

Feds probe report of armed resident confronting firefighters

By KEITH RIDLER, Associated Press

BOISE, Idaho (AP) — Federal authorities are investigating an anonymous report that an armed landowner confronted firefighters battling an Idaho wildfire and accused them of not properly protecting a private elk-hunting ranch.

The report recently posted on the National Interagency Fire Center's website said two hotshot crews refused an order to fight the fire because of safety concerns. The post said the landowner set a backfire below crews working on a slope in August, endangering firefighters who then abandoned the area.

It appeared on a section of the website that allows firefighters to anonymously voice security issues. Center spokeswoman Jessica Gardetto said Thursday that safeguards are in place to ensure that only posts by firefighters make it onto the site, but she had few other details. A committee reviews submissions before making them public, she said.

A local sheriff disputed that any threats with weapons occurred, saying ranchers in the area commonly carry guns and that firefighters called Forest Service officials after the confrontation.

"Nobody did anything with them," Idaho County Sheriff Doug Giddings said of the ranchers' guns. "They just had them. You know — it's Idaho County. The firefighters were a bit taken aback by that. I think most of them were from out of state. So they called us, and it all ended up OK."

Idaho County is a rural area with elected officials who often voice mistrust of federal agencies.

Giddings identified the ranch as the Mountain View Elk Ranch, based in Riggins. A message left by The Associated Press was not immediately returned.

Besides the allegations in the report, the blaze in question posed problems for firefighters after it exploded in size in a rugged area about 3 miles east of Riggins and jumped the Salmon River. The spread in late August made it too unsafe to send in firefighters and occurred around the time of the reported confrontation, fire spokesman Brian Harris said Thursday.

The 150-square-mile blaze is now completely contained.

Fire managers took a cautious approach because of the unpredictable nature of wildfires in the remote area, which have led to firefighter deaths, and national resources that were stretched thin amid multiple blazes in the Northwest, Harris said.

"We had a requested a fair amount of critical resources, but they just weren't available," he said.

Harris said that fences at Mountain View Elk Ranch were intact and that he was not aware of any elk escaping.

An investigation into the report is underway and involves the U.S. Forest Service, U.S. Bureau of Land Management and the Idaho Department of Lands, the fire center said.

Associated Press writer Rebecca Boone contributed to this report.

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