

Report submitted by Murry Taylor regarding the near miss on the Donnelly Flats fire, June 11, 1999.

This is how I remember what happened.

We jumped the fire just before noon. Two loads split up and began running progressive hoselays up both sides. I was on the left/east flank. The fire was spreading from the north to the south. By 3:00 PM Rob Yeager, Doug Carroll, Dave Liston, Scott Hocklander, Buck Nelson, Marty Adell, and myself had progressed an estimated 2000 ft. along the left flank when we came to an area of intense munitions rapid fire. We held up, reassessed, and decided to drop back down our line and start an indirect burnout burning to the east along an abandoned grassy road. We'd just started wetting the road and burning when the wind suddenly picked up from a 3-5 mph light breeze out of the north to a steady 10 out of the south. The heat became intense with total crowning. We suddenly picked up several spots right near our line along the grassy road. We decided to pull back down the line abandoning all our hose and hard work. On the way out we met one of the Delta crews and told them to come with us. The seven jumpers and crew then hiked out and hit the road just about 100 yards east of our jumpspot—an acre sized mineral soil clearing that was part of an old Fort Greeley fuel break. We regrouped back on the east side of the tail on the road near where we'd first started in along the fire's edge with our hoselay.

At that point--maybe it was 1700, I'm not sure--Buck asked me if there was anything I thought we could do. I suggested that we could go back in a ways and pull some of the hose nearest the road. Fire activity in the area we had just evacuated twenty minutes before was intensifying as demonstrated by intermittent scattered torching lifting above the tops of mature black spruce. Flame lengths I estimate at 40 to 50 feet at that point. Black smoke began to blot out the sun. The northern edge of the big spruce was about 1000 feet south from the road. Between the road and the spruce, fuels were typical "interior" scattered stunted spruce, light brush, grass, and tundra.

The seven of us started back up the hoselay to retrieve hose, not much worried about the condition of the fire since "the black" appeared to be well burned and sufficiently cool to serve as a safety zone. The Delta crew that had hiked out with us talked about coming into pull hose behind us, but they were still getting themselves organized, and by the time things went bad, they were only 100 feet off the road. The seven jumpers were strung out along the hosely, the furthest being in along the line maybe 700 feet, with me being closest to the road, maybe in 300 feet. From time to time I could see them moving ahead of me. I think it was Buck and Doug.

The intensity of the fire activity had been increasing steadily ever since the abandonment of the burnout at the end of our hoselay. At that time, there was apparently a collective recognition that we should not go any further, since we all stopped and began disconnecting hose. I stopped and unscrewed a section, then walked back the length of one section (100') and disconnected it and began pulling it to the road. I was about 200 feet from the road. I don't remember seeing the

crew at that time.

What follows in this next paragraph happened in an estimated one minute.

As I began pulling hose, I noticed a small (three-foot diameter) whirlwind building inside the black. I looked back toward where I'd last seen Buck and Doug and saw a wall of fire rise up out of a line of tall spruce 100 yards beyond them to the south, red flames whipping under heavy black smoke. I radioed Buck and told him about the dust devil, the deteriorating conditions at the tail, and suggested that he consider pulling out. He responded that he agreed. I turned around and continued dragging the hose. Suddenly the wind picked up from a former 10mph out of the south to a crazy estimated 40 out of the north. Dust and smoke began streaming around the fire devil. Almost instantly, it grew to startling size. With a great swosh, the firewhirl built to a 100 foot wide vortex of blowing smoke grey ash, flying embers, and burning debris.

Conditions at the tail (an area I'll call three acres) deteriorated into vigorous reburning ground fire and torching unburned tree tops. A sudden rush of wind hit me and drew fiercely in toward the firewhirl. Struggling to keep my feet, I dropped the hose, turned, and began to move quickly away from the fire out into the green. Dust was streaming off the east-west jumpspot road horizontally. There came a moaning sort of a roar, and the firewhirl left the black and started toward me. As quickly as the wind had begun sucking inward, it suddenly blew out circling the growing vortex. At the center of the 100 foot wide great swirl I could see a core cylinder of pinkish red, funneling up, twisting one way and then the other upwards into the main smoke column. As I moved away from the approaching firewhirl, it continued to come my way, almost like it was following me. As it left the black, the ash and smoke diminished until the main core of the vortex was mostly what was visible. At one point I think the vortex was within 75 to 80 feet of me and I felt in great danger. Sparks from the swirling embers hit the grassy tundra and burst immediately into fanning areas of running ground fire. I saw four spots around me racing fast in grassy tussocks. At one point I felt like the wind might lift me off the ground. I ran as fast as I could go, looking desperately for a waterhole to dive into, but most of them had dried into mud bogs. After about twenty seconds of "run-for-your-life" running across the tundra, the fireswirl changed direction and in one great swing pulled back into the black, then blew out across the road spreading fire 200 feet out into the green to the north past the jumpspot road and east of our jumpspot. When the wind subsided in the area where I was running, the spots grew calm. Still, I kept running as fast as I could until I reached the road where I rejoined the other six hose pullers. They had each cut/run across the green directly from their individual positions along the hoselay to the road. We were all extremely relieved to be together, back on the road, and, at least for the moment, out of harms way. The Delta crew had moved west on the road into the jumpspot, as had Marty Meirerotto, our eight jumper and pump man.

In summary, I'll say this. I've been working fires in Alaska for quite awhile. So have a few others that witnessed what we immediately identified as a tornado. I don't know the official size that changes a large firewhirl into a tornado, but none of us are willing to call it anything but a tornado. In my experience, such a large fire devil is new. Never have I seen fire behavior escalate to life threatening conditions so rapidly.

