**Story behind the firefight: Timeline details Butte Fire spread on day one**

**By**[**Guy McCarthy, The Union Democrat**](mailto:gmccarthy@uniondemocrat.com?subject=Story%20behind%20the%20firefight:%20Timeline%20details%20Butte%20Fire%20spread%20on%20day%20one)October 03, 2015 01:00 am

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| [http://www.uniondemocrat.com/mambots/content/multithumb/thumbs/b.220.220.16777215.0.stories.NewsPhotos.2015photos.100315%20butte%20fire%20follow%201163.jpg](http://www.uniondemocrat.com/images/stories/NewsPhotos/2015photos/100315%20butte%20fire%20follow%201163.jpg)  Russ Nodder steps carefully with a Parker 12-gauge shotgun he pulled Friday from the ruins of his Boston Yale Ranch home destroyed by the Butte Fire. Guy McCarthy / Union Democrat, Copyright 2015.   Battalion Chief Mike Olivarria of Cal Fire’s Amador-El Dorado Unit was at Sutter Hill Fire Station 60 about two-and-a-half miles north of Jackson on Highway 49 when he was dispatched to a fire near Butte Mountain Road in Amador County.  It was 2:30 p.m. Sept. 9.  He drove his command truck toward Vista Point. He could see the smoke, moderate, not building rapidly. He pulled up off Charamuga Ranch Road and found the fire at about four acres, just about to hit the rock-and-dirt track he was on.  About a dozen spot fires burned south of Charamuga Ranch Road. There were goats in a pen and cows beyond a fence, where the ground fell steeply into the Mokelumne River canyon. He saw some residents and told them to go inside.  Two engines behind him started picking up the spot fires. Another engine crew laid hose lines at the place the fire started. A dozer came in.  Dispatch had already ordered two tanker planes, two helicopters and one air attack plane. People down by the river could see and hear the helicopters roaring in with buckets of water to drop. Olivarria ordered two additional tanker planes to drop more retardant.  “We were having success picking the fire up,” Olivarria said. “Then I had a report from one of the divisions there was a spot fire in the canyon. Something obviously got up in the column, something hot, and deposited it down in the canyon. As an air attack came on scene, he reported the first fire was looking good but the second, the spot, was increasing in activity.”  Olivarria said he knew the fire in the Mokelumne River canyon would start making slope runs back up the canyon, so he had engine units set up structure protection on several buildings, including at least two homes.  “Then our actions became controlling that fire on the rim of the canyon and try to get around to the east side of the fire, but most resources were used up doing structure protection,” Olivarria said. “So the fire activity was mainly slope runs, up slope and backing down, south towards Electra Road.”  **3:30 p.m. Sept. 9**  Assistant Chief Chris Post of the Amador-El Dorado Unit said he was at headquarters in Camino, about 40 miles north of Jackson, when he heard the fire getting dispatched. By then it was about six acres. He said he figured he had an hour to drive when he left Camino.  “During my drive over I made a couple calls to confirm what the fire was doing and to provide logistics, because at this point it was clear it was going to go into the evening,” Post said.  Russ Nodder, 77, who’s lived 20 years at his place in Boston Yale Ranch, said he’d just returned from the gym when he saw smoke to the north. Boston Yale Ranch has about 15 homes on a ridge north of Highway 26, and it’s named for an old gold mine, Nodder said.  “It was right up by that white house,” Nodder said, pointing across the Mokelumne River canyon to a building on the opposite ridge. “We didn’t think it was that big a deal frankly. They had helicopters dropping water and fixed-wing aircraft dropping retardant.”  “A deputy came down about 3:30 p.m.,” Nodder said. “We stood here and we all watched them fighting the fire and he said he didn’t think it would be a problem, but if it was they would have fire trucks in here to protect the homes.  “That never happened,” Nodder said. “Not here anyway.”  Nodder said he called his wife, who was on her way home. He told her there was a fire across the canyon.  **4:45 p.m. Sept. 9**  Post arrived at the Butte Fire about 4:45 p.m. He was near Amador Lane.  “Chief Olivarria had relocated to the top of Electra Penstock, a good viewpoint where you could see the majority of the fire,” Post said. “There were people from the Sheriff’s Department, PG&E and Amador Fire Protection District there, too.”  The fire looked to be 50 to 80 acres, Post said.  “We had resources on the perimeter of the fire,” Post said. “We were making progress on the fire. When I got there we had 15 to 20 engines, several dozers and a couple hand crews.”  Post said he had confidence in the firefighters.  “This was the A team,” he said.  **5:30 p.m. Sept. 9**  Olivarria and Post both say a key turning point in the Butte Fire’s behavior occurred about 5:30 p.m. when daytime winds blowing up-canyon died out, and a north wind of 6 to 8 miles per hour swept in.  “The sun was lower and began to shade the canyon,” Post said. “Up-canyon winds stopped and the smoke column started leaning to the south because of the north wind.”  This north wind started pushing the fire toward the Electra powerhouse next to the Mokelumne River in Amador County, Olivarria said.  “Then the fire spotted across the river, into Calaveras County,” Olivarria said. “As soon as I saw it spotted to Calaveras County I called for resources from Tuolumne-Calaveras on that side. And evacuations on Montgomery, and along Highway 26 one mile east and west of Montgomery.”  Montgomery Drive is the entry road off Highway 26 to Boston Yale Ranch. There were four deputies on duty that evening in Calaveras County, Sgt. Anthony Eberhardt of the Calaveras County Sheriff’s Office said. Nodder said he never got an evacuation order.  “We heard it jumped the river,” Nodder said. “I moved my travel trailer with my pickup out to Highway 26, took it west a mile to Hertzig (Paving). He’s got a big lot there. My wife followed me and drove me back.”  Power had been off for about an hour.  Olivarria and Post decided Post should take over incident command when the fire jumped the Mokelumne River into Calaveras County, so Olivarria could focus on fighting the fire.  Post moved to Tabeaud Lake, a PG&E day use area, which had more room for vehicles and better access.  **5:57 p.m. Sept. 9**  Post said the moment the fire jumped the Mokelumne River was “the infamous time of the fire.” It was 5:57 p.m.  He asked Camino interagency command center for a full wildland response from Tuolumne-Calaveras Unit.  “I asked for 10 engines, four hand crews, two dozers, two battalion chiefs,” Post said.  Olivarria said pilots were cleared to drop as much retardant as necessary, with no concern it would get into the Mokelumne River and flow to Pardee Reservoir, the primary water storage for East Bay Municipal Utilities District.  “Once it was on the Calaveras County side we ordered the DC-10 and it got there just before sundown,” Olivarria said.  Post said the fire was starting to burn up-slope from the Mokelumne River, south toward Highway 26.  It was 102 degrees. Eight percent humidity. Steep slopes, wind, dry vegetation, all caused the fire to make runs, he said.  “Between 5:57 p.m. and 8:10 p.m. there were 15 tanker plane drops. Eight S-2T drops, six large tanker drops and one very large tanker drop, the DC-10.”  Up at Boston Yale Ranch, the fire was close to Nodder’s home.  “The flames were right here in these trees,” Nodder said. “It came up this ravine like a chimney. Some of the flames must have been a hundred feet tall. A big wall, a giant wall of flame. We just made it out alive. It was all kind of a blur at this point.”  No one came to tell him and his wife to leave, Nodder said.  “We decided to get out on our own,” he said. “My house had not caught fire yet. We drove out and around and parked and I ran back here. I could see my house was fully engaged. Then we went where everybody else was, the intersection of 26 and 49.”  Post said that before 8 p.m., he made a large order for more personnel and equipment for the next day.  “These are rough numbers but we ordered 49 bulldozers, 160 engines and 30 to 40 hand crews,” Post said. “By this time we’d moved quickly from initial attack to extended attack to a very large incident.”  **Overnight fire growth**  Post then moved incident command to Sutter Hill Fire Station 60. He’d already ordered a Type III incident management team, then a Type I incident management team. People were setting up the Amador County Fairgrounds to receive resources, and set up trailers for map-making, creating incident action plans for the next day’s briefing, and feeding for Thursday morning.  By 6 a.m. Sept. 10, there were 579 fire personnel assigned to the Butte Fire, Post said. The fire had grown to 4,500 acres overnight.  “You look how large the fire grew in the first day-and-a-half, when you compare the extreme fire behavior, the exponential growth, largely because of the fuel conditions,” Post said. “The impact on fuels amplified the wind effects.”  Some in the community have said they have heard that fire crews put the fire out and left.  Untrue, Post said.  “We continually added resources through the first day,” Post said. “At no point did we reduce our numbers, reduce resources.”  **Boston Yale Ranch**  Nodder said he believes six of the 15 homes in Boston Yale Ranch burned.  “I’ve been to several meetings over at the government center in San Andreas,” Nodder said. “Signed up with FEMA and the Red Cross. We’re getting a lot of help from the people over there.  “Now my concern is erosion control,” Nodder said. “I’m afraid if we get heavy rain all this will go down hill, all this ash you see, and end up in the Mokelumne River. I’d like to see the county come in here and put straw and seed in to prevent erosion.”  Nodder said he had a gun closet in his house. That’s why he returned to the ruins of his home on Friday, to salvage what remained of his rifles and shotguns.  “That’s what’s left,” Nodder said, showing a grape box filled with fire-blasted gun barrels. “There’s a dozen here. No, 11. Whoops, there’s a double-barrel over there. See how that fire burned? It’s unbelievable it can do this kind of damage.”  He showed what remained of a Beretta 12-gauge shotgun, a 12-gauge Remington shotgun, a sporterized Enfield 30-06 rifle, and a Winchester lever-action 30-30 rifle. Then he walked carefully through the ruins of his home and pulled out another fire-cooked shotgun.  “This is the first shotgun I ever owned,” Nodder said. “A Parker 12-gauge.”  It was a gift from his father on his 16th birthday.  The Butte Fire was considered 100 percent contained as of Friday evening. The burn area was mapped at 70,868 acres, which equals 110.7 square miles. More than 290 fire personnel remained assigned to the incident.  Pacific Gas and Electric officials say a live tree may have contacted a PG&E line in the vicinity of the ignition point. An investigation of what caused the Butte Fire is incomplete, according to Cal Fire.  The Union Democrat reported Sept. 18 several residents believe they know where the Butte Fire started: Under a power line that crosses Charamuga Ranch south of Butte Mountain Road.  A lawsuit has been filed against the utility and the company it contracts with to cut trees away from lines. Others are expected.  The blaze resulted in the deaths of two men in neighborhoods that were under mandatory evacuation orders, and one firefighter was burned. In all, 818 structures including 475 homes were destroyed. |