree branch that fell onto the energized conductors including point of failure.
E3 - Photographs of the fire origin area
6 – CONDITIONS:

The weather was hot, dry with high winds recorded at over 30 miles per hour. North winds in the region had blown for several days and the relative humidity was low and had been low for several days (see attachment j). Night time fuel moisture recovery was minimal with the dew point, well below ambient temperatures.

The area around Darby Road has limited cellular/mobile telephone coverage limiting the ability for people to report the fire once telephone lines were compromised.

Suppression efforts were hampered by limited telephone and cellular access. Butte County and surrounding counties had multiple fires burning at the same time as the La Porte Fire limiting the number of available resources to respond. The Cascade Fire had been burning in Yuba County near the Butte County line prior to the start of the La Porte Fire. The La Porte Fire was mistaken for the Cascade fire by local residents and fire officials.

Weather

From Bangor RAWS station (BNGC1) located at N39.380747 W121.386228

Descriptive location is 446 Los Verjeles Rd Bangor, CA 95914

Approximately 2.70 miles SSW from the fire origin area.

Recorded on 10/08/2017 23:51 PDT (attachment i)

Temperature: 68 Degrees Fahrenheit

Relative Humidity: 13 percent

Winds: ENE 6 miles per hour, gusts to 30 miles per hour

Dew Point: 15 Degrees Fahrenheit
7 – VEHICLE/EQUIPMENT:

No vehicles were identified as being a factor in the ignition of the fire.

Distribution power lines were in the origin area. The energized conductors were damaged because of mechanical failure and provided a heat source that started the La Porte Fire.
8 - PROPERTY:
167 Darby Road
Bangor, CA 95914

Location where the fire originated. In the drainage, just east of Darby road, north of the residence located on the property. Property is rolling hills with a steep drainage running through the north half of the property from west to east.
9 - NARRATIVE:

On October 9, 2017 at approximately 10:00 am, I responded as a Fire Investigator to an actively burning vegetation fire in uniform while driving my department marked vehicle. The fire was in the community of Bangor, CA. I arrived at the Incident Command Post (ICP) at Butte County Fire Station 55 in Bangor at approximately 11:00 am. I met with the Incident Commander, Division Chief (DC) Garret SJOLUND (D2104), and received fire history information. SJOLUND told me the following in summary:

The fire was first confirmed by responding firefighters around 12:15 am on October 9. The fire was moving at a critical rate of spread from the north, north east to the south, south west. The fire had already destroyed an unknown number of structures and was still burning at a critical rate. No firefighting personnel had yet identified an origin area. Firefighters observed extreme fire behavior and high wind speeds.

Battalion Chief (BC) Jason MORRIS (B2109) was also with SJOLUND and I at the ICP. MORRIS told me the following in summary:

MORRIS had first observed the fire's edge 200 feet east of the low water crossing on Vierra Road at South Honcut Creek. The fire was burning erratically, driven by turbulent winds. At one point in the evening, MORRIS used the intersection of La Porte Road and Los Verjeles Road as a safety zone. MORRIS saw the roof of the Bangor Feed Store was pulled up and cast off by the wind. Darby Road was in the geographical area referred to as Division A, supervised by the operator on CAL FIRE Engine 2165 (E2165).

After speaking with SJOLUND and MORRIS I proceeded towards the intersection of Darby and Vierra Roads in my department vehicle. As I drove north on La Porte Road, I observed several macro indicators such as angle of char, foliage freeze, and protection, indicating the fire advanced (head fire) through the area. As I drove, I observed changes in the spread pattern that indicated the fire transitioned several times from an advancing fire to a lateral fire.
La Porte Fire had not crossed the La Porte Road as I approached Gold Pan Court. I noted the road was spray painted with the word “CELL” at the top of the rise. As I approached Darby Road, I saw E2165. I stopped and talked to the operator, Fire Captain Kevin FLEMMING. I confirmed he was Division A Supervisor and notified him that I would be working in his division for accountability. FLEMMING told me he had just transitioned into the position having relieved the previous Engine Company Officer. FLEMMING told me he was waiting for the La Porte Fire to burn towards this section of road and was hoping to hold the fire in the area. He asked if I would assist in holding traffic on the road as it had become dangerous for firefighters with low visibility and no restrictions imposed on civilian traffic. I assisted for approximately one hour after which, local law enforcement assumed control of the traffic control point.

As I continued onto Darby Road, south from La Porte Road I observed macro indicators (angle of char, depth of char, protection) indicating I was in the lateral progression area of the fire. As I continued south on Darby Road, I observed two distribution conductor wires hanging low across the road approximately one quarter mile south of La Porte Road. I observed indicators indicating the fire had made an advancing run from the drainage towards the southwest following topographical features. I set out on foot towards the drainage. I observed a distribution pole, in line with the conductor wires, that was broken and burning at the top of the pole but was not burning at the base. As I approached the area, I observed micro indicators such as protection, stem fall, staining, and sooting as well as macro indicators that directed me to an area 20 feet northeast of the broken and burned power pole. I noted the area and continued walking beyond it. I walked to the next power pole and followed a power line south towards the structures at 167 Darby Road, subsequently returned to my vehicle and continued driving to the east side of the fire. I noted the location as 167 Darby Road and continued to Vierra Road.

As I approached the location indicated by MORRIS, 200 feet past the low water crossing on Vierra Road, I observed macro indicators (angle of char, depth of char, sooting and staining) that indicated that I was in a backing fire progression. I parked my vehicle and set out on foot, recording my path on a Garmin Global Positioning System.
(GPS) hand held module. I observed many micro indicators including cupping, sooting, staining and stem fall. I considered the totality of several indicators to determine the fire's path and progression across hundreds of points along the path. The fire had burned in many directions transitioning from backing, to lateral, and advancing fires which is consistence with turbulent winds.

The fire’s path of progression led me back the property at 167 Darby Road. To ensure I was being objective, I returned to Vierra Road and traveled further north east to 15460 block of Vierra Road and set out on foot again, observing the macro and micro indicators. Again, the fire’s progression led me back to 167 Darby Road. In all, seven hours were spent observing the indicators to determine the general origin area (GOA).

I returned to my truck and drove to an access gate located at the property on 167 Darby Road. The gate was locked and I made vehicle access by lifting the gate off the hinges. I noted there were no foot prints or vehicle tracks in the area. I followed the micro and macro indicators to the specific area of origin. Within the specific origin area (SOA) was a conductor wire with blue and white burn marks indicating electrical discharge from the conductor. Near the SOA, I observed a distribution pole that was broken with a broken wooden cross arm still dangling from one of the conductor wires (photo 1). The cross arm was still partially intact, but split along the mounting bolt holes. On the ground was a bent metal cross arm support. On the ground east of the distribution pole, I observed a seven-inch diameter oak branch that had a recent break at the base of the branch (photo 7). I observed the break in the branch did not appear to be weathered. The oak branch was partially scorched however mostly undamaged with leaf foliage still intact. The oak branch was positioned on top of the conductor wire that was observed in the SOA. I photographed the area and secured access to the GOA.

I ordered a Light Detection And Ranging (LIDAR) team to survey the area including the broken limb and the tree from where I believed the broken limb came from. I ordered an arborist to examine the oak tree that had broken to evaluate the health of the tree. The arborist was also to determine whether the tree should have been assessed and
maintained by the responsible power company. Pacific Gas and Electric crew workers in the area told me this was one of their poles..

The report provided by the contracted arborist, Mark Porter, stated the subject valley oak did show signs of decay. The arborist report stated there may have been a crack at the base of the limb. The arborist report stated it is possible there were no visible outward signs of failure or weakness that would have been discovered with a normal assessment.

I reviewed the report timeline from CAL FIRE Butte Unit Emergency Command Center that included 911 calls and radio transmissions. The first 911 report of the fire was at 11:18 PM on October 8, 2017. There was conflicting information based on several fires in the area as to whether it was a new fire.

Based on witnessed reports, observed facts, specialist reports, historical data available, and my training and experience, I conclude the following:

The La Porte fire started between 10:30 p.m. and 11:00 p.m. on October 8, 2017 in the drainage on the property located at 167 Darby Road, Bangor CA. The fire started when gusty winds caused a tree limb to break and fall onto energized distribution powerlines. In falling, the limb caused the power pole cross member to break along with other crucial components of the pole resulting in a catastrophic failure of the pole. The failure of the pole resulted in the failure of a conductor that discharged electrical energy providing a heat source that resulted in a fire. The fire started upon natural vegetation and forest ground litter that grew into a wildland fire.
1 10 - ATTACHMENTS:
   a. Photo Log
   b. Google Earth aerial view of fire origin location (pre-fire)
   c. La Porte Fire Damage Assessment Map
   d. Google Earth aerial view with final fire perimeter overlaid
   e. Google Street view of origin area showing subject tree, pre-fire
   f. Damage Assessment parcel spreadsheet
   g. LE-71 Origin and Cause report by Tom Kluge #3970
   h. LIDAR report
   i. BNGC1 weather observations from October 8-9, 2017
   j. BNGC1 weather observations from October 2-9, 2017

Tom Kluge
Peace Officer #3970
CAL FIRE Butte
176 Nelson Ave.
Oroville, CA 95965
(530)538-7888
LA PORTE FIRE

17CABTU015954-103

October 8, 2017
Photograph 1

General Origin Area (GOA)
Photograph 2
Subject tree in GOA
Photograph 3

Closer view of subject tree in GOA
Photograph 4

Closer view of subject tree in GOA
Photograph 5

Subject limb break of subject tree
Photograph 6

Close up broken limb
Photograph 7
Broken oak limb in GOA
Photograph 8

Close up view of broken cross arm
Bangor, California
Google, Inc.
Street View - Apr 2012

https://www.google.com/maps/@39.4151913,-121.3632798,3a,41.9y,60.3h,93.12t/data=!3m... 3/24/2018
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<td>Outbuilding gt 10'X12'</td>
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WHEATLEY, MATTHEW  
Destroyed  
Destroyed  
Destroyed  
Mobile Home - Double Wide  
Outbuilding gt 10'X12'  
Outbuilding gt 10'X12'

NICHOLS, GEORGE E  
Destroyed  
Destroyed  
Mobile Home - Double Wide  
Outbuilding gt 10'X12'

ARNOLDSEN, KATHLEEN F  
Destroyed  
Destroyed  
Outbuilding gt 10'X12'  
Single Family Residence

QUESADA, DAVID  
Destroyed  
Mobile Home - Double Wide

SMITH, LINDSEY  
Destroyed  
Destroyed  
Destroyed  
Destroyed  
Non-habitable-Shop  
Outbuilding gt 10'X12'  
Outbuilding gt 10'X12'  
Outbuilding gt 10'X12'  
Single Family Residence

CASSIANO, MAYRA  
Destroyed  
Destroyed  
Mobile Home - Double Wide  
Outbuilding gt 10'X12'

MILLER, LYNN M  
Destroyed  
Outbuilding gt 10'X12'

MORSE, ANDREW  
Destroyed  
Destroyed  
Mobile Home - Single Wide  
Single Family Residence

BROWN, MARY LYNN  
Destroyed  
Destroyed  
Destroyed  
Commercial Building 20 X 20  
Commercial Building - 30 X 20  
Commercial Building - 30 X 40  
Commercial Building - Retail Feed store

AYERS, EDWIN R  
Destroyed  
Destroyed  
Destroyed  
Mobile Home - Triple Wide  
Non-habitable-Shop  
Mobile Home - Double Wide  
Outbuilding 66 X 28
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<td>MICHAEL, LISA</td>
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On Monday, October 9, 2017 I responded to the La Porte fire in the community of Bangor CA. I responded in my law enforcement uniform a fire investigator in my marked department vehicle. I arrived at scene at approximately 11 am.

I met with the B2109 (Jason MORRIS) at Butte County Bangor Fire Station 55. MORRIS told me that when he arrived at scene, the fire was backing on Vierra Road 220 feet east of the low water crossing at Vierra and Darby Road. D2104 (Garrett Sjolund) was the Incident Commander and showed me a crude sketch of the fire. SJOLUND also told me the initial reports of the La Porte fire were mistaken for the Cascade Fire that was in Yuba County close by. Chief SJOLUND also told me all power lines had been de-energized per Pacific Gas and Electric (PG&E). I collected Global Positioning Satellite (GPS) data from Chief MORRIS and drove into the fire area. As I turned north onto La Porte Road from Oro Bangor Highway, I became aware of the vast devastation and the loss of property.

As I continued north on La Porte Road I observed several Macro indicators such as angle of char, depth of char, foliage freeze, ash deposits, and protection. The macro indicators clearly showed the fire advanced from north east to south west. I traveled to the intersection of Darby Road and La Porte Road and observed macro indicators that showed lateral movement of the fire with lower intensity. I knew by the indicators I was on the right flank of the fire (looking from the heel towards the head). Near the address of 167 Darby road, I observed powerlines that were sagging across Darby Road. I set out on foot and walked towards a broken and burned power pole in the same location adjacent to 167 Darby road.

As I approached the area, I observed micro indicators such as protection, stem fall, staining, and soot deposit as well as macro indicators that pointed to an area 20 feet north east of the broken and burned power pole. I noted the area and continued walking past. I walked to the next power pole and followed the branch line up towards 167 Darby Road and subsequently returned to my vehicle and continued driving to the east side of the fire.
I parked at the location given to me by Chief MORRIS, 34° 24.260N 121° 21.450W in Vierra Road. Using the macro and micro indicators I determined I was on the left flank of the fire (looking from the heel towards the head). I walked north from this location into the fire area observing and following the macro and micro fire progression indicators. The fire progression through the area was very erratic and consistent with the wind patterns reported during the time of the fire as it passed through the area. I followed the indicators across Robinson Ravine to the home of [REDACTED]

I spoke with [REDACTED] at his home. He told me the following in summary:

[REDACTED] was at his home when he heard the roar of the fire around 11 p.m. He went outside and saw from his front porch, the fire travel from the north east to the south west. He said he observed the fire sheeting across the field next to his drive way. [REDACTED] told me he thought the fire must have started about a quarter mile north of this driveway on Darby Road based on his observations of the fire.

I walked back to the east from [REDACTED] property and observed macro and micro indicators that lead me to determine I was in the outside heel of the fire and the fire had backed into the area from the origin.

Using the three points of reference and the macro and micro indicators I determined the fire started in the area of the powerlines that run through the property at 167 Darby Road owned by [REDACTED]. I returned to the sagged powerlines across Darby Road. As I reentered the area, I observed the following facts:

There were powerlines that were down in the area. A power pole had been broken and burned. One of the metal supports for the cross beam was bent in an ell where it should have been straight. One conductor was broken. The insulators for one of the conductors was broken. The cross beam was split into two pieces at the point where the bolt holes were drilled through. There was a seven inch diameter oak branch laying on the broken conductor. The oak branch had most of it leaves still intact. There was a valley oak near the broken branch that had one of the top limbs broken off. The diameter and distinct features of the failed limb of the tree were very similar to the broken limb on the ground. There were signs of arcing on the broken conductor wire.
On October 12, 2017, I met [REDACTED], 171 Darby Road, Bangor CA. [REDACTED] told me he was home with his wife at the time the fire started. [REDACTED] said the lights dimmed in the house sometime between 10:30 pm and 11:00 pm. [REDACTED] said he stepped outside and saw the glow in the drainage behind his neighbor's house (167 Darby Road). [REDACTED] said he knew it was a fire and left his property to notify everyone he could as he evacuated. [REDACTED] said Darby Road was overrun by fire blocking his egress to the north.

Based on the facts observed, witness statements, and my training and experience of 20 years in the fire service, I believe the La Porte fire started between 10:30 p.m. and 11:00 p.m. on October 8, 2017 in the drainage on the property located at 167 Darby Road, Bangor CA. The fire started when abnormally high gusty winds did cause an otherwise healthy tree to be broken at a high limb and did fall onto energized distribution powerlines. In falling, the limb did cause the power pole cross member to break along with other crucial components of the pole resulting in a catastrophic failure of the pole. The failure of the pole resulted in the failure of a conductor that did discharge electrical energy providing a heat source that resulted in a fire upon natural vegetation and forest ground litter that grew into a wildland fire.

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Ave Air Temperature

Statistics

Begin Date/Time
Oct. 2, 2017
:00 LST

End Date/Time
Oct. 9, 2017
:00 LST

Ave Air Temperature
Deg F
Average
66.3
Max. | Min.
88 | 46

Ave Relative Humidity

Statistics

Begin Date/Time
Oct. 2, 2017
:00 LST

End Date/Time
Oct. 9, 2017
:00 LST

Ave Relative Humidity
%
Average
29
Max. | Min.
55 | 10
Mean Wind Speed

Statistics
Begin Date/Time
Oct. 2, 2017
:00 LST

End Date/Time
Oct. 9, 2017
:00 LST

Mean Wind Speed
mph
Average
2.2
Max. | Min.
8 | 0

Maximum Wind Gust

Statistics
Begin Date/Time
Oct. 2, 2017
:00 LST

End Date/Time
Oct. 9, 2017
:00 LST

Maximum Wind Gust
mph
Average
8
Max. | Min.
29 | 0

https://wrcc.dri.edu/cgi-bin/wea_graph2.pl?stn=cbgr&mon=10&yea=17&day=2&ndy=007... 5/20/2018
Solar Radiation

Statistics
Begin Date/Time
Oct. 2, 2017
00 LST
End Date/Time
Oct. 9, 2017
00 LST
Solar Radiation
W/m2
Average
212.84
Max. | Min.
756 | 0

Precipitation

Statistics
Begin Date/Time
Oct. 2, 2017
00 LST
End Date/Time
Oct. 9, 2017
00 LST
Precipitation
in
Average
0
Max. | Min.
0 | 0

https://wrcc.dri.edu/cgi-bin/wea_graph2.pl?stn=cbgr&mon=10&yea=17&day=2&ndy=007... 5/20/2018