

FIRES

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The panel cited multiple examples of state Department of Natural Resources and USFS-led interagency fire teams refusing to attack fires last summer, watching them burn and in two cases backburning private timber and pastures without permission of the landowner or in direct defiance of their pleas not to do it.

Contacted later, USFS and DNR spokespeople said those agencies are working to reduce fire loads by thinning and prescribed burns.

Cathy Dowd, a USFS Okanogan-Wenatchee National Forest spokeswoman, said when the USFS doesn't attack a fire its because there is no safe place from which to do so.

"Folks may not think we are doing anything, but we are definitely managing and monitoring from the air and in other ways and looking for ways to engage and suppress it," Dowd said. "All this year's fires were suppression fires, meaning the goal was to put them out," she said.

DNR Northeast Region Manager Loren Torgerson said it was the toughest fire season the state has experienced, that firefighters risk their lives daily and three died doing so. "We saved many people, homes and ranches and earned their heartfelt thanks," he said.

He said DNR needs more resources for preventative thinning and fire fighting and urged the Cattlemen's Association to support that request.

Traditional fire suppression slowly begins behind fires and fire lines are built along flanks, Jim DeTro, Okanogan County commissioner and a smoke jumper from 1967 to 1973, said at the meeting.

"Eventually, the beast wanes. They encircle it and claim victory but only when nature allows. But the dragon takes its toll. Firefighters earn overtime and hazardous duty pay and they accept failure and loss with no regard to how the loss could be prevented on the next event," DeTro said.

In Pine Creek, Gerald Scholz and other ranchers built a fire line with bulldozers that held, but agencies wanted to backburn the area, including private ground, DeTro said. They did so even after they promised not to in response to Scholz's pleas, he

said. The next day DeTro confronted the official who said he wouldn't backburn and he "said I didn't understand the difference between backburn and backfire," DeTro said.

A backburn is suppose to be relatively small, but the area was not tied together by fire lines, he said. "We warned them about the wind, but they did it anyway and it got away from them," he said.

"Guys are getting way to happy with their drip torches (for backburning). If these agencies have that kind of attitude they might as well backfire to the Pacific Ocean," DeTro said.

One third of the 600,000 acres burned this year in the Okanogan, Tunk Block and North Star fires was caused by backburning, he said.

Craig Vejraska, an Omak rancher and former Okanogan County commissioner, said agencies burned his private timber, which is his bank account, without asking permission and just a week ago burned what grass he had left to complete a blackened area.

"It could have saved our bacon and now we have 700 cattle looking for a home," he said.

"We should take the incident command away and give it and the money to the Riverside Fire Department. They put out a hell of a lot more fire than DNR," he said.

He yelled at two USFS officials for being part of the problem. Earlier they talked about forest management and they responded that was their arena, not fire fighting.

Dowd, of the USFS, didn't know anything about Scholz and Vejraska's claims. DNR spokeswoman Sandra Kaiser said DNR staff contacted Scholz but he was unable to provide any names or details about his claims. Scholz could not be reached for comment, but his wife, Bobbi, said she's not aware of DNR contacting him. The fire had been stopped, then DNR backburned in the wind despite their pleas not too, destroying their timber and shed full of hay, she said.

"We can blame USFS all we want. USFS is dysfunctional, but who makes it so?" asked state Rep. Joel Kretz, R-Wauconda, and a rancher. He said Congress has to change forest management.

"We are in a critical situation right now where virtually every rancher is burned out. We need every inch of WDFW land made available for grazing to maintain an industry," Vejraska said.

While state agencies are asking for more money to fight fires, Kretz said they shouldn't get any until they perform.

In the 2014 Carlton fire, "huge (public) resources sat in town," Brewster, while Gebbers Farms bulldozers and 180 Gebbers orchard sprayers with water saved the town, Kretz said.

"If you look at a map of that fire, you see a big green donut hole in the middle. Part of it was private (Gebbers) and part of it was public that had been thinned. But the big difference was Gebbers crews got in there and actually fought fire," Kretz said.

"I went up on the fire with Gebbers folks. We saw occasional state rigs looking at maps and smoke and when they did see any smoke they headed toward the fire," he said.

"What you hear from the state is that it's catastrophic. That they can't fight them. They talk safety. You can't go in when its crowning out (in tree tops) at 40 mph winds, but watching Gebbers they didn't go into the teeth of the fire but got ahead of it and didn't put in scratchy thin fire lines but two D-8s (Caterpillar dozers) side by side," Kretz said.

"I saw a complete and utter inability (by fire officials) to make a decision. They would say you can put in a fire line but can you use a D-4, not a D-8? They're worried about environmental impacts, but it's a fire," he said.

DNR officials have a "smug" attitude when questioned later, saying they've heard stories and will have to run them down to see if they are true, he said.



Courtesy of Joan Gilbert

From left to right: Author Joan Gilbert, Sebastian Hobbs, James Madsen, Rachel Frolander, Reece Christman, Brett Greenshields and Cole Farwell pose in front of The Bookloft in Enterprise on Friday. The teens are six of the 33 kids who worked on the original film in 2011.

BOOK

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Each of the projects ultimately was sold at the Enterprise Education Foundation dinner auction, with all proceeds going to programs that support arts and music. All proceeds from the new book will go to the foundation as well.

The 2011 project was ambitious, to say the least. The students created and designed the characters, built the sets, took every shot of the tedious stop-motion animation process.

It took five months to complete the six-minute film.

And those crafty kids? They're all sophomores in high school now. Gilbert still sees many of them, and some are still into animation. But the slow process of the craft isn't for everyone.

"At the time, a few said, 'I'm never doing this again,'" Gilbert said.

BOOK SIGNINGS

WALLOWOLOGY*
Joseph, 1-3 p.m. Dec. 4

MAD MARY'S
Joseph, 1-3 p.m. Dec 5

LOOKING GLASS BOOKS,
La Grande, 3-5 p.m. Dec 18

BOOKLOFT*
Enterprise, 1-3 p.m. Dec 19

* Book signing to include showing of original film

"Wallowa Lake — The Real Story" also is available at Book and Game in Walla Walla and Bookworm in Kennewick. If you're unable to support a local book store, you also can purchase it at amazon.com

Gilbert said she's applied for the Made in Oregon designation for her new book, and that it has been selling well.

"People seem to like it. It's a cute story with a little twist

at the end."

Gilbert has scheduled several upcoming book signings at local book stores. A few will include showings of the original film.

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