



Twenty-two-year-old Kate Blackstock brings home a calf orphaned by the Soda Fire.

OPPOSITE: Mary Blackstock, member of the Owyhee Rangeland Fire Protection Assn., watches the Soda Fire bearing down on the Brandau Ranch. The fire line held to save the place.

## Destruction of the West

*Bureaucratic central planning has failed because there's no incentive to manage the resource right. The more the West burns, the more money the agencies get, and the more lives and livelihoods are ruined.*

*By Judy Boyle*

**W**hen the Soda Fire began in Owyhee County, Idaho, on Aug. 10, 2015, the first responders were members of the Owyhee Rangeland Fire Protection Association (RFPA). These dedicated ranchers are volunteers whose associations have legal agreements with the Bureau of Land Management to be the initial attack on wildfires. (See sidebar on page 74.) The ranchers stayed on the fire for 36 hours, containing it to 640 acres. Then the BLM arrived to mop up, assuring the RFPA volunteers the fire was out and they could go back to ranch work. A few hours later, the fire blew up into the largest in the nation, devastating more than 285,000 acres.

A lightning strike in Canyon Creek near John Day, Ore., was fought by local ranchers to protect their cattle, range, and private property. It was contained at 200 acres when the federal government took over. That fire threatened the towns of John Day and Prairie City, destroying ranches, 26 homes, cattle, and wildlife over 105,000 acres.

Northeast of New Meadows, Idaho, lightning struck a large yellow pine. Federal workers were called in to assess the situation but they didn't feel comfortable cutting it



*TOP: After timely rains there is abundant grass, but BLM forced ranchers to leave allotments full of fine fuels. It all burned. BOTTOM: A raging inferno roars towards the Blackstock Ranch at 2 a.m. The barn, corrals and home were saved. Lost are spring, summer, and fall allotments, plus their private pasture. Cattle lost were unknown at press time.*

down, so they simply left. During the night, the tree burned in half, rolled down the mountain, and spread the fire. The result was the Teepee Fire, 94,000 acres, which threatened the towns of Riggins and New Meadows, jumped the Big Salmon River, and trapped rafters upriver, obliterating valuable resources and wildlife.

In Montana, the governor sent a sternly worded protest letter to the U.S. Forest Service when state firefighting helicopters were refused permission for initial attack on the North Fork Fire with embers igniting fires into Glacier National Park. Montana has five state firefighting helicopters, which are very successful at suppressing fire on state land. Those Montana experts were forced to remain on the ground watching valuable resources burn until federal helicopters arrived four hours later. The state helicopters could have been there in 30 minutes. The fire went unchecked in its vital first hours when the chance for suppression is highest.

Throughout the West, local, state, and federal resources became overwhelmed. According to the federal government, this year's wildfires "exceeded national operational capability." The national preparedness

was “level 5,” the highest level, during August and much of September. More than 25,000 firefighters, 200 U.S. soldiers, 126 experts from Canada, New Zealand, and Australia, numerous state National Guardsmen, volunteers from rural fire departments and associations, and landowners battled blazes throughout the West. Canada sent several “superscooper” planes, each with 1,600-gallon capacity. Out-of-state volunteers and far-flung family members poured in to help others defend their property. (See “Kamiah Fires,” page 76.) By mid-September, more than nine-million acres had burned—three times the acreage compared to 2014.

The pattern of fires escaping the initial chance to extinguish them before morphing into rapidly expanding monsters was repeated across Idaho, Oregon, Montana, and beyond. Once fire grows into an inferno and the winds hit it, there is little chance for control no matter how many millions of dollars and resources are thrown at it. Often fire-agency websites show dates of estimated containment as “October,” meaning “when the snow puts them out.” Thankfully, early September snows stopped many of these raging western fires.

The fire triangle requires three things: oxygen, temperature, and fuel. Fuel is the only control man has in depriving the fire. Natural fuel growth does not stop just because bureaucracy is at a standstill. Fuel reduction through livestock grazing to reduce brush build-up in the forest and fine fuels build-up on rangelands along with logging to reduce overcrowding in the forest is a win-win for anyone who truly cares about the land.

Firefighting on federal land has created skyrocketing budgets and expenses. The fire budget in one BLM district alone has quadrupled since 2000. For the first time in the 110-year U.S. Forest Service’s history, more than 50 percent of its budget goes to fighting fires—money which used to be dedicated to timber management, fuels reduction, and wildlife habitat improvement.

Early September figures show the Northwest at 929,071 acres of federal lands burned, with 39,641 acres of nonfederal lands burned. The Great Basin numbers are: feder-

**“We have some 73 million acres of national forestlands at risk from wildland fires that could compromise human safety and ecosystem integrity... The situation is simply not sustainable—not socially, not economically, not ecologically.”**

—CHIEF DALE BOSWORTH, U.S. FOREST SERVICE, 2003



PHOTO COURTESY CONNIE BRANDAU

**By mid-September, more than nine-million acres had burned—three times the acreage compared to 2014.**

al, 466,601 acres, and nonfederal, 11,289 acres. We do know that costs and destroyed acreage have exploded since the first warning was issued decades ago. Firefighting on federal land has become a big business with little incentive to put fires out early. Just as with everything else, if it doesn’t make common sense, then follow the money. No one blames the firefighters themselves. It’s the federal policies put in place from the 1990s to the present that is annihilating the West.

What are the lessons learned from these massive fires and how do we prevent them from happening again? Beginning in the mid-1990s, Congress and others have issued many reports warning of disaster if the federal government didn’t return to active natural-resource management. Dale Bosworth, former Forest Service chief, famously stated that the federal land-management agencies are locked in the “paralysis of analysis.” Conflicting laws and regulations have provided environmental groups, seeking nonmanagement, the tools to stop all resource management with endless, time-consuming appeals and lawsuits. The National Environmental Policy Act, originally called the Reduction in Paperwork Act, instead has become the

“Mother of All Paperwork Act” with its overwhelming processes. Agencies have found it easier to not manage or very minimally manage rather than spend all their time drowning in “process” and court. Each time they lose or settle a lawsuit, federal taxpayers are forced to reward the environmental groups with Equal Access to Justice Act (EAJA) funds.

In 2003, Dale Bosworth addressed the issue of annual forest growth in excess of removals, like the situation in Idaho. In an article entitled “Fires and Forest Health, Our Future is at Stake” he wrote: “Forests are overcrowded with trees.

Beset by drought and under stress from competition, the trees are more susceptible to insect attack and catastrophic fire than ever before.... We have some 73 million acres of national forestlands at risk from wildland fires that could compromise human safety and ecosystem integrity.... The situation is simply not sustainable—not socially, not economically, not ecologically.” Twelve years later this situation has become even more ominous.

In a 2007 University of Idaho report, U.S. Forest Service land in Idaho had 72 percent of the timber acreage, 81 percent of tree (wood) growth, 85 percent of the annual tree mortality, and 10 percent of the wood harvest, providing a tremendous fuel load. The same is true in rangeland. The sharp reduction or removal of livestock and the refusal to remove junipers supply excessive fuel waiting for a lightning strike. This year in Owyhee County, grass was amazingly abundant due to timely rains. Instead of allowing ranchers to harvest that grass by increasing the number of cattle or extending the grazing season, the BLM forced ranchers to leave allotments full of fine fuels. That extra fuel was the piece the fire triangle needed for the massive Soda Fire.

As an unintended consequence, fuels’ overload on federal lands with resulting fire places state and private lands at great risk. Besides being adjacent to a bad federal neighbor, as federal land burns out of control, all the firefighting resources are expended, leav-

ing little to nothing to support efforts if lightning strikes private lands. This was the case in north-central Idaho in the Kamiah Fire complex. The state was spread too thin with fire in numerous locations and was unable to offer much assistance to landowners when Mother Nature played her hand. Nearly 50 homes in the rural landscape were destroyed with Kamiah and surrounding towns in harm's way. Rural communities across several western states were in severe danger with this season's fires. Burning up forests and rangeland has become common but now entire towns are placed at grave risk. Even businesses normally considered safe from wildfire, such as fruit sheds, were destroyed. The economic ruin continues to grow each year.

On Aug. 12, 2015, Idaho's Department of Environmental Quality issued a rare statewide air-quality advisory. It rated the air from unhealthy to very unhealthy due to wildfire smoke in a state that reaches from Canada to Nevada. Idaho county commissioner and former state Sen. Skip Brandt deplores how lack of proper management has created enormous health and safety issues for Idaho citizens. "We can no longer tolerate the status quo. We have moved from burning up wilderness areas and national parks through a hands-off policy to now burning up homes, businesses, private property, and threatening towns on a massive



PHOTO COURTESY DIANE JAY

*Don "Red" Jay, 85-year-old Korean War veteran, and his daughter, Diane, stayed to fight the fire. They saved Red's home. Note the U.S. flag waving in defiance of the approaching flames. BELOW: Emery Tuning, driving the Cat, and cousin Jeremy Grove, holding the flashlight, returned to Kamiah to fight the fire. Embers fall all around them. (See page 76 for "Kamiah Fires" story.)*



PHOTO COURTESY ANDREW PUCKETT

scale." Brandt believes gridlock-creating lawsuits are one of the problems. "The West must be free to manage the land through modern forest and rangeland practices," he says. "It is vital to remove the ability of federal judges who are not educated in such matters to flip our world upside down."

Jerry Hoagland, longtime Owyhee County commissioner, sees another problem. "The entrenched Green federal bureaucracy, both in the local and Washington, D.C., offices, prevents managers from doing what's best for the land. This lack of proper management ends up in catastrophic disasters like the Soda Fire. One phone call by a Green staffer to either the Washington, D.C., office or to national environmental groups stops all commonsense management. It is a no-win situation."

With more than 50 percent of the West in federal holdings (and only four percent in the East), Congress and agencies in gridlock, and judges and environmental groups taking over federal-land management, hope of preventing future massive fires is bleak without serious radical change. Currently, there is little incentive to return to commonsense management of our God-given natural resources with which the American West has been blessed. Those who live on and with the land have understood and practiced stewardship for generations. The rise of environmental

## Rangeland Fire Protection Associations

*Neighbors helping neighbors comes naturally to western ranchers. The feds and enviros should follow their lead.*

**A**fter the 2007 southern Idaho Murphy Complex rangeland fire, ranchers knew something had to change to enable them to fight destructive wildfires that can decimate their cattle herds, pasture, wildlife and habitat. During that fire, a rancher was desperately trying to remove fuel by building a firebreak where he knew it would be effective. In front of that blaze were cattle, private land, fences, that year's summer and fall pasture, pasture for future years, wildlife and the habitat needed for the many species which share the high desert country. He knew if that fire was denied fuel, its vicious run would end right there. However, the federal government viewed his firebreak as "unauthorized." He was ordered to immediately stop and leave the area under threat of arrest and severe fines. This clash of ideas

and authority repeated itself over and over in Idaho to the detriment of all.

In 2012, ranchers around Mountain Home, Idaho, decided to replicate Oregon where the BLM and local ranchers have worked together fighting fires since the 1960s. That authority had been unused in Idaho law. Ranchers formed a Rangeland Fire Protection Association or RFPA. This nonprofit association is made up of ranchers trained by the BLM to legally stop rangeland fires. The RFPA motto is "neighbors helping neighbors." This comes naturally to western ranchers. It is ingrained early when children see their parents drop everything to help a neighbor, whether it's an adjoining ranch or 100 miles away.

The Jordan Valley, Ore., RFPA, formed nine years ago, currently has 100 members.

President Silas Skinner states: "Oregon has provided our RFPA with five trucks and 24 slide-in pumpers for ranch pickups. We also use private equipment from the various ranches. Everyone works together during fires, including local ladies bringing us food, water, and supplies."

After the Soda Fire, the Oregon BLM recognized the Jordan Valley RFPA for defending the town of Vale as the fire approached. They were the first firefighters at Homedale to protect homes. During the postfire debriefing, 122 community members were present, which impressed the Oregon BLM.

"We take protecting our families, neighbors, property, and rangeland very seriously," says Skinner. "We don't do this for a living. We are here to assist."

Through RFPAs, ranchers provide the

groups that want to preserve the natural environment has created the opposite of what they seek—unless their real motive is to eliminate man from the western landscape.

There are intelligent, honest environmentalists who truly want to do what is best for the natural landscape. Then there are those whose real motives are the removal of man. The founder of Western Watersheds Project often publicly stated that his motive was to end ranching in the West. Other groups worship the creation rather than the Creator, believing nothing should be touched by man. To those who seek removal of man, the end justifies the means. If they must destroy the natural environment to accomplish their goal, so be it. They gleefully sue to receive EAJA money which funds their next lawsuit. They threaten and blackmail big business to support their efforts. The environment is the big loser for both people and wildlife. Citizens and their elected officials have the power to stop this. How much longer will we allow these bullies to continue their radically destructive agenda? ■

*Judy Boyle is an Idaho state legislator whose family has been in agriculture for generations. She lives in the middle of a large irrigated valley and was relieved to be battling mosquitoes rather than wildfires. She was director of natural resources for Congressman Helen Chenoweth-Hage.*

# Ranchers Won't Be Cowed

*For ranching families resilience is imperative and quitting not an option.*

**T**he Soda Fire in Owyhee County, Idaho, did more than just burn 285,000 acres of rangeland. It has placed at grave risk generations of Owyhee County families, the backbone of the rural economy. It has left in question the populations of many wildlife species. It has provided opportunity for massive takeover by noxious weeds and invasive species. It has established new fear in town families who believed themselves safe from such a raging inferno. It denuded ground to allow for severe erosion and flooding. It belched untold tons of toxins into the atmosphere. It transformed an entire landscape into the desolation of black ash, and turned beautiful Owyhee County into a moonscape.

Owyhee County ranchers are angry at government for failing to heed clear warnings of impending calamity and not acting in the best interest of the land. They are angry with environmental groups which don't understand the land and how it functions. They are angry with federal judges in their ivory towers who have no clue of reality. They are angry with politicians who repre-

sent nonfederal-land states with no vested interest but who refuse to vote for serious changes in conflicting laws.

Government systems and processes have failed the land, wildlife and citizens of Owyhee County and much of the West. Fourth-generation rancher Inez Jaca laments: "As I grew up, my family considered BLM employees as friends. We brought them into our homes, fed them, helped them however we could. They treated us as partners in managing the land. Today, we don't feel treated as a valued partner."

Connie Brandau, whose husband's grandfather homesteaded their ranch, puts it bluntly: "Environmentalists created this fire. Their lawsuits, their judge's decisions, and the BLM's fright of being sued just fried more chicken [sage grouse] in five days of wildfire than has all Colonel Sanders' Idaho restaurants in the last year!"

Connie remembers a hearing on grazing permits in front of federal District Court Judge Winnill nearly a decade ago. Afterwards, the founder of Western Watersheds told a reporter, "We just handed the ranchers



PHOTO COURTESY CONNIE BRANDAU

*RFPAs use membership fees to purchase insurance and additional equipment. BLM provides Idaho members with initial and yearly refresher training, personal protection clothing, fire shelters, and handheld radios. Most RFPAs have surplus BLM water tenders and an engine. RFPAs use Cats, graders, and other equipment from members' ranches.*

initial attack as they are usually the first ones to notice a fire and have stopped many dangerous blazes early on. Last summer, one Owyhee rancher extinguished 12 small lightning-strike fires on his own without fear of federal fines or jail time.

Ranchers have valuable knowledge of the terrain, access routes, prevailing winds, and location of water. Fire managers quick-

ly learned the value of local knowledge to plot out access routes and water sources and in assessing and strategizing on a wildfire. By training and working together on fires, ranchers learn how to work with the BLM firefighters and BLM learns to listen and respect the ranchers' knowledge of the land.

In May 2014, two Idaho RFPAs and BLM were honored with the prestigious national Pulaski Award given in recognition for outstanding contributions to wildland firefighting. However, the Soda Fire highlighted conflicts between the Idaho and Oregon BLM's relationships with the RFPAs. Skinner explains: "We have a great relationship with the Oregon BLM and they recognize us as a firefighting entity. Idaho BLM does not. Idaho BLM does not accept Oregon BLM training nor our firefighting experience. We were called to help

fight the Soda Fire in Idaho but quickly ran into problems. Oregon BLM gives us freedom to operate where Idaho BLM wanted to oversee our every move."

Currently, RFPAs cover most of southwestern Idaho and have proven to be very cost-effective, saving natural resources, wildlife, federal taxpayer money, cattle, and private property.

Charlie Lyons, one of the founding members of the Mountain Home RFPa, explains the difference between the BLM and the RFPa: "Ranchers don't want to be professional firefighters. We just want to ranch and not have wildfires threaten and kill everything in sight. We can lose \$100,000 worth of feed in a few hours and a lifetime of cattle genetics in one day. Ranchers see wildfires as a huge waste of resources going up in smoke and a threat to our families' future. We are the ones who have to pick up the pieces and rebuild our lives once the fire is out."

—Judy Boyle

the smallpox-infected blanket.”

The environmentalists had asked the federal judge for, and received: reductions in grazing AUMs, reductions in length of season of use, changes of season of use (spring turnout dates on top of the mountain in the snow before the grass begins to grow and calving season just starting), implementing stubble height, restrictions on browse of woody species, and the fencing off of riparian areas. The environmentalists clearly knew these were unworkable for ranchers, but con-



PHOTO COURTESY MARY BLACKSTOCK

*As soon as the fire passed, ranchers scrambled to gather cattle, sort for their proper owners, and search for new pasture.*

vinced the judge that the changes were reasonable and best for the land. The end result was the immense fuel load waiting for a spark to create destructive fire. In the environmentalists’ quest to eliminate ranchers, the judge’s actions destroyed what he thought he had protected.

Ted Blackstock, from another long line of Owyhee ranchers, is frustrated with the lack of any government accountability. “The bureaucrats have nothing to lose with their decisions or lack of proper management. They gamble nothing and the fires don’t directly affect their paychecks. Ranchers stand to lose everything. We have always had our private land for backup, but the fire destroyed even that.”

This lack of accountability by the government easily explains the difference in philosophy regarding fire. Ranchers want fires extinguished immediately (which is the mission of the Rangeland Fire Protection Associations), yet the federal government’s mission is to “manage” fire.

These ranchers and many more lost all their spring, summer and fall grazing—possibly for years. The government hasn’t been flexible after past fires but insists there will be no grazing for a set number of years, even if

the land responds quickly with abundant grass. Instead, that forage is allowed to build up for the next lightning strike and a repeat catastrophe.

Ranchers are the ones who face the dead cattle, and, even worse, those that have to be put down because of their horrific burns. There are orphaned calves to care for and cows whose burns may hopefully heal. Ranchers are not normally faced with treating burned animals that require a different type of care. As soon as the fire has passed,

ranchers must scramble to gather cattle, sort for their proper owners, and search for new pasture. Cattle are fed hay and observed for problems like smoke inhalation and injuries not readily noticed in the immediate gather. Additional worries are losing the best genetics in the herd, stressed cows aborting their calves, and, looking toward the next calving season, questioning if the surviving cows’ teats are scarred too badly to deliver milk to newborn calves.

However, for ranching families, quitting is not an option. Ranchers are used to things they can’t control like weather, prices, and hard luck. They have been on their ranches for generations and look forward to the next generations of children and grandchildren taking the reins. Ranchers have always made the best of bad situations, making lemonade out of the lemons handed to them by nature, the government, or environmental groups which erect obstacles that would level others.

Inez Jaca says: “We are proud of our legacy, take our stewardship very seriously, and love this land. Our four grandchildren, ages seven to 12, are very much partners in this ranch doing everything from buckarooing to picking rocks out of the fields as they learn proper management of the resources. I look forward to my grandchildren continuing our ranching tradition as the sixth generation on this land.”—*Judy Boyle*

*A fund has been established through the Owyhee Cattlemen’s Association for affected ranchers at <http://www.owyheecattlemen.com>.*

# Kamiah Fires

*The convergence of community.*

A series of lightning strikes hit the Clearwater country of north-central Idaho August 2015, touching off more than 100 fires on federal, state, and private lands. Wildfires elsewhere had federal and state firefighters stretched thin with few resources available to the Clearwater Valley region. A fire on the edge of Orofino sparked trees just behind the mill. Unless it was quickly stopped, it could engulf the entire town. Fires were all around Kamiah and the outlying areas. Winds were 40 to 50 mph, throwing embers up to a mile ahead of the flames. Trees were exploding with fields, outbuildings, and homes ablaze. Thick smoke made driving hazardous and breathing difficult.

The communities soon realized fighting these fires would be up to them. They put out a call for help to their family members living elsewhere. The response was heartening. Adults who had been raised in the Clearwater country arrived, bringing their friends from all over Idaho and other states. A church from Texas sent volunteers and equipment. It was a lesson in how American volunteers respond to an emergency.

Farms, ranches and rural subdivisions are scattered throughout the rolling farm and timberlands of the Clearwater Valley region. Andrew Puckett, Kamiah area farmer, rancher, beekeeper, and chief of one of the rural fire departments, put 1,000 miles on his personal four-wheeler in just one week during the fires. “We were continually on the defense for a week and a half straight, grabbing a few hours sleep, constantly being pushed back by the fires. We would set up a fire line only to have the high winds carry fire behind us. We moved from house to house doing our best to make them defensible. Some were impossible to defend based on where they were built, the type of roof and siding, and lack of defensive space around the homes. We always did our best to save property and we thank God no lives were lost through fire.” A map shows “the island,” surrounded by fire, in which Puckett’s volunteers and other firefighters frantically labored.

Phillip Kelley wrote a blog as he fought the fire, telling of 60-foot-high flames pushed by 45 mph winds and the courage

*(Continued on page 80)*

# The Aftermath

*A sad sight to behold. Words and photos by Andrea Scott.*

It is an apocalyptic scene of cattle melting into scorched earth. An occasional rabbit runs across the flattened landscape, or maybe a deer. If any sagebrush is left standing, it is a bare, upright, black bone.

This is only part of the aftermath of the Idaho Soda Fire, which consumed nearly 300,000 acres. The fire ignited late last summer, and was at one point considered the largest fire to burn in the United States.

we need longer term.”

Ranchers hard-hit by the fire were already going through their winter hay in August since they had no grazing ground left. At \$120 a ton, one ton will feed about 70 cows a day. The Millers took a \$40,000 hit just in hay.

One of the hardest things for the Millers to stomach is that they are a one-iron outfit. This means that they have bred and raised



*From left: Scott Jensen, Wayne Hungate, Tori Miller with son Clancy, Jason Miller, Tim Miller with granddaughter Hadlee Brown, and Gwen Miller stand in front of cattle they have saved from the fire. Some will still have to be put out of their misery because their injuries are too grave. TOP RIGHT: What used to be a healthy cow on grass. LOWER RIGHT: Mule deer races across a barren landscape.*

Wildlife was also killed. Approximately 36 grazing allotments burned in the raging flames. Officials say the fire was probably caused by lightning.

“I’m a fifth-generation rancher,” says Gwen Miller. “We found dead cows with calves beside them and other cows where the fetus had blown right out of them. We lost a barn and the guest cabin but were able to save the main cabin.” The Millers have ranched in the area for 35 years and lost at least 47 head of cows and 31 calves. They own 2,000 personal acres and also own grazing rights to run on BLM and state sections.

“We went in to gather and didn’t know which way to go,” Gwen says. “We tried to lock them into the black areas to keep them safer from any new burns. Now we look forward and make choices every day about what we need to do immediately and what

their own herd without buying outside replacement cattle. “We have a cattle buyer that we have dealt with for 16 years,” says son Jason. “He knows the genetics and history of the cattle we raise and we’re proud of that. A lot of our history went up in that fire.”

However, there was hope in the midst of this disaster. Outside help was quick to respond in whatever way they could. Food and water were donated by individuals and businesses and taken to area ranchers. People from Idaho and Oregon donated hay.

Farm Bureau agent Wayne Hungate says the Millers are lucky to have their cattle insured as well as their buildings and equipment. He estimates that replacement costs for a cow will range from \$2,500 to \$3,000 per head.

Scott Jensen, from University of Idaho Extension in Owyhee County, was also on

the ground seeing what he could do. “Our role is to try to assess and coordinate ranchers’ needs and match needs to resources.”

There is also hope as state and federal officials meet with ranchers and look at priorities regarding rehabilitation. The Millers remain positive, even though history with the BLM has not been good.

“The BLM, Department of Lands, Fish & Game and other agencies met with ranchers to look at priorities,” Tim Miller says. One BLM official who met twice with ranchers back in August says: “We’re getting a complete list of range improvements and other changes that need to be made from the ranchers so we can take that into considera-



tion.” Reseeding options and planting times were discussed. BLM spokesperson Karen Miranda says: “Ranchers are a big part of this process. We’re hoping to plant in October.”

Although the grass may emerge in spring, it still leaves ranchers with uncertainty. “There was a shortage of pasture before the fire,” says Hungate, “and now the shortage is even more dire.” Immediate needs are hay, and places to put cattle long-term. Ranchers don’t know if they should sell their cattle, put money in the bank and then buy again in two to three years when there is ground available to graze, or tough it out with what little they have. ■

*Andrea Scott writes from southern Idaho.*



# Get Out of the Fire

Money clouds, moral courage, cooperation and redneck ingenuity. By Steven H. Rich

**O**pen secret: the federal government knows exactly how to protect the West from catastrophic wildfire. Powerful interests just don't want it done. Despite this, Gila County, Ariz., has won that war for 10 years, in a vast, windy, much-used forest recreation area crackling with lightning in tinder-dry fuels. It was a wildfire theme park.

In June 1990, a new kind of fire appeared there. The deadly Dude Fire was the nation's first megafire. It was terrifying. Its never-seen, frenzied behavior killed six firefighters, burned 24,000 acres in two national forests, and destroyed 63 homes, previewing multimillion acres of disaster. In 2002, the 468,638-acre Rodeo-Chediski Fire burned part of Gila County and 2004 brought the 119,500-acre Willow Fire. That's just a few examples. That year, new but unshakable county supervisor Tommie Martin approached Tonto National Forest officials. "What must we do, together," she politely demanded, "to actually end this mess?" To their great credit, they stepped up and made necessary changes. That shouldn't involve career risks.

Martin loves rigorous, truth-based cooperation. She invented much-imitated, team-focused Collaborative Resource Management. So a county/federal/ state/NGO/private-citizen team was formed. Resource Management International's Eric Schwennesen was hired to ride herd and write a plan. Since then, the county's commitment "to minimize every fire" has been severely tested. Eighteen ignitions met U.S. Forest Service (FS) "catastrophic potential" status.

"2012's threat level was scary," Martin recalls. Soon, the Poco Fire took off. "The Forest Service feared another Wallow Fire [2011]," she winces. That huge, needless blaze torched over 538,000 nearby acres, crushing ecological values and quality of life for generations. In Wallow Fire-like steep terrain, Red

**The Wallow Fire in 2011, a huge, needless blaze, torched over 538,000 acres and crushed ecological values and quality of life for generations.**



ABOVE: Courageous Gila County supervisor Tommie Martin has long advocated sane, sound-science, collaborative solutions to deadly threats. RIGHT: Cash-strapped, federally dominated Gila County made 44 "Helitack" water depots from spare parts, war surplus and grit. Present Helitack turnaround time: one minute. Result? Fires die small. AT TOP: Fire-safety-symbol Smokey Bear burns.

PHOTOS COURTESY GILA COUNTY



Flag winds, and "sea of gasoline" fuels, Gila's Poco Fire died at 2.2 percent of the Wallow-monster's size. Matt Reidy, Poco Fire incident commander, had high praise for the county's contribution. "Gila County was prepared and invested," Reidy says. "Their people were always there, and always helpful."

When Martin weighed in, Tonto Forest leaders well knew their system's worst weakness: *far too few* depots for water-dropping helicopters (Helitack); 98.5 percent of the county is federal land; and money is scarce. Martin and the Gila County wild bunch used determination and "redneck ingenuity" to cobble up 44 effective water depots from spare parts, war surplus and grit. Water refill times now average one minute.

"It's worth it. Helitack drops turn little fires into nonfires," Martin says, "and keep midsized fires from blowing up till reinforcements come. Still, the policy game's rigged against us. Helitack's really a highly effective, highly courageous Band-Aid. The system gets overwhelmed. They've sent our copters to Texas. Then we're sitting ducks."

The FS also knew that area towns were completely vulnerable. It had plans, but no funding, and told the team. Again with its own money, the county thinned forests around towns. Later, the feds started Wildland Urban Interface fuels reductions. Martin frowns, "Of course, WUI treatments, anywhere, are just another Band-Aid on monstrous, pre-catastrophic fuel blocks."

Consulting together, Martin and clients healed vast acreages, restoring biodiversity,

health and prosperity. She's a key, founding leader of Arizona's Four Forests Initiative, which scientifically mandates and authorizes commercial tree harvesters to carefully, but immediately, separate fuel blocks in federal forests. High-level federal bungling and alleged corruption interfered.

Still, collaborative efforts saved firefighters' and residents' lives, homes, and lands in Gila County. "We set out to end this crisis, and save our county," Martin says. "Working together, we absolutely can. But I see no evidence that some policymakers *want* to end it. They've led us out of the frying pan [logging treatments they didn't like] into the fire. We want out. I believe in environmental economics. Tree harvest once funded the whole

Forest Service, with a profit. Now, fire budgets eat them up.” Many others doubt policy-makers’ motives.

Last year, Utah’s governor and legislators learned that more than 80 percent of the state’s unburned watersheds are in a pre-catastrophic wildfire state. For this, and further mismanagements, they and most western states have demanded ownership of BLM and Forest Service lands.

Beautiful, historic Spring City, Utah, has been bracketed by severe fires. Resident and wilderness survival expert Brad VanDyke was appropriately alarmed. On the town’s Emergency Preparedness Committee, he acted like Martin and brought in an expert to explain Spring City watershed’s pre-catastrophic state and its options. Expert town-folk also reported that fire-caused floods could wreck the town.

Despite federal assurances, VanDyke was deputized to repeatedly engage FS bureaucracy. The Spring City area’s dotted with ponds. Its Helitack should crush the fires, right? “What’s the mystery?” Brad persisted. “Why do fires keep getting so big?” He knows that Gila County’s promised one or more copters are within easy range. “How long does Helitack fly to get here?” he asked. One brave informant answered: “If things work right, one to two hours [unacceptable]—if they’re not on another fire [unacceptable]. Pray one doesn’t start. We can’t put crews in. Too dangerous.”

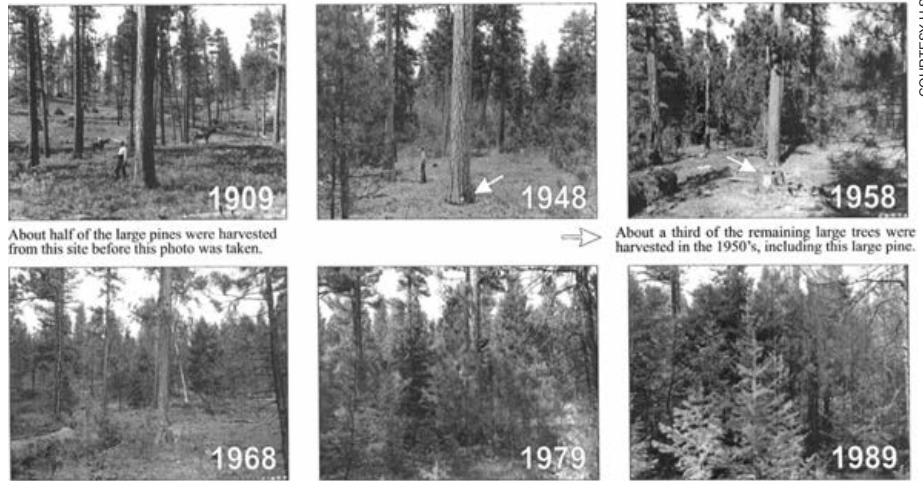
But the fiery devil’s not in such details. It’s in false policy assumptions that save nothing but the recreational illusion that hikers have somehow entered the 17th century. VanDyke faces a merciless machine that never questions itself.

Proof? The “fire is always natural/good” premise has disastrously *failed* for decades, within sight and smell of millions of urban homes—and still continues.

Here’s why: Ignoring natural law, romantic (Green-think) nature philosophies contaminated fact-orientation in natural-science classes long ago. So, generations of Green-think produced mounds of fuzzy, quibbling, junk science. Rather than asking “Can ecosystems and species tolerate this” and “What creates health and abundance” their only interest is, “Is this caused by random forces” (their definition of “natural”). Green-think “experts” contaminated media, school curricula, and public perception. Result: crazy policy, crazy politicians, catastrophe, and a massive cover-up of the “Trashing of

## 80 Years of Change in a Ponderosa Pine Forest

These photos, all taken from the same point, show changes resulting from fire exclusion and harvesting of large pines. Fire scars show that, between 1600 and 1895, low-intensity fires burned through this forest every 3 to 30 years. Fires have been excluded from the area since 1895.



1909  
About half of the large pines were harvested from this site before this photo was taken.

1948  
About a third of the remaining large trees were harvested in the 1950's, including this large pine.

1958

1968

1979

1989

ABOVE: 1909 logging treatment returned tree density to fire-safe, Native American-managed levels. Selected cuttings in 1948, 1958 and 1968 kept densities tolerable. By 1979, anti-science politics progressively dominated federal agencies. Rapidly multiplying fuels grew into “pre-catastrophic” fire states in most western watersheds. Since 1989, forest health has collapsed entirely. Wildfires have exploded. BELOW: “Money cloud.” Termed “pyrocumulus” by science, they’re made of water from killed trees, soils and wildlife. Money cloud refers to the self-inflicted \$1.5-billion government “fire industry.”

the West.”

Despite a century of personal heroism and sacrifice, Forest Service culture is desensitized to severe fire’s terrible damage. Policy-speak says, “Fire is natural,” but the experienced know: Beyond lower severity levels, fire’s *not* a healing force; it’s our worst option.

Agency media officers don’t use the fire-jargon term, “playing hide the iron.” But they know it. It’s a budget game for command-level personnel. It means, “Let’s order up *way too many* fire engines, bulldozers, etc., so we can get more money.” They don’t ever say “light ’em and fight ’em” either. That’s the practice of letting prescribed fires “escape”—for money. When will media mention a “money cloud” or “cumulus overtimus” on the air? Scientists call these “pyrocumulus” clouds. They’re made of water vapor from burned trees, animals, other plants and soils. Mushroom-shaped money clouds signal big fires and long fights—with a lot of overtime. The giant Rodeo-Chediski Fire was, for example, started by a Forest Service part-time employee—to create a job opportunity. No, this pattern is not funny. But it does illus-



trate the pervasiveness of the problem.

Scientific harvest treatments are a healing ecological force, every time. Did you know? Flood flows—therefore harm to fish and general biodiversity, erosion, pollution, etc.—from cutting all the trees in a treatment site are a measured 2,293 percent less than from an average severity wildfire. When will media and schools teach these facts? The Healthy Forests Restoration Act of 2003 is already the law of the land, for obvious reasons. Science has known what to do for a very long time. The crisis is a moral one. ■

Steve Rich is president of Rangeland Restoration Academy. He’s a rancher, consultant, writer, artist and nature advocate.

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## KAMIAH FIRES

(Continued from page 76)

and determination of the people to stop the monster. At one point the Kamiah Mill's log deck was burning, risking the entire mill and town. A man took charge by jumping in a nearby loader, separating the burning logs out of the deck, and tossing them into the river, at grave risk to his own life. It was through his family that John Leverkusuhn of Vidor, Texas, became involved in the region's firefighting efforts. John is the owner of Jet Oilfield Services whose motto is "failure is not an option." John drove his huge tanker truck to Idaho which he normally employs to deliver fracking fluids in the oil fields. Nine other members of the Vidor Church of the Lord Jesus came with John to help in the firefighting effort.

The Leverkusuhns and Kelleys became acquainted two decades ago when John and Phillip attended an Idaho church meeting and instantly connected. When Hurricane Rita hit, the Kelleys' Idaho church sent donations for the victims of that disaster. John says, "We lost everything in Hurricane Rita. God brought people from all over America to help our community rebuild. When we heard

PHOTO COURTESY MARY BLACKSTOCK



about the Idaho fires, we immediately contacted the Kelleys to ask how we could help."

Families who lost everything but the vehicle in which they escaped have been surrounded with an outpouring of love, support, and assistance. Cloninger's, a longtime, family-owned grocery store in Kamiah, gave \$500 to each of the nearly 50 families who lost their homes to help with food and gas.

The Kamiah Community Credit Union opened an account for cash donations with a match up to \$100,000. A local Kamiah church's new room and five semi-trailers are bursting at the seams with donated items. Unfortunately, those without homes have nowhere yet to put those items.



PHOTO COURTESY PHILLIP KELLEY

John Leverkusuhn brought his water truck from Texas to help with the battle in Idaho. His motto is "failure is not an option." LEFT: BLM's refusal to allow managed grazing to remove excessive fuel resulted in a 285,000-acre inferno.

The people of the Clearwater region are grateful for the assistance they did receive from state and federal firefighters. They are especially grateful to family, old friends, and newfound friends who came to their aid as volunteers, leaving behind jobs and families to do a dangerous, dirty job without pay and without government-forced action. This proves once again that America is the best country on earth where citizens willingly pull together when a need is shown.

—Judy Boyle

A fund has been established at the Kamiah Community Credit Union for those needing assistance: [www.kamiahfirerelief.org](http://www.kamiahfirerelief.org).



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