



Steve Tool/Chieftain

Mike Hayward (left), chairman of the Wallowa County Board of Commissioners, discusses county fire response strategy for the Falls Creek Fire with Wallowa County Emergency Services Director Paul Karvoski in the parking lot of the Hurricane Creek Grange Hall on the morning of Aug. 22.

Ranchers round up herds in front of fire

Cows now eating hay meant for winter grazing

By Kathleen Ellyn
Wallowa County Chieftain

As the Grizzly Bear Complex fire roared across Grouse Flats north of Troy, the ranchers at Anchor Bar, their friends and their neighbors fought with everything they had to preserve the barns and homes on their ranch. The ranch is spread out widely, so in fighting that fire, the cowboys slowed the fire down and may have played a large part in saving the little community of Grouse Flats.

Buck and Chelsea Matthews, managers of the Anchor Bar (Burns Ranch), were still scrambling to round up cattle and haul them to safety as the Grizzly Bear Complex turned for Eden Bench Monday morning.

"Buck hasn't had three hours sleep in three days," said Chelsea Matthews.

Her concern Monday morning was a rumor that the Forest Service was going to backburn Eden Bench. "We still have 300 cows there," she said. "We're trying pretty hard to get word to the Forest Service that we would really like the opportunity to get them out."

The cattle on Eden Bench were on a grazing allotment on Forest Service land. Because of the remoteness and size of the ranch, the roundup was being coordinated by radio. Cell phones don't work.

But landlines still do. The Matthews contacted Wallowa County Commissioners in Enterprise to intercede on their behalf Monday morning and Commissioner Paul Castilleja headed for their ranch as Commissioner Mike Hayward headed for the Incident Management Team headquarters in Elgin.

Hayward called early Monday afternoon with the news that the Forest Service was not planning a back burn near the cows on Eden Bench. But the winds were pushing the fire toward Eden Bench all the same.

"The Forest service is working with Buck to see if he can get some extra cowboys in there safely and get those cows gathered," Hayward said. "Matthews told us that normally gathering these cows takes two months. We're hoping to speed that process up. Everybody is plugged in together."

In the end, Matthews and

'We lost tons of pasture and timber, probably around 6,000 acres, but what our friends and (fellow) ranchers did was outstanding.'

Chelsea Matthews

Markeson decided to get the cows on their own.

"That's really dangerous country and Buck is not willing to put anyone else in danger," Chelsea Matthews said. "They're going to stay safe and do the best they can. They've got radios and are in touch with the Forest Service."

All of the other stock on the 10,000-acre ranch are accounted for, Chelsea Matthews said.

"All the home ranch cows are all right," she said. "We lost tons of pasture and timber, probably around 6,000 acres, but what our friends and (fellow) ranchers did was outstanding. They hauled 20 head of ranch horses out in the middle of the night. They moved cows onto the burnt area after the fire passed through because everything else was grass that could have been burned."

The cows on the burnt area are now eating up the hay intended for winter and the fall feed is ashes, Williams said.

"We'll have to get our cattle out of here eventually, our fall feed is pretty much gone," she said.

That extraction project will be undertaken by the Baremore Ranch in Wallowa and the cattle will be taken to Cody Tippet's ranch in Wallowa, Matthews said.

The structures on the ranch were all preserved, Matthews said, thanks to the two water trucks the ranch operates and the work of Buck Matthews, ranch owners Mike and Pat Burns, ranch hand Josh Markeson, local Enterprise ranchers Todd and James Nash, Kevin McCadden and Collin Cunningham, Collin's friend Jared Wingfield and Matthews' friends Lou Heytvelt of Pomeroy, Wash., and Joe Platz of Union — both experienced at structure protection. A Forest Service helicopter assisted with water dumps on the structures.

Falls Creek Fire growing

By Steve Tool

Wallowa County Chieftain

The Falls Creek Fire, located in the Eagle Cap Wilderness and on some private property about 2 miles above the Hurricane Creek trailhead, has grown to about 250 acres as of the morning of Aug 25. The fire has forced the closure of Upper Hurricane Creek Road to all but fire personnel and residents as well as causing the issuance of a Level 1 (get ready)

evacuation notice to nearby areas. The fire was reported by a hiker at about 7:28 a.m. on Aug. 22.

The fire also resulted in the closure of the Hurricane Creek Trail as well as the Falls Creek Trail within the wilderness area.

About 116 personnel from multiple agencies, including the U.S. Forest Service, the Oregon Department of Forestry and the Joseph City Fire Department are on the ground fighting the fire. Four engines

and two water tankers are in service on the blaze, while several helicopters are being shared with the Grizzly Bear Complex Fire near Troy. Wallowa County Emergency Services and the Sheriff's Office are assisting with closing off Hurricane Creek Road and serving evacuation notices.

A USFS Type 3 Incident Command Team assumed command of the fire with Francis Tyler as the team's commander on Aug. 23. Smoke jumpers were flown into the Joseph Airport, but were transported to the fire by vehicle before hiking in due to poor visibility.

At a public information meeting held at the Joseph Community Center on Aug. 23, USFS officials said computer models showed the fire had little chance of reaching residences or other structures. Nevertheless, plans were implemented for the strategic placement of firefighting equipment near some residences for structural protection in the event of a "worst case scenario" incident. "It's highly unlikely the fire will head in that direction, but if the very worst

happens, we don't want to be scrambling around looking for equipment," Tyler said.

Jamie Knight, a public information officer with the ODF, said that because of the fire's proximity to residences, permission was granted for special tactics on the wilderness area. "There is special language that allows for mechanical equipment to be authorized for these situations. In this case, motorized equipment such as chainsaws and pumps, but MIST (Minimal Impact Suppression Tactics) tactics will still be used," she said.

Knight also said a fire investigator was already in place by Aug. 22 and is still on scene investigating the cause of the blaze, which is listed as undetermined.

The fire is projected to move north into Falls Creek and south toward Deadman Creek with weather concerns including the wind switching to southerly flow on Aug. 26 along with higher temperatures, lower relative humidity and a Red Flag Warning. The fire is zero percent contained with an estimated containment date of Sept. 10.

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