

Fires: 'Log it, graze it or watch it burn'

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36, voiced concerns about "mismanagement" of government lands. Their comments mirrored those of ranchers in southeastern Oregon after the massive 582,313-acre Long Draw and 430,000-acre Holloway fires of 2012.

"These fires are not a surprise for those of us who live and work in eastern Washington. We've been warning about the potential disastrous effects of federal and state management policies for many years," said Nicole Kuchenbuch.

Agencies have allowed forests to become overgrown and unhealthy, consumed by underbrush that's fuel for fires, she said.

"Agencies tell us to keep our cattle out of creek bottoms, but there's no grass elsewhere because they don't thin forests," she said.

Sod was so thick in Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife grasslands from 20 years of no cattle grazing that it took bulldozers two and three passes to cut fire lines to soil, she said, adding that sod can be a fuel that's almost impossible for firefighters to extinguish.

While ranchers have lobbied for change, nothing happens because of the political strength of environmentalists and the Endangered Species Act, the Kuchenbuchs said.

Haeberle calls them "asphaltites — born on asphalt, raised on concrete and living in a world of plastic flowers."

Sandra Kaiser, spokeswoman for the Washington State Department of Natural Resources, said the agency is fully on board with thinning forests to decrease their fire fuel load.

"Last biennium we requested \$20 million from the Legislature and got \$10 million for forest health treatment and thinning," she said. "It's essential to preparing landscape to resist fire. It's work that needs to be done."

Stark difference

About 370 miles to the south, near John Day, retired U.S. Bureau of Land Management forester Bob Vidourek, pointed out the difference in the way federal forests were formerly managed and how they are managed today.

He oversaw projects from 2003 to 2007 that thinned some of the 2,500 acres of BLM land that abuts U.S. Forest Service and private land on Little Creek Mountain. The projects included a timber sale, thinning stands and clearing out a large amount of slash.

On Aug. 28, the Canyon Creek fire roared through Forest Service land and crested Little Creek Mountain. Vidourek's home was put on a Level 3 "leave immediately" evacuation order but he wasn't worried. The BLM land that had been thinned and cleaned up several years earlier was separating the blaze from his home.

"I was never really worried," he said. "I knew if it got into that stand, it wouldn't burn too hot."

The fire did burn some of the BLM land but slowed considerably and stopped 1,000 feet from Vidourek's house.

Vidourek said he faced



Rancher Casey Kuchenbuch herds cattle toward his home field during the Okanogan fire, Aug. 18. More than 2 million acres of Washington state has burned this summer, impacting scores of ranches.

North Central Washington wildfires*

Four large wildfires burning in or near Okanogan County, Washington, have scorched roughly 600,000 acres. Last year's Carlton Complex was the state's largest on record, burning more than 256,000 acres.

2015 2014

- Chelan Complex**
 - Acres: 93,694
 - Containment: 55%
- Carlton Complex (2014)**
 - Acres: 256,108
 - Containment: Inactive
- Okanogan Complex**
 - Acres: 147,979
 - Containment: 45%
- Tunk Block Fire**
 - Acres: 161,440
 - Containment: 40%
- North Star Fire**
 - Acres: 205,331
 - Containment: 25%

*As of Sept. 2
Sources: inciweb.nwcg.gov; gacc.nfic.gov/nwcc
Alan Kenaga/Capital Press

Map showing the locations of five major wildfires in North Central Washington, including Chelan, Carlton, Okanogan, Tunk Block, and North Star. The map includes county names (Okanogan, Chelan, Douglas, Grant, Lincoln), cities (Tonasket, Omak, Okanogan, Nespelem, Coulee Dam, Brewster, Twisp, Carlton), and major roads (Highways 20, 97, 153, 173, 174, 155, 172). A legend indicates the 2015 fires in red and 2014 fires in blue. An inset map shows the area in detail within Washington state.

many hurdles when he tried to get the forest management projects going, but was eventually able to overcome them.

"I'm confident that the work we did probably saved some of these houses," he said, pointing to other nearby homes. The fire "killed everything on the other side of the mountain. I'm confident the work we did slowed the fire down."

Fire mismanagement

Beside land mismanagement, ranchers involved in Western fires in recent years allege state and federal miscues in fighting fires, while praising efforts of local firefighters.

In the Long Draw and Holloway fires in Oregon three years ago, ranchers accused the BLM of letting land burn to expand designated wilderness areas. The BLM denied it.

In Washington's 256,108-acre Carlton fire last year, many ranchers and others believe the DNR let the fire go to gain more federal dollars. More than 200 landowners are preparing to file a lawsuit seeking more than \$75 million in damages for what their attorney says was "a series of intentional and negligent actions."

In this year's Okanogan fire, a Pine Creek rancher, Gerald Scholz, blamed DNR backburning for the loss of his grazing land, timber and hay.

He treated cattle with burned feet and sold others, saying he would have to reduce his herd from 700 to 200 for winter.

"Gerald told them not to backburn anything up here. He's been fighting fire 30 years and was adamant we didn't need it," said his wife, Bobbi.

Kaiser, the DNR spokeswoman, said she would have to find out the facts of the situation before commenting.

Okanogan County Commissioner Jim DeTro said he repeatedly asked an agency — he declined to say which one — not to backburn in Pine Canyon, but it did. As a result, the dozen or so ranches along Pine Creek lost their spring and fall grazing ground.

"The fire swept around the east side and five hours after they did that burnout they were evacuating Pine Creek, Crumbacher development and Riverside," DeTro said.

DNR stepped up on early lightning strikes, using smoke jumpers on initial attacks, DeTro said. "Then it had one or two major screw-ups that turned into catastrophic situations."

Things went well once Type 1 management teams, which handle major wildfires, arrived, he said.

DNR contracted with Gebbers Farms, of Brewster, which used six Caterpillar D-8 bulldozers to build and hold a line

on the south of the fire, he said.

There are a lot of good firefighters, but there was lack of coordination and delays of engagement, said rancher Casey Kuchenbuch.

'Tough decision'

"We had a tough decision. Move our cows and save them or go build a Cat line," Kuchenbuch said. "I was promised by a head official he would have a Cat up there. It never happened. We saved our cows. If I'd gone and had Gebbers with me there's a high percentage chance I might have saved the rest of my summer range ..."

"We recognize they had limited resources and a massive fire," Haeberle said.

But a Forest Service consultant turned around Gebbers' Cats and "they backburned the rest of our summer range and our cabin to try to save the town," Haeberle said.

State and federal firefighters went back to camp for the night, but local firefighters and volunteers held lines all night because "it was our land and our homes," Nicole Kuchenbuch said.

Ranch losses

Haeberle lost all of his 6,000 acres of spring and fall pastures on the hillsides on both sides of the still green val-

ley floor where their Black Angus now graze fields intended for hay and fall forage. He lost half his Forest Service grazing allotment summer range, 200 tons of premium alfalfa hay and many miles of fencing that costs about \$20,000 per mile.

They rescued 120 cow-calf pairs but 60 are missing. They figure they will have to reduce their herd of 425 pairs and 100 replacement heifers and buy up to 750 tons of hay at about \$150,000 to compensate for three months of extra feeding, split between fall and spring. Usually, they are self-sufficient with their own hay and grazing.

Because of the fire damage, their grazing will be drastically reduced for two or three years.

Well over 200 cattle, hay and hobby ranches were impacted by the Okanogan, Tunk and North Star fires, DeTro said. Of that, about 20 are operations with more than 200 head of cattle that lost their spring and fall pastures, portions or all of grazing allotments and haystacks.

Cass Gebbers, co-owner of Gebbers Farms and Gamble Land & Timber, said he lost most of the rest of his DNR grazing allotments in this year's fire that he didn't lose in the Carlton fire last year.

Altogether, 95 percent of his allotments are burned out, and this year so far he has 18 cows dead, 33 badly maimed and 46 pairs and 10 bred heifers missing, he said.

"We barely got out of the west fork of Rock Creek (gathering cattle) when the fire boiled out of there. It sounded like a jet engine," Gebbers said.

Early on, lightning ignited just inside the "donut hole," acres of his private range he saved last year. "We threw everything we had on it and nailed it in five to 10 acres just an hour before high winds hit," he said.

Gebbers' Cats built and held a line on the south side of the fire, just north of Highway 20, and received "much more government support in holding it" than they did last year, he said.

"Government guys were stretched real thin. The morn-

ing of the Chelan Reach fire, fires were popping everywhere (from lightning) and guys were scrambling," he said.

About 130 miles to the northeast in Lauer, Wash., rancher Len McIrvine said the Stickpin, Graves Mountain and Renner Lake fires came together on his range. He said he's losing about 200,000 acres of grazing allotments, but saved 300 to 400 head of cattle and doesn't know the fate of 300 to 400 others.

"Up to now, no one's really done anything to stop the fires. It's just protecting houses. It's a let-burn policy. It's the plan all along. It's a proposed wilderness area so they (Forest Service) wouldn't put a bulldozer in there. Later they did," McIrvine said.

"All these fires, the last 20 years they let them burn. They refuse to come in and stomp out a little lightning strike. They use all the resources to save a little shack and lose billions of dollars of livestock and timber," he said.

He agreed with the Kuchenbuchs that the underlying problem is build up of forest and sod fuel loads from no logging, thinning and grazing.

"A big sign that went up this spring in Colville says, 'Public lands. Log it, graze it or watch it burn,'" he said.

Helping out

Help has come from many directions.

At the request of the Okanogan County Cattlemen's Association, Monte and Laurie Andrews, owners of Ag-Tech Farm Services in Okanogan, are coordinating hay that's been donated from as far away as Spokane, the Tri-Cities, Ellensburg and Mt. Vernon.

As of Aug. 31, the feed store had received about 1,000 tons.

"Cattle loss is not as great as what we first thought it would be, maybe 5 percent, but a lot of ranchers haven't found their cattle yet," Monte Andrews said.

In The Dalles, Elizabeth Turner offered 1,200 acres of dry pasture. Depending on the weather, it could hold 50 to 100 pair for two months and with wheat stubble straw maybe longer, she said.

Oregon Country Natural Beef Co-op is making a list of resources, she said.

"My hope is (burned out) ranchers don't have to sell their cows, because once you sell them it's almost impossible to buy bred cows later," Turner said. "If there's enough resources to move those animals around and not sell them, it's better for feedlots and everyone in the Northwest."

A lot of the help came in the form of neighbors helping one another. Oliver, the Seneca rancher, said a lot of ranchers dropped what they were doing and rushed to help him and others who were fighting to protect their operations.

"It's pretty shocking how many people dropped everything they were doing and came and helped us out," he said. "We had a pile of help."

Capital Press staff writer Dan Wheat reported from Okanogan, Wash., and staff writer Sean Ellis reported from John Day.

Fick: 'I'm really excited to be a head coach'

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every day.' But we're coming up with different workouts, different routes and different coaches and teams to coordinate with. I enjoy all that."

You really wouldn't expect anything less from Fick.

A counselor at the high school, Fick takes an intense interest in the lives of his student-athletes.

"Working at the high school as a counselor, I get to work closely with a lot of students, but coaching is a fun way to get to know kids in a different way, and get out and get some exercise," he said.

And Fick knows the hills, streets and trails of Astoria pretty well by now.

Success as student runner

As a student at Astoria (Class of 2000), Fick closed out his prep cross-country ca-

reer with a 19th-place finish in the 1999 OSAA state meet at Lane Community College, where the Fishermen placed seventh in the team standings.

And that was back in the days of the old four-classification OSAA, when it was a lot tougher to place at state.

The current Astoria cross-country program may be going through some lean years, but the tradition is still there, as are the familiar names who have always been a part of the program. And they're all there to offer a hand, Fick said.

"It's great to have those resources to lean on. I consult a lot with John Goodenberg and coach (Carl) Dominy around some of their workouts, and continue to design some of my own workout plans.

"Being an Astoria alum, it's fun to come back and — having run under their coach-

ing — have a different role. I really enjoy that."

Father figure

Fick's father, Mark Fick, has logged thousands of hours as a high school coach in Clatsop County, most recently as both the girls and boys basketball coach at Jewell High School.

"My dad has lots of great experience working with kids and just being a positive figure, encouraging them and focusing on teamwork, hard work ethic ... I try to build on some of those lessons that he's taught me," said Fick, who just happens to focus on a different sport than his dad.

"Being an assistant track coach last spring was a great introduction," he said. "I'm really excited to be a head coach. It can make for some long days, but I love it."

— Gary Henley

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