Rangeland Wildfires Can Be Good or Bad

By Heather Smith Thomas

After experiencing range fires close up and personal (in July 2000 when our daughter was severely burned while trying to help control a fire and in August 2003 when fire that started on Forest Service land above our ranch "blew up" and swept over 12,000 acres of Forest Service (FS) and Bureau of Land Management (BLM) land, burning some of our range and fences—forcing a frantic effort to save our cattle, and threatening homes along our creek), my husband and I have strong feelings about wildfires. *(Editor's Note: see article "Fire" by Heather Thomas and book review "Beyond the Flames" in this issue.)* Our community lost 2 young men (working as firefighters for the FS) in the summer of 2003 on a different fire.

The West has numerous areas that have suffered many years of drought. This is nothing new; we've gone through drought cycles before. Dry conditions make us sitting ducks for serious fires, especially in areas with high fuel load—where logging and grazing have been minimized or eliminated on federal lands. Fire can be a good land management tool, but we feel that much of our public land has been mismanaged because of policies that attempt to appease an element in our country that wants to "save" every tree and remove livestock from public lands. Some of the folks who think it's immoral to cut a tree or graze the grass seem to have no qualms about that same tree or grass burning up in a fire, and this is a mind-set we do not understand.

The "let it burn" philosophy in our wilderness areas and parks is also questionable when fires become uncontrollable and move onto adjacent overgrown national forests and rangelands or onto private land, destroying usable timber, livestock forage, private property, and sometimes human life. Efforts to control some of these fires after they "escape" puts many people in danger and have resulted in a number of serious and fatal injuries.

People in the West Have Little Input on How the Land Is Managed; or, Fires Are Fought (or Not Fought)

Many of our rural communities in the West are at the mercy of wildfires because a high percentage of our land area is federally owned and we have very little say in how those lands are managed. Our county, for example, is 93% federal land (FS and BLM). During dry years we usually have bad fire seasons that impact ranches and homes. In counties like ours, there is more development pressure on the few private acres; homes are built right next to forests or to rangeland that in some places hasn't been grazed for 50 years or longer, with buildup of grass and tall sage (which burns hot in a range fire).

It's risky to build a home next to forest or heavy sage or the cheatgrass-covered BLM land surrounding a city like Boise (landlocked by federal land that is no longer grazed, creating a tremendous fire hazard on dry years), especially when laws forbid dealing with vegetation on federal land to create a buffer zone. Yet people continue to build right up to the forest or range because other choices are few. In our county, for instance, the "planners" want people to build up on the hills, away from the riparian areas, but this puts homes more at risk from wildfires.

These areas would be safer from devastating fires that destroy millions of dollars of property (and sometimes result in loss of life when people try to fight fires or evacuate) if federal lands next to private land could be judiciously logged

This article has been peer reviewed.

Fire-burned area with all vegetation destroyed.

and grazed. The foothills around Boise, for instance, could be made much safer just by grazing them each spring with cattle or sheep. The cheatgrass is nutritious for a short time while green and growing. Grazing would benefit ranchers, produce a food product from otherwise unproductive land, and create a safer environment—leaving less fuel load when the grass matures and becomes a fire hazard.

The expense of fences (or herding) and stock water structures (or hauling) would be tiny compared to costs resulting from fires. Grazing would be a win/win situation, providing beneficial use for grass while reducing or eliminating a serious hazard that costs millions or billions of dollars on bad fire years when homes are lost and/or heroic efforts must be made to save them. Yet some of the same people who worry about the safety of their homes are the ones who don't want livestock on public lands, thanks to the propaganda efforts of certain environmental groups.

The same situation affects timbered areas near cities, towns, or private land. If these were properly managed and selectively logged or thinned (providing much-needed lumber in an economy where lumber costs have risen astronomically), the trees would go to good use instead of wasted, and private property would be much safer. Fire does not damage a sparsely timbered area as much as it does a jungle of thick old growth with heavy fuel load. It tends to sweep through quickly and not burn as hot, leaving more wildlife habitat intact. Periodic flash fires often improve the habitat by clearing out some trees and brush (and leaving some), improving grasslands and grazing areas. The same effect can be had by selectively logging and thinning a forest, using the trees for human use.

As an example, a man in our community purchased a section of timbered land, with plans to harvest the timber. The section next to it had already been selectively harvested, with some trees left. But before he had a chance to cut his timber, the fire season of 2003 "harvested" it for him, destroying almost all the vegetation, leaving very little cover even for small wildlife. By contrast, the adjacent piece that had already been selectively logged didn't have enough trees to carry a hot fire; the fire swept through and didn't kill the trees or destroy the wildlife habitat.

A buffer zone of selective timber harvest next to private property and landlocked communities (surrounded by federal land) would still provide good wildlife habitat and greatly reduce the risk to property and human life. Fire is never as deadly or destructive when there's not such a heavy fuel load. Periodic fires or selective logging and well-managed grazing can keep these lands much more "healthy." Then a lightning-caused fire might sweep through but not kill everything.

The fire on the creek drainage above our ranch in 2003 was so hot that some areas burned down to the rocks (burning trees, sage, roots, and topsoil), leaving bare spots that may grow nothing for years to come. Most of this area hadn't had a fire for at least 150 years, as determined by old fire marks in growth rings of some of the older fir trees. A few trees were logged in the 1940s and some in the 1970s, but many areas had never been cut, and managing agencies put limits on local firewood and post/pole harvest. In one area, many acres of timber were cut by FS crews, leaving a jungle of downed timber that could have been firewood—except the roads to it were then blocked. That mess of dry wood all burned.

The number of cattle allowed to graze on the FS and BLM allotments had been greatly reduced from what it was in the 1950s, and a rest rotation system had been put in place, leaving large areas totally ungrazed each season. The fuel load in the timbered area was high, and when it burned, it burned hot and deadly—and then the fire roared down across the ungrazed "rested" pasture and onto our BLM allotment, which also had a large amount of timber and dry grass. We put our lives at risk trying to save our cattle.

Air Quality

Entire communities are at risk for respiratory and other health problems for weeks or months some summers, immersed in thick smoke as fires burn out of control around them or smoke is blown in from out-of-control or "let burn" fires many miles away. At times the smoke is so thick you can't see more than 100 feet, and it's not safe to drive on the highway.

Local residents are unhappy about regulatory double standards like rules that don't allow burning (even wood burning stoves) at certain times because of air pollution. Yet our tiny burnings are a drop in the bucket compared to the thick smoke we breathe during fire season. Poor air quality during a bad fire season has put people in the hospital (especially elderly people or those with impaired respiratory function). At times it's unsafe to go out of the house, and smoke seeps into many of our homes.

The Clear Creek fire in 2000, started by lightning in the wilderness area near our community, soon spreading beyond the wilderness area, burned from July 16 until October (our air cleared when it finally rained September 1), burning more than 200,000 acres. It was the largest fire in the continental United States that year. That fire, and smaller ones around it, immersed our valley in thick smoke for 2.5 months, raining ashes on us and creating health problems. The Red Cross distributed air filters/purifiers to some of the people most at risk. The smoke was so thick it obscured the sun and stung our eyes and lungs when we were outdoors, yet we had to be outdoors (as ranchers) to do our work.

A Frivolous Waste

Can we afford to burn up all this timber or grass? Why let it burn when it could be harvested and serve a useful purpose? Yet we let it burn and then sometimes have to mobilize heroic efforts to save private property and lives when these fires go places we don't want them to go, costing taxpayers billions of dollars in firefighting efforts. It's a double expense: the loss of good timber and the expense of fighting the fires after the fact.

Some of the arguments against timber harvest are invalid. Properly managed harvest impacts the land less than does a bad fire because trees can be cut in selected locations, and best management practices can minimize damage to the land. Erosion following a serious fire is much worse than the impact of a properly logged area. Fire can take all the vegetation from a very steep slope, for instance, leaving nothing to hold the soil. In some of our mountain regions this has created mud slides that peel the remaining topsoil from the slopes and deposit it in the streams. Water quality issues from logging are insignificant compared to what Mother Nature has treated us to following a bad fire.

Runoff (a mixture of mud and ashes) from a thunderstorm following the fire.

With the price of lumber today it seems totally illogical and frivolous to let it burn rather than harvest it. Are we so affluent that we can waste this natural resource? We let our own timber burn and yet import a lot of lumber from other countries; much of our lumber today is coming from Canada. And the price keeps going up, making it more difficult for people to afford to build a home. During the summer of 2000 alone, wildfires in the West burned more than 7.4 million acres, equal to a strip 5 miles wide from coast to coast across our whole country. Those fires destroyed enough timber to have built 100,000 homes. Multiply that by many other dry summers that spawn bad fire seasons, and that's an incredible loss!

The loss of property is also tremendous. Many of these fires end up destroying homes, fences, crops, and livestock, wiping out people's livelihoods. The toll in human life is also unacceptably high. During the fire season of 2000, for instance, more than 20 people lost their lives (most of them firefighters), and many, many more were injured or seriously burned.

Management Policies

After being personally involved with fires that affected our community, our family, and our livelihood, such as the Withington Creek fire in 2003 that burned 12,000 acres in mountains behind our ranch (and nearly burned a subdivision of homes on the other side of town), my husband and I are even more critical of land management agencies' policies regarding fires. This criticism is shared by many of the local FS and BLM employees who are also frustrated with policies that do not fit local areas.

On this particular fire (which might have been relatively easily contained and controlled in the first 2 days, with a little more effort), minimal control efforts were made until it grew enough to threaten the housing development next to town. It might have been controlled much sooner with less total manpower, saving a lot of expense and not putting so many people's lives at risk.

After rounding up some of our range cattle the first night and next morning after the fire started, we attended one of the interagency morning meetings to try to find out if the other cattle (in the next drainage) were at risk and if we should gather them also. The fire boss (in charge of this fire) was sent in from Nevada. We were assured the cows were safe, that the fire would not come down the mountain. They thought it would work up to the timberline and burn itself out in the rocks. They didn't think it would become a serious problem, perhaps not understanding our local wind and weather patterns—the afternoon winds and downdrafts and sudden afternoon storms.

A cloud of smoke as the fire intensified as observed from 6 miles away.

The casual attitude from the fire bosses was disturbing to us since we were some of the people at risk. If the agencies had been serious about controlling the fire, they would have attacked it quicker and more diligently, when it was still small. But instead, there were constraints on what the firefighters were allowed to do (such as width of the fire lines and so on). They had meetings every morning, at agency headquarters on the other side of town (about an 18-mile drive to get to the fire afterward), and no one was fighting the fire when it would have been most beneficial. Through that first week, no one went out to fight fire until nearly midday, even though early morning is the best time to make progress, as there's usually more humidity and no wind yet.

And they quit too soon, taking the crews off in the early evening, though nighttime is sometimes a good time to get ahead of a fire when heat and wind are not so intense. They finally left crews on it at night *after* it blew up and made its big run, trying to keep it from going beyond Joe Moore Creek and into the rougher area south along the Lemhi Range, where it might have gone many, many miles with little hope of control, threatening property in other drainages toward Leadore.

We who live on the land could not understand people not getting serious about trying to stop a fire until it's late in the game, putting more people at risk (home owners and firefighters alike). If it were up to us, we'd be out there fighting fire when we could do the most good, but as "civilians" we were not allowed to help. But during some of the mop-up afterward, we took it on ourselves to put out smoldering roots and duff that threatened to start up again and advance into timber on our range and into our private rangeland. On a wetter year with less fire danger, a wait-and-see attitude might be justified, but during drought (especially in an area with high fuel loads), a potentially risky fire should be controlled more quickly. During those several years of drought, our county was the driest it had been in 100 years.

Avoidable Tragedy

With the deaths of 2 young men in the Cramer fire a month earlier that summer (July 22, 2003), we also saw a problem in the agency hierarchy and/or training. In this instance, poor decisions were responsible for the firefighters' deaths, resulting in extensive investigation by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), the USDA Office of the Inspector General, and the FS itself. The FS later reprimanded 6 people, removing some from their jobs, and the fire commander served 18 months of federal probation in lieu of being prosecuted for involuntary manslaughter.

The final reports from investigations took nearly a year to be released. OSHA stated that FS employees in charge of the Cramer fire "willfully" ignored all 10 of the agency's firefighting safety rules and 14 of its 18 "watch-out situations" (these rules and watch-out situations dictate when and where the FS fights fire).

The FS report said the deaths were a result of a series of lapses and miscommunications, including disabling a helicopter (for routine maintenance) at the height of the blaze, sending another helicopter to pick up a nearby firefighter (40 minutes before the 2 men perished) but not telling the pilot about the 2 stranded men (on a ridge near Cramer Creek, with the fire coming up the mountain below them). The men were part of a helitak crew, dropped there to build a landing pad. A crew below them was soon pulled off as the fire advanced up the mountain, yet the 2 men were not notified to pull out. They might have escaped on their own, on foot over the mountain, but did not abandon the landing site they were trying to clear until it was too late because they entrusted their lives to their supervisors and had been told a helicopter was on its way to pick them up. Also, they were not told that a decision had been made (an hour and a half before the fire blew up) to *not* use the landing area they were working on. At that point, they could have walked out over the mountain or been picked up.

The FS report (compiled after investigation by a panel of 10 fire experts) pointed to 9 factors causing the fatalities, including a failure by management to provide oversight of the fire and using the wrong tactics to combat the blaze. Then they were too late to forge a plan to rescue the 2 men.

The USDA report by the Office of the Inspector General stated that poor judgment and a number of safety violations by the fire's commander, district ranger, and other fire bosses contributed to the deaths and concluded, "Had existing FS fire suppression policies and tactics been followed in a prudent manner, particularly by the incident commander, the fatalities … may have been prevented."

A person without adequate firefighting experience should not be in charge of fire crews or making decisions on when and how to manage a fire. You can't always fight fire "by the book"; fire does not always follow the rules. You must be able to make quick and important decisions on the basis of personal experience with fire.

The investigators who scrutinized failures in the Cramer fire recommend overhauling the training program for fire commanders who oversee smaller and less complex blazes (such as the Cramer fire was in its early stages). Yet the fact remains, according to Ted Putman (national expert on deadly fires and one of the government investigators who had spent 22 years investigating entrapment deaths for the FS), that a major cause of fatalities is that fire personnel often stick to a course of action even if adverse changes occur. The deaths in the Cramer fire renewed the debate over when to call it quits. "Almost all the pressure is to fight the fire, with very little planning for disengagement," said Putnam. No fire is worth risking a life. Yet firefighters are taught to stay on task, adhering to the military model their training mimics.

Three years earlier, in July 2000, when our daughter nearly lost her life in one of the fires preceding the Clear Creek fire, a number of people in our community said that this near tragedy made many people more careful and probably prevented an untold number of injuries and possible fatalities during that record fire season. And after the young men died in the Cramer fire in July 2003, whoever was in command of our Withington Creek fire a month later did not hesitate to call *all* the firefighters off the mountain *right now,* when that fire blew up, undoubtedly saving lives; less than an hour later, the fire quickly swept over the whole area where those crews had been. But *why* are these lessons so hard learned? And why do people forget?

In summary, we who live in a fire-influenced environment must be able to work together to prevent or minimize the damage caused by wildfires and the risk to human life. Our community (which includes ranches and homes along our river drainages), surrounded by federal land, is made up of people who make their livelihood from the land or are employed by the government agencies; it is hard to find a family that does not have ties to FS or BLM. Many people work, have worked, or have relatives or friends who have worked full time or part time (sometimes during fire season) for these agencies. During a bad fire year, we hope our homes and livelihood will be safe and strive to fight the fires. Yet we are sometimes thwarted in those efforts by policies that are made in Washington.

My family is grateful for the efforts of firefighters who did a good job of trying to control further advances of the Withington Creek fire (near our ranch) after it "blew up"—and the crews that diligently foamed and wet down homes, trying to protect private property. The sad thing was that these heroic efforts would not have been needed if existing policies about fire were more logical and the fire could have been controlled early on when it was small.

Fire is part of nature. We are not against letting some fires burn. But the decisions regarding fires and the management of vast areas of public land that are part of our natural resources here in the West (and on which our rural communities and many of our larger towns depend for economic stability) are becoming farther and farther removed from our hands. In spite of efforts to involve the grassroots in some of the decision making (and these efforts are well intentioned and sometimes helpful), we feel the trend in this country is strongly pushing the future of these lands out of our hands and that it will continue to make the rural West a mere colony with no "vote" on what happens to our land or to us.

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