

# Firewise program helped save Pine Creek homes

By Bill Dean  
Public Information Officer,  
Canyon Creek Complex

It was early afternoon when the fire took off, producing significant columns of smoke, watched by an already devastated community. Homes, barns and forests were impacted for more than three weeks by the Canyon Creek Complex fire. Families affected earlier by the fire were already working through the recovery process. Other families however, were anxiously waiting their turn, monitoring the fire's progress as they prepared to evacuate and wondering if their homes would succumb to one of "mother nature's" devastating forces. The fire was well anchored in the rugged and remote areas of the Strawberry Wilderness after making a run across rural communities along Canyon Creek. Fire managers struggled to control the fire, as firefighting resources were in short supply due to numerous dangerous fires in the region.

Encouraged by gusty southwest winds, the fire made a run out of the wilderness. In the fire's path sat the small, dispersed community of Pine Creek. The Grant County Sheriff's Office made the call in the early afternoon to evacuate residents. As flames moved swiftly down the slopes, firefighters strategically maneuvered around the fire's advances, skillfully knowing when to retreat to safer positions. The fate of homes and property was obscured by smoke and terrain.

Barely two years earlier, residents of the Pine Creek community came together to write a Firewise plan, and began making their homes and property more resilient from wildfire's impacts. Firewise, a project of the National Fire Protection Association, is a collaborative community program that encourages local solutions to fire protection by involving homeowners and stressing individu-

al responsibility for preparing their homes from the risk of wildfire. It is cosponsored by the USDA Forest Service, the U.S. Department of the Interior, and the National Association of State Foresters.

The Pine Creek community's attitude wasn't "if" it was "when" fire would burn through their property. Resident Howard Gieger led the way with many other community members preparing and implementing the Firewise plan. Together, they learned fire behavior, fire proofing techniques and evacuation tips. Learning the different evacuation levels helped them prepare to evacuate, not just themselves but also pets and livestock.

The Pine Creek community held meetings, potlucks and work parties, helping each other with ideas, motivation and physically improving their properties. These community members did most of the work themselves and helped their neighbors, pruning, mowing, thinning trees and improving access routes by clearing away dense vegetation. They built a bridge to provide an emergency ATV route across a creek, located water sources and set up sprinklers where it made sense.

After the fire passed through and the smoke subsided, all of the Firewise participants' homes survived. Howard built his home in 1978 and it is all that he and his wife have. Upon the Gieger's return, Howard said they were so thankful for what they found. The fire burned through their property and all around their home, but the home itself was unaffected.

Howard was happy to help out by taking care of his part. Firefighters said Howard and his neighbors should pat themselves on the back for all the preparations they did.

—Bill Dean is a public information officer on the Canyon Creek Complex.

# The long wait begins

Woman spends several days to learn the fate of her cabin

By Yvonne Pepin-Wakefield  
For the Blue Mountain Eagle

Artist and author Yvonne Pepin-Wakefield built a log cabin above Pine Creek in 1975. Since the Canyon Creek Complex fire began, she has spent at least nine nights sleeping in the back of her truck at the Grant County Fairgrounds to be as close as she could to her cabin, which was in danger of burning. Following is her story.

I was 18 years old when I set out to build a log cabin on 80 acres I bought abutting the Strawberry Mountain Wilderness. Along with the cabin, I built an extended family with the people of Grant County.

On Aug. 14, I set out from my home in The Dalles to spend a quiet weekend at the cabin. As I drove east of Dayville, an eerie plume bloomed — a rangeland wildfire I figured, hoping it was nowhere near the direction I was heading. But it was.

The plume continued to billow, covering the sun, shedding a bloody glow over the land.

By the time I arrived, it was clear I should not have been here; burning embers rained down. I knelt by the creek below the cabin to bless this place fast becoming like the nearby forest, beyond prayer.

In minutes, tearing smoke and smoldering pine cones and moss tossed by the inferno a mile away forced me to say good-bye to the longest relationship in my life, this log cabin. I took only a sleeping bag and left behind everything I'd built here to burn.

By the time I hit the county road, the evacuation had begun. I pulled to the roadside and watched an exodus of trailers, cars and trucks, people like me fleeing.

My parents died when I was a kid, leaving me with an inheritance I used to buy the land where I built the cabin from trees in the forest. Through loss, I've known my share of desperation. But nothing like the helplessness I felt now.

I returned the second day of the fire. I hauled buckets of water up from the creek, dousing the perimeter until a neighbor below Pine Creek arrived on an ATV to say, "It's useless. Four hoses were on a house in Canyon City, and it burned to the ground. Just leave," he said.

Halfway down the rutty mountain road I was stopped by four firefighting vehicles heading up. They came to assess how to save the cabin. If hope had a color, it would be the value of yellow in the fire shirts covering their backs.

Always super fire conscious, I cleared trail if needed in a forest fire evacuation as part of Eastern Oregon's first Firewise program. Now, the fire crews planned to use it to bring heavy equipment to cut fire lines. They also ordered a pump to keep a hose spraying from the creek. All of this would take days.



Contributed photo

Yvonne Pepin-Wakefield with her therapy dogs, Henry and Zachary



Contributed photo

The cabin built by Yvonne Pepin-Wakefield when she was 18 years old was threatened by the Canyon Creek Complex.

For the next three days, I was allowed through the blockade but spent the nights sleeping in my truck at the fairgrounds relief center alongside other evacuees, many not as lucky as me.

On the fourth day, firefighters in full gear appeared out of the wilderness. I was inside cleaning the cabin as if to prepare a body for burial when I saw them through the window. They were tying pink surveyor's tape to trees to mark fire line, and I was told it was time for me to leave and not to return until their work was done.

I returned home to The Dalles, but I couldn't stop thinking about John Day; I wanted to be there desperately to help out in some way. What I could do is offer petting therapy at fire camp with my two terrier mixes, Henry and Zachary. They are registered therapy dogs and volunteer in hospitals, cancer units and schools. I arrived Aug. 25. That evening, Henry and Zachary sat in a basket with signs, "Petting Station." Streams of firefighters and support personnel stopped to pet "The Boys."

Some of the firefighters have been away from home for months, and they miss their dogs, so Henry and Zachary became nicotine patches for pet withdrawal. Several times crews that were working at my cabin stopped to give a report.

A firefighter bent down to pick up Henry. "I put hoses on your cabin at midnight," he said. It was just 6:30 a.m., and he was heading back to work.

On Friday night, one firefighter showed me a picture of a shed with a hand-painted sign in red, "Thank You Fire Crew!"

"Is this at your place?" she asked. Yes. I painted the sign and nailed it up when I first had to evacuate two weeks before.

"We love to see these signs," she said.

At the 6 a.m. firefighters briefing last Saturday, Steven Beverlin, Malheur National Forest supervisor said, "There are days on a fire. And there are days on a fire. This is one of those days."

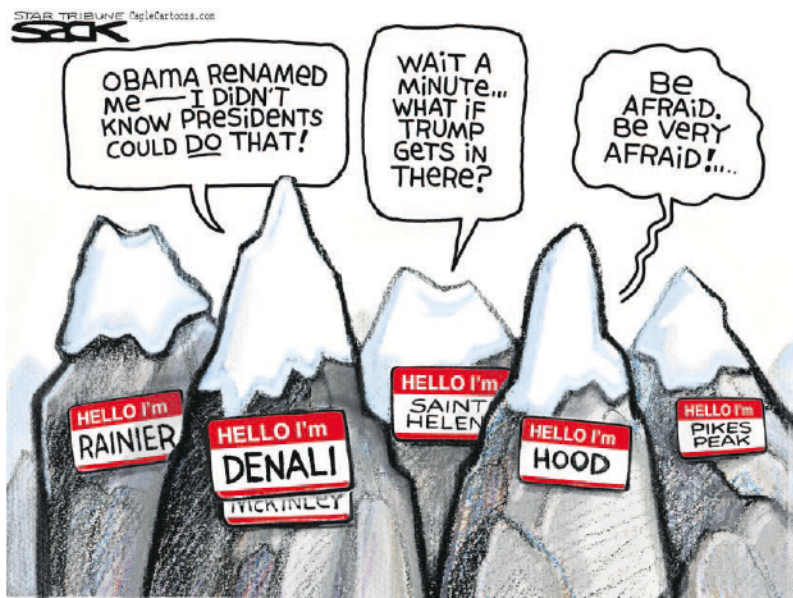
The fire had expanded to nearly 100,000 acres and threatened Prairie City, where some portions were evacuated.

At the pavilion I returned the sleeping bag and pair of shoes given to me earlier. I talked with a couple who were evacuated from Prairie City and another woman whose Canyon Creek house had burned down. "You just take it day by day," she said.

On the drive back home to The Dalles, I stopped at the Red Cross shelter in Mt. Vernon. It wasn't even noon and already 15 persons had registered as new evacuees; at least two of them lived on Pine Creek.

All along the 200-mile trip, I checked my phone for the message I didn't want to get.

Just past Wasco, my cell rang, and I hesitated to pull over before answering what I was sure was bad news. It wasn't. By Saturday afternoon, the fire held and the cabin was still standing.



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## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### Preserving forest for fire fuel

One of the many excuses to restrict use of our public lands by the Walla-Walla-Whitman and Malheur National Forests is that we need to "preserve" our forest for the next generation. The only problem is, the Forest Service isn't doing that. The Forest Service, with assistance from their partners in the local environmental community, allow our forest to degenerate into fuel dense stands waiting to take our homes and property with it.

To preserve has many definitions; to save from decomposition, to keep safe from injury or to reserve for personal or special use.

The only preserving I see is the third, to reserve for personal or special use, to which those special uses seem to be geared only to those who mean to use public lands for their personal enjoyment of "recreational use" which comes from the local environmental groups. That preservation comes at the expense of our friends' and families homes and future generations' needs of the natural resources that are now gone forever.

In the West we are well-schooled in preserving our summer fruits and vegetables. Would anyone who takes part in canning to preserve those resources, go through that work and then open up the cupboard doors and bust every jar with a hammer, and then close the doors and let the mess set?

But yet this is the mentality we are watching unfold in our mountains. It's time it ends, and I hope that this

summer brings the people of Eastern Oregon and the West together to call for sane, active, vegetative management to both the Forest Service and elected county officials who are responsible for protecting the safety, health, and welfare of our local rural communities.

John D. George  
Bates

### A thank you

I would like to thank the U.S. Forest Service, Malheur National Forest, Blue Mountain Ranger District for the professional way in which they handled the preparation, initial attack and transitional attack on the Canyon Creek Complex.

I am an out-of-state task force leader who was called in to assist the district with the possibility of initial attack. When I arrived I was properly briefed, provided with maps and oriented to the district to aid in rapid response.

I was assigned as a TFLD to assist the initial attack incident commander on #270. We were able to use safe firefighting tactics, and initially catch the fire at a little under 10 acres. Several weather events occurred with wind, and low relative humidity that eventually led to the fire escaping initial containment and growing into the Canyon Creek Complex.

The fire management staff, firefighters, dispatchers and resources I worked with had the public's best interest in mind at all times. When the fire made large runs, public and

firefighter safety remained at the top of everyone's list. The incident command team provided thoughtful and decisive leadership and emulated the principles of duty, respect and integrity.

Many times we hear of fires like these costing lives. Many people provided the leadership and local knowledge to keep everyone safe, and engaged in attempts to protect lives, property, and the environment.

I also had the opportunity to work with the local Oregon Department of Forestry, fire program and local fire departments. What an excellent group of firefighters. Both managers and firefighters came in and assisted many times, having to be told to end a shift for their own safety due to needing rest.

Burns Interagency hand crew and Prairie City Ranger District hand crew: Thanks for taking a firefighter from Iowa and orienting me to Eastern Oregon. Without your guidance and knowledge I could not have performed my job in a safe manner.

Finally to the communities of John Day, Canyon City, and Prairie City: I appreciate the hospitality you made a 23-day stay feel like I was at home. Everyone treated the out-of-town firefighters like guests. For that I will always be grateful.

I hope if I am ever in need of assistance I could call on the above mentioned group. If they show up I know that my family would be taken care of in the best possible way.

Jason A. Wickizer  
Harlan, Iowa