

Nestled high in the heart of the San Juan Mountains, the Town of Silverton's unique mining history, Victorian charm, and unequaled natural beauty provide an ideal base for your summer or winter explorations. Accessible by the scenic Narrow Gauge Railroad, this old west town sits at an elevation of 9,318 feet, surrounded by public lands waiting for you and your family to discover (www.silverton.org).

Because Silverton was never the victim of a major fire, as so many mining camps were, the buildings have been preserved, many of them with original furnishings, fixtures, stamped tin ceilings, and polished, mirror back bars. It's a friendly place to visit (Retzler, 2002).

The town provided visitors an opportunity to see how miners and their families lived over a hundred years ago in this 9,318 foot high mountain valley. The Mayflower Gold Mill, a National Historic Landmark, allowed tourists to see how miners got gold out of the hard rock ores. While accessible by a winding drive via U.S. Highway 550, most visitors took the three to three and a half hour trip via the D&SNG. According to some, the train is Silverton's bread and butter.

Operating daily from May to October, the D&SNG offered riders the opportunity to enjoy views of unparalleled beauty and an unforgettable steam train experience. The train hauls over 200,000 people a year from Durango to Silverton with nearly 40% of those passengers traveling in June and July on four daily trains. The average round-trip fare was about \$65.00 per person. In addition, the railroad employed 80 full-time and 145 seasonal employees. While hundreds of thousands of visitors choose to drive the 50-mile high alpine road linking Durango and Silverton, the train experience has continued to serve as a major tourism attraction.

THE SPARK

The drought had become so severe that the moisture content in live trees had dropped to less than would be found in kiln-dried lumber in a lumber yard. What started as a spark in the tinder-dry forests north of Durango changed into a roaring inferno as a wildfire jumped control lines and raced toward the top of Missionary Ridge to the northeast of Durango, consuming 6,000 acres on the first day. Silverton lies due north of Durango, and if the fire continued to burn out of control, both the rail and road links between the two towns would be engulfed in smoke. Everyone intently watched the skies as a shift in wind could bring the fire toward Durango (Clay, 2002).

Because of the heavy smoke produced by the fire, air quality in parts of the San Juan Basin, which included Durango, became unhealthy for the sensitive—the elderly, children under seven, and those with respiratory problems (Aguilera, 2002). Other attractions also began to suffer. Instead of playing golf at Tamarron Resort (ranked in the top 50 resort courses in the nation by *Golf Digest*) just north of Durango or playing in the river (kayaking, tubing, or rafting), most tourists took their activities inside as dense smoke obscured the Sun. Tourism activities and expenditures were evaporating as the fire and smoke spread, and concerns over additional fires in the tinder dry region flared.

THE CRISIS

The chance of accidental fires was all too real. Several small fires had already been started by stray cinders from passing D&SNG trains. In response to this threat, water tankers with small fire-fighting crews were scheduled to travel behind every train as a precautionary measure.

By mid-afternoon, Wednesday, June 19, 2002, D&SNG railroad Chief Executive Officer Allen Harper found himself caught between a rock and a hard place as the fire danger increased. See Figure 1 for a timeline of events. Continuing to run the coal-fired trains in the isolated tinder dry mountains could cause additional fires, and fire-fighting resources were already stretched.