

Fighting Fire with Fire

AN INTERVIEW WITH DON WHITTEMORE



On Sept. 6, 2010, the Boulder County Communications Center received a radio call about 10 a.m. of a fire in Fourmile Canyon. High winds helped spread the blaze, and within a week 6,181 acres had been consumed, along with 169 homes, in what was the most expensive wildfire in Colorado's history.

Rocky Mountain Fire chief discusses how firefighters protect Boulder County

BY JANE PALMER

Its sunny skies and rain-free days may make Colorado a year-round playground for outdoor lovers, but these conditions also contribute to one of the biggest threats to the state's happy inhabitants: wildfires.

In 2002, the Hayman Fire burned 137,760 acres, cost \$39 million and caused the deaths of five firefighters. Each year thereafter has brought a new wildfire disaster. In 2009, recognizing the need for advanced disaster response and coordination at the local level, Don Whittemore, the assistant chief of Rocky Mountain Fire in Boulder, formed the Boulder County Incident Management Team (BCIMT). The group pulls together more than 70 fire, law-enforcement and medical responders.

Within a year the BCIMT would manage what was then the most destructive wildfire in Colorado history—the Fourmile Canyon fire, which destroyed 169 homes and resulted in more than \$217 million in damage. Whittemore was the incident commander during the fire's most destructive and threatening period. His leadership



Don Whittemore (center), assistant chief of Rocky Mountain Fire, briefs Boulder Mayor Matthew Appelbaum (left) and Colorado Gov. John Hickenlooper during the Fourmile Fire in 2010.


decisions are credited with the most important statistic of all—there were no fatalities or significant injuries.

Whittemore, however, wasn't content with the outcome. He turned his attention to how to better manage such unprecedented fires in the future, and in 2011 he started researching and working on a book, *Managing the Unimaginable*. In the book, he analyzes the current management of natural and manmade disasters and presents new insights into the field of emergency management.



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FLAGSTAFF FIRE PHOTO BY TODD ONSA;
WHITTEMORE PHOTO COURTESY DON
WHITTEMORE

Above: Smoke rises from Boulder's landmark Flatirons during the Flagstaff Fire in June 2012.



Is it true that wrangling over funds is impacting your ability to fight fires?

In terms of the pre-positioning and anticipation of a fire, yes. But when fires hit, Sheriff [Joe] Pelle in Boulder County is awesome. He says, "You don't need to ask me for anything. If you think you need it, order it. Throw everything we have at it—we'll work it out later."

When we are fighting fires at a lot of places elsewhere in the country, we have to work out the costs and benefits daily on whether we can use an aircraft or not.

What are the physical and emotional realities of fighting a fire?

It is exhausting. We generally work 16 hours and then have eight hours off. It's fully physical work in hot conditions, and you are fully clothed in clothes not ideally suited to exercise. You're carrying a backpack all the time, which weighs somewhere between 20 and 40 pounds, plus your tools, and you might be carrying water, generally a gallon of water per person per day, and you are doing all this exercise—hiking, digging, lifting—and you are breathing smoky air all day, so your oxygen intake is full of carbon monoxide. It is really, really hard.

Which is worse, fighting fires or being in charge of other firefighters fighting fires?

When you are in charge of fighting a fire, it is like being in charge of anything else: When things are going well there is no greater satisfaction, but it is a high-risk, high-reward scenario. When you don't save a house, that is really hard and very personal, but it doesn't compare to the stress of worrying about other people's lives.

At the Fourmile Fire I was 98 percent sure that someone was going to die. I was pulling people back and saying, "You can die here." When I passed command I was emotionally shot because I was just waiting for someone to tell me that a person was dead.

Do you think people have an accurate perception of what firefighters can do?

I believe people have an unrealistic expectation that we can catch every fire, every time. If you had unlimited resources at every place in every moment, that could be possible, but that is just not the case.

There are fires where there is nothing we can do to stop them. Fourmile was one of those. Unless someone was there right at the start and hit it with water, you weren't going to stop it unless you got some kind of lucky break.

And I guess it depends a lot on the scope of the fire?

If you take something like the Hayman Fire and put the Hayman footprint over Boulder County, it would cover an area like Peak-to-Peak to Broadway, Jefferson County line to Larimer County line.

That is not an unrealistic potential for our area if you have all the right conditions. You get all the right conditions that line up to create that scenario and firefighters can do nothing. You have got walls of flames that are 100, 200 feet tall and a little hose. What do you think? It is no different than saying you can stop a hurricane. ●

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