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4. **WILDFIRES:** Report on Esperanza blaze finds 'risky decisions' led to deaths of Forest Service crew

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A five-member team of U.S. Forest Service firefighters died last October as a result of misjudgments about the severity of the Esperanza fire in Southern California and "risky decisions," including attempts to save a vacant residential building despite being in a "non-defensible" position. All five were fatally burned by a sudden, intense fire run up a steep drainage below their location, according to a report issued Tuesday by the Forest Service and the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection.

While relatively modest in size near the end of a record wildfire season, the 42,000-acre Esperanza blaze was heavily covered by television and other news media because of its proximity to Los Angeles and Palm Springs, the extensive destruction of private property, and the fact that it was caused by arson.

The crew, which was operating outside the boundaries of federal lands at the time of the fire rollover, had been trying to protect an empty house in steep terrain. Three of the men died immediately, one on the way to the hospital, and the last within a few days of the Oct. 26 incident ([Land Letter](#), Nov. 2, 2006).

During a news conference Tuesday, Forest Service Chief Gail Kimbell attributed the fatalities to "a loss of situational awareness" during an urban wildfire situation by managers and the team. "They underestimated, accepted or misjudged the risk to firefighter safety," she said.

The report concluded that "a risky decision or series of decisions appear to have contributed to this dangerous situation from which there was no room for error." Evidently, the crew members felt they were in a secure position and had not scouted alternative means of escape.

The fire was initially reported at 1 a.m. Pacific Time, and within a few hours reached the rural community of Twin Pines, in the San Jacinto Mountains near Cabazon. The ill-fated crew, from Engine 57, was dispatched along with four other engines from the nearby San Bernardino National Forest as part of the state/federal interagency fire protection agreement. According to the report, at the time of the burn over, the fire was just a few hundred acres in size, fueled by dry chaparral and Manzanita while Santa Ana winds were blowing from 50 to 70 miles per hour. They were overwhelmed by the fire while trying to defend a structure that was called the Octagon House in the report.

Two main causal factors were identified: loss of awareness of the dangers and the decision by command officers to attempt structure protection at the risk of firefighter safety. Eight identified contributing factors included social acceptance of such risks by crews to protect homes during wildfires, difficult terrain and heavy winds, and that "effective communication controls were not in effect prior to the incident."

Also, the five Forest Service engines involved in fighting the fires, along with an engine crew from March Air Force Base "were not supervised by a strike team/task force leader. This contributed to the increased complexity and span of control," the report stated.

Shortly after word of the fatalities, remaining Forest Service crews were pulled from the area.

Whether the report will lead to changes in agency policies regarding protection of residential property is uncertain, although lawmakers in Washington, D.C., expressed grave concerns about the issue (*see story above*). The report was forwarded to San Bernardino County district attorney's office, which is prosecuting a 36-year-old auto mechanic charged with 23 counts of arson,



The scene of the fatal fire rollover that took the lives of five Forest Service firefighters last October. In the center is the Octagon House, which the crew was trying to save. Photo courtesy of California Department of Forestry.