

Wildfires and National Defense Policy:

an opinion by Robert Hirning

In the last decade, the strategy of fighting wildfires has crept into the national debate. Various agencies and think-tanks have weighed in on the rising number and intensity of wildfires, particularly in the west. We hear that regular low-intensity ground fires historically kept forests healthy and that years of suppressing them led to big buildups of understory fuels.

We hear that it is not fair to the majority of taxpayers to have to pay for defending rural communities who have allowed people to live in the “wild land/urban interface” areas. Smokey the Bear says, “Only you can prevent forest fires,” but now adds, “and if you people choose to live there it’s your own fault when your house catches fire.” Americans are led to believe that rural residents should be responsible for taking care of their own problems when it comes to wildfires.

In my opinion, this is wrong. Since when do the citizens affected by natural disasters have to pay for their own rebuilding? Did the city of New Orleans have to bear the cost of Katrina; did New Jersey and New York have to cover the cost of Hurricane Sandy? In our democracy, we agree to bear the costs equally of defending our nation against enemies domestic and foreign. I use the word enemies because, unlike other disasters (such as tornadoes, floods, earthquakes, and hurricanes), wildfires can be fought.

We used to be very effective in stopping fires early in their spread. In the 1970s, we had commanding federal forces stationed right here in the Valley: the Siskiyou Smokejumper Base, a helicopter and helatack crew based at the station, a 40 person suppression crew with 20 people standing by and another 40 regular district personnel who could be called on a moment’s notice.

Mountaintop towers on Sanger, Waldo, Serpentine, Bolan, and Pearsoll Peak were all manned lookouts. There were many fires, but none that got away and we took pride in that. Over 40 years later, there is hardly a brush truck in the district. This requires crews dispatched from Grants Pass an extra hour to get to a fire. One lone Forest Service rig, for example, showed up on the Four Corners fire about an hour after State and IV Rural had already set up a command post and gone to work with about 30 engines, aircraft and ground forces. In all fairness, this fire was not on Federal land, but when I worked on initial attack 40 years ago we cut line anywhere under mutual aid agreements.

Now the burden has turned to state and local forces which have been beefed up and are doing an incredible job in their areas of protection. Anyone who witnessed the Four Corners Fire in 2013 or the Reeves Creek Fire in 2014 will know what can be done with a well-equipped, dedicated fighting force. We pay state and local taxes and certainly get excellent protection from those agencies. However most of the land in the west is federal and that is where the monster, catastrophic fires have raged increasingly in recent decades.

Much blabber has come from Washington D.C. about forest plans, including fire response, but most of it boils down to downsizing. Let’s face it, the National Forest Service doesn’t make money any more selling timber, and stingy, urban-centered congresses and administrations refuse to appropriate adequate funds. Fire crews have been largely privatized through contracts and important aircraft bases have been regionalized, and smaller ones closed.

The Siskiyou Smokejumper Base was closed in 1981 to save \$45,000 annually, yet the Biscuit Fire, alone, in 2002 cost almost half a SBILLION! That fire became the largest in Oregon history.

Where would the money come from to pay for federal aircraft, jumpers and ground troops at 1970s levels? It is my belief that billions should come from the bloated Defense Budget. Unlike other natural disasters, wildfires are fought much like a military campaign.

The Defense Budget contains staggering costs for unused military hardware. A fleet of 3,000 useless Abrams M1 tanks are stored in the Nevada desert. Still, the defense contractors lobby for more; Boeing is building 100 refueling tankers to refuel Cold War era B-52s. An anti-tank hunter is being built for the sole purpose of shooting tanks as if war was fought like World Wars I & II. The Pentagon plans to buy 2,443 F-35 aircraft at a projected cost of \$400 Billion. That is several times the cost of all wildfire fighting costs put together for the next generation. Yet we are using retired 1950s era airliners for fire retardant drops.

Build fleets of hundreds of aircraft specifically designed for wildfire fighting, capable of short-runway take-off, and station them in airports around the west. Sure it will cost money, sure it will create jobs, but isn’t that precisely what we are doing in subsidizing the jobs of aircraft industry workers? Win-win!

The suggestion that rural folks in wildfire-prone areas should pay for their “short sighted development policies” is not only coming from anti-expenditure Tea Party types, it is coming from wannabe progressives too.

Rachel Cleetus, an economist with the Union of Concerned Scientists writes, “A lot of the firefighting money is coming from federal sources like the Department of the Interior and the Forest Service, whereas a lot of decisions around development are being made at the local level through local zoning regulations, for example, where the folks who make those decisions are not paying the firefighting cost.”

She could not be more wrong. We do pay for state and local firefighting costs through taxes, and if a fire starts on federal lands it is their obligation to put it out. Remember the first smokejumpers were 555th Airborne soldiers and only after WWII became a civilian Forest Service crew. Shouldn’t wildfire fighting again be part of our national defense policy?

Winding Trails:

by Al Hobart

Thursday, August 27, 1964 – Illinois Valley News, Cave Junction, OR –

Raspberry Lake

On the north side of Sanger Peak a little newly-budded wildplant is probably wondering what has become of me. Last Wednesday I had an appointment with the unfamiliar-looking little rascal, which had just emerged from under the snow when I saw it a couple of weeks earlier, too early for identification. With the best of intentions, I headed for the rendezvous, but, as Bob Burns used to philosophize, the best laid plans sometimes fail to pan out. By the time I reached Camp Chicago, close by Sanger Peak, I got to wondering if the road was passable. No, that was too far. Conscientiously I hauled back on the reins, but Little Toot had the bit in his teeth, so we went to Young’s Valley, shamelessly ignoring the call of the little Sanger wildie.

When I got to Young’s Valley I couldn’t resist the urge to see how far I could drive up the Cyclone Gap road. At Cyclone Gap the rocky trail to Raspberry Lake, over by my favorite Preston Peak stamping grounds, beckoned so invitingly that I didn’t even try to resist. I brought my little jinx pole, I mean fish pole, along thinking I might try my luck at Sanger Lake. But Raspberry is an even better fishing lake than Sanger, I think, and what those fish did to me last year made the challenge

irresistible. So now that I was within hiking distance of Raspberry I grimly and confidently set out for the lake, determined to break the one-trout hex or bust a hamstrap trying.

I did it too – broke the hex, I mean. The fish still didn’t seem too friendly and cooperative, but, before I quit, I reeled in three times my usual catch – three fish. At first I tried a beautiful red and gold spinner, and only succeeded in scaring the fish over to the other end of the lake. Then I sneaked around to that side and shot a fly hook baited with a tempting chunk of baloney out toward the center of the lake. One practically rose to meet it in the air. I reeled him in and up onto the rock where I was fortified up and just as I had him almost in my lap he squirmed off the hook. There was some frantic clawing and clutching there for a minute but I finally won the tussle. When two more had joined him in the plastic bag, time was up: I had to quit fishing and get busy hunting – hunting the unusual wildflowers that hide out in those dark rocky crevices above the lake’s south shore.

I’ve never before seen such a magnificent display of the great Siskiyou lewisias as those blooming all over the sunny rocks that rim the northwest shore of Raspberry Lake. They almost carpet the rocks, some of them in dazzling clusters, twenty inches across and fifteen inches high. The broad spatulate, thick leaves are up to eight inches long

in an attractive green rosette – the numerous flowers with their many narrow, pink-striped petals are an inch or more wide. Some of those plants could hold a place of honor in any home flower garden.

The large white Columbia windflower gleams among the shaded rocks on the rough lake shore. Higher up, in a steep, damp crevice, grows the fringed grass-of-Parnassus, the only location I’ve found for it. Up there, too, on that steep, damp cliff-side, is a colony of the not-common Sitka romanzoffia, a small but showy flower with white flowers three-fourths of an inch across. The only buttercup-leaved hemievas I’ve ever seen cling to the side of a rocky gorge in that same precipitous mountainside. Big yellow stream violets grow near the lake shore among the damp rocks. And the prickly currant, with its attractive pink biscuit-shaped flowers and multitudinous long yellow prickles, is there too, lying in wait for the unwary fisherman. The pretty white Bride’s bonnet and scarlet snow plant are in the woods nearby, and numerous other intriguing wildflowers make their home in the rocky, wooded vicinity of Raspberry Lake.

Later that evening, feeling awfully guilty about that neglected little Sanger Peak plant, but half-starved, as usual, and inordinately happy, I sat down to a nice big feed of the best durned rainbow trout I ever ate.

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