Black Feather Fire -Fighting Wildfire Safely in Diverse Landscapes

Photos show the San Pedro Park Wilderness area near the Cutoff trail from Rito de las Perchas to Vega Redonda. Taken in September 2010, the photos show a landscape where you literally cannot see the forest for the trees. While this type of fuel loading is unfortunately common in many mixed conifer forests, it is often not safe to deploy firefighters directly into these conditions. Not only are injuries more likely in overgrown forests such as these, but if a firefighter is injured, evacuation delays due to access challenges can be life threatening.

Under normal conditions, fire managers aim to have medical extraction plans that allow for an injured person to get to a hospital within less than one hour. Whereas the extraction time in a forest like this can be delayed to several hours. While fires like this call for a suppression response, tactics and strategies other than direct attack often prove safer for firefighters.

Layers of dense, thick dead and down material, creates fuel, that when it burns, it burns hot and with high intensity creating large amounts of smoke as was seen on Sunday, August 6, 2023, when the fire was first reported.

When these types of conditions occur, it is safer for fire personnel to work outside these dense fuel areas to create primary and alternate containment lines.

On the Black Feather Fire, firefighters are working to remove dense fuels along key holding features like roads, and natural areas like meadows. This provides protection for communities without compromising firefighter safety. Firefighters are using numerous, safe fire suppression approaches. For example, crews are using chippers to break dead and down material into smaller pieces. Chipping fuels reduces the intensity of fire and the amount of time it takes to burn. This reduces some of the negative effects that fire can have, to both humans and the landscape. Some of the chipped material will be hauled away outside of the fire area.

Wilderness Challenges Video