



FIRE SEASON

ATTACK ON FIRES BECOMES AN ASSAULT ON THE FOREST ITSELF.

STORY & PHOTOS BY JAMES JOHNSTON

EDITOR'S NOTE: Outdoor writer and environmental activist James Johnson is chairman of the Many Rivers Group of the Sierra Club Oregon Chapter, representing 3,000 members in Lane, Douglas and Coos counties.

Base Camp

It's July 25, and the Clark Fire has been raging in Fall Creek for 12 days, transforming the nearby town of Lowell into base camp for a massive military-style campaign. The outfield of the high school baseball field is a tent city housing a thousand fire fighters. Semi trailers and prefabricated shelters house laundry facilities, showers, a first aid clinic and a cafeteria. Tons of supplies — everything from crates of Gatorade to piles of Nomex shirts — crowd the sidewalks and parking lot.

Inside, classrooms have been transformed into high-tech nerve centers that resemble Pentagon war rooms. A math classroom labeled "Communications" houses a bank of radios that crackle with staccato reports from "forward observers," "overhead support," medics, and "division commanders." Another classroom has been transformed

into the "Operations Center," where serious looking men and women in uniform are hunched over laptop computers, the walls covered by charts and maps with names like "Analysis of Tactical Applications" and "Operational Planning Worksheet." Other classrooms labeled "Logistics," "Security" "Public Information," and "Finance" are jammed with more computers, phones, fax machines, photocopiers and administrative staff.

Putting out forest fires in this day and age, says Dale Gardner, in typically understated fashion, "can be a pretty complicated process."

If the Clark Fire is a military campaign, Gardner is its general. A short unassuming man, this is Gardner's 41st season fighting fires, and his eighth as the incident commander of the Northwest Oregon Interagency Incident Management Team, one of 51 teams of fire behavior specialists and planners responsible for extinguishing the

large fires that have become a fixture on the federal forestlands of Oregon and throughout the West.

Today Gardner is pointing at a map labeled "Clark Incident Wild Fire Suppression Analysis." The map is the focal point of the entire operation, a detailed diary of the fire's advance across the rugged ravines and ridges of the Fall Creek watershed, and the Incident Management Team's deployments to halt its spread. The map shows good news. According to the Wild Fire Suppression Analysis the fire's has been stopped in its tracks.

"This is a computer driven program," deadpans Gardner, "so you know it's right."

The Asbestos District

Wildfire in the Fall Creek watershed seems as incongruous as a baseball game at the bottom of the ocean. The "asbestos district" as Forest Service rangers jokingly call it, is a temperate rainforest of dew-drenched ferns, moss draped logs, and cathedral-like Douglas fir, western hemlock and red cedar trees. Hundreds of thousands of visitors come to Fall Creek during the hot summer months, drawn to the emerald green swimming holes, abundant campsites and hiking trails just 45 minutes east of Eugene-Springfield.

Last month, record high temperatures and low humidity turned the normally lush forest into a tinderbox. On the afternoon of July 13, someone just downstream of the Clark Creek Campground ignited brush and grass and touched off a blaze that quickly became a crown fire, an inferno that climbed into the dense upper canopy of Fall Creek's old-growth forest and leapt from tree to tree, incinerating the popular Johnny Creek Nature Trail and Bedrock Campground, forcing campers to flee, leaving behind tents, clothes, coolers and even their pets.

On July 14, the Northwest Oregon Interagency Incident Management Team had taken over command of the fire, which had swelled to more than 900 acres. Flames almost 300 feet tall jumped Fall Creek and began marching north and east into a steep bowl formed by Slick, Bedrock and Jones Creeks. Fall Creek canyon, normally shrouded in thick early morning mist, was now almost totally obscured by a thick cloud of smoke. Gardner's team relied on infrared-equipped aircraft to fix the fire's location and line of advance, and began mapping out a containment strategy based on topography and wind direction. They picked the ridgeline to the northeast of the bowl as the place for firefighters to make their stand.

Forest Fighting

Timothy Ingalsbee is the director of the Eugene-based Western Fire Ecology Center, and an outspoken critic of many fire suppression tactics.

"It's a misnomer that they're fighting fires, in fact they're fighting the forest," says the former Forest Service wildland firefighter. "They use all the tools and ideology of warfare and they assault a forest ecosystem."

On the ridgeline overlooking the Clark Fire, crews fell trees and clear vegetation with bulldozers and by hand along roads and ridgelines. On July 16th, the fire made quick runs up the steep canyon of Jones Creek on the critical eastern side of the fire, forcing crews to evacuate. But heavy-lift helicopters armed with buckets large enough to hold an SUV kept the flames in check until weather conditions allowed firefighters to complete the line.

When these lines are completed, crews battling big blazes in the backcountry fight fire with fire. They use a variety of incendiary devices — everything from hand-held drip torches to giant flamethrowers mounted on the underside of helicopters — to torch thousands of acres of forest in the path of a fire. If the direction of the wind holds, the fire dies for lack of fuel. Firefighters themselves torched as much as half of the 5,000 acres of forest burned in the Clark Fire.

"The public thinks that the Forest Service is fighting fires," says Ingalsbee, "but they're actually starting fires. It's a search and destroy mission, logging hundreds of acres to create a line, then burning thousands more. What we're going to find out in the next couple of years is the collateral damage that's been done to Fall Creek."

"Wildfire," he adds, "not logging and aggressive fire