
Wildfire Diary

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(From reports, articles, and information provided by Bill Waterbury, Burnt Powder Zone Fire Management Officer; David Anderson, Fire Management Staff Officer; Gay Brockus, Public Affairs Specialist; Charles Ernst, Range/Fish & Wildlife/Watershed Staff Officer; Terry Porter, Budget & Accounting Officer, all from Wallowa-Whitman National Forest; and USDA Forest Service Region 6 Incident Information Officers Warren Olney, Mike Ferris, Pauline McGinty, Norm Hesseldahl, Joe Meade, Deanna Riebe; Dick Harlow, Lakeview District BLM II0; USDA Forest Service Region 6 "Greensheet.")

The morning of Saturday, August 2, 1986, the National Weather Service Office in Pendleton, OR, said, "A very, very weak low will pass across Oregon today. . . but it still has enough energy to increase the chance of isolated mountain showers and thunderstorms even though moisture will be very limited." That afternoon, the Pendleton office said, ". . . there is significant lightning activity, but little if any significant rainfall with the storms." Temperatures were in the 80's and 90's, with variable winds at 10 to 20 mph, and relative humidity ranging from 10 to 20 percent.

In late July and early August of 1986, northeastern Oregon had experienced a period of hot dry weather, resulting in extremely dry fuels. The majority of annual/perennial grasses and herbaceous plants had already cured; fine-fuels moisture was as low as 3 percent. The extent of the dry period was indicated by the 1,000-hour fuels

dropping to 10 and 11 percent across the 2.4 million-acre Wallowa-Whitman National Forest.

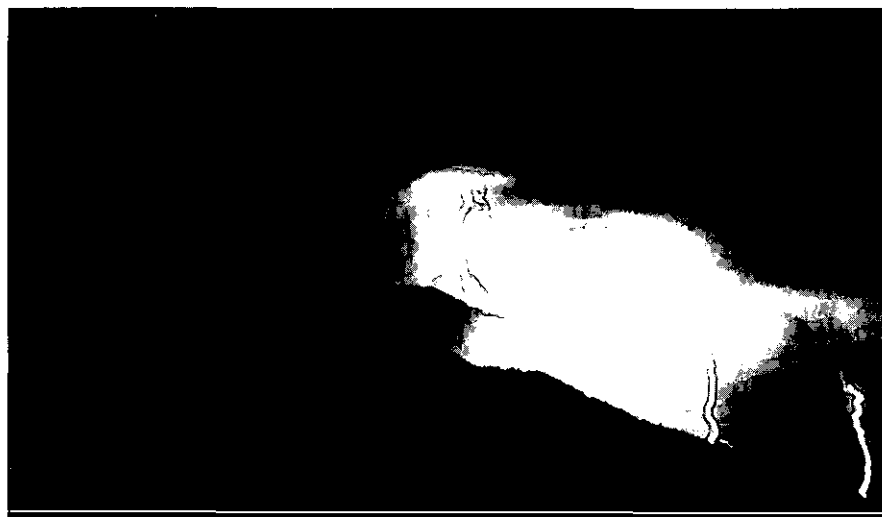
The objective language of fuels moisture analyses and twice-daily weather reports cannot begin to describe the feelings and sights of that hot, dry, windy, dusty Saturday afternoon throughout this corner of Oregon. Hundreds of lightning strikes seemed to come at once, flashing across the horizon of the Elkhorn Mountain Range, into the foothills, striking onto dry high-elevation forest, sagebrush hills and open range in hundreds of places — nearly simultaneously. **NO** rain accompanied the lightning strikes.

Within minutes, dozens of fire reports started coming into the Burnt Powder Fire Zone in Baker — from lookouts, observer planes, private citizens. The storm started these fires in a 70-mile semi-circle from 6,900-ft Chicken Hill on the

north, to the southwest and south of the town of Baker, and south to the small town of Unity, 50 miles away from Baker.

By evening of that day, 300 fires had been reported on lands under the fire protection jurisdiction of the Wallowa-Whitman and Malheur National Forests, the Oregon Department of Forestry, and the Bureau of Land Management. During the night, many successful initial attacks were made by the men and women of local interagency crews, but in spite of their efforts, the number of fires grew beyond their capability, and reinforcements were requested.

By Sunday morning, with the dry lightning and gusty winds continuing, a number of fires had grown to Class B or above, including eight major project fires within a 25-mile radius of Baker. (Hundreds of ranches, rural residences, summer



First dry lightning storm over the Baker Valley, August 2, 1986, which started hundreds of fires on the Wallowa-Whitman, Malheur, and Umatilla National Forests in northeast Oregon. The lightning storm moved on into Idaho and started numerous fires there.

cabins, occupied mining claims, campgrounds, logging operations, historic sites, and a ski area are within this half-circle. The small towns of Sumpter, Granite, and Unity were all close to the fires.)

On Sunday afternoon, more weather instability was causing extremely erratic fire behavior, forcing indirect suppression tactics. The Forest's Class II overhead team and an Oregon Department of Forestry team were in place on the Dark Canyon, Sunflower, and Cottonwood fires south of Baker, near a number of rural residences and ranches. The Olympic National Forest Class II team was en route to assume command of both the Eagle and Lost Cow fires near the town of Unity.

Late Sunday afternoon, travellers on Interstate 84, heading northwest from Boise, could see at least four major smoke columns from as far away as 60 miles; these columns were estimated to be higher than 40,000 feet. A few miles south of Baker on the interstate, sagebrush, juniper, and ponderosa pine burned not 50 feet from the highway.

Sunday evening, Wallowa-Whitman Forest Supervisor Jerry Allen, working with Baker District Ranger Glenn McDonald, Unity District Ranger Bud Flint, and Fire Staff Officer Dave Anderson, determined that the multiple large fires required an Area Command Team to manage the fire situation, and to relieve local personnel.

During the night the decision was made to order four Class I overhead teams (now called "National Teams" under the Incident Command Sys-

tem). These teams would manage the Huckleberry, Cornet, Sunflower, and Cottonwood fires. All four of these rapidly spreading fires posed a threat to structures and other private property.

Supplies and crews began arriving on August 4, with incident command posts set up at Phillips Lake, Unity High School, Bridgeport and in the town of Sumpter. By Tuesday, August 5, suppression was organized and functioning well, with nearly 1,400 interagency men and women working all aspects of the fires—firefighting crews, overhead, command teams, aerial and ground support equipment, supply, logistics, EMT's, information, financial support.

About 2 o'clock Tuesday afternoon, a new fire, later to be named the Clear Incident, spread to 500 acres from Saturday's initial lightning strikes around Chicken Hill, near the Anthony Lakes complex of ski area, summer homes, and a newly reconstructed campground, about 22 miles northwest of Baker. Another Class I team was assigned to manage this fire. An 84-square-mile area, surrounding the Anthony Lakes Ski Area, was closed to pedestrian, horse, and vehicle traffic. All public access to roads and trails within the area was restricted. Some summer homes were voluntarily evacuated. Flame lengths in the high elevation subalpine fir and lodgepole pine were estimated to be 300 feet, creating their own weather patterns.

That evening, the area command was restructured to form a unified area command, with shared respon-

sibility between the Oregon Department of Forestry, Bureau of Land Management, and USDA Forest Service, headquartered at the Burnt Powder Fire Zone compound in Baker.

An area commander is responsible to the agency line officers and managers, and the team is responsible for setting strategy, priorities, and coordination. Tactics for managing incidents remain the responsibility of incident commanders.

Objectives and management philosophies utilized by the Baker Unified Area Command included:

- *Equal authority for all three command coordinators.*
- *Operate on a strategic basis only; do not become involved with incident suppression operations or tactics.*
- *Act as facilitators, strategic priority setters.*
- *Keep the three agency line officers informed and involved.*
- *Do not place report demands on incident commanders. (Basic maps and the IC Incident Status Summary Form 209 reports will meet most BUAC needs.)*
- *Maximize BUAC effectiveness by using the person with the highest chance of success dealing with IC's, agencies, and local problems.*
- *Keep it simple.*

A first-ever "unified command center" was later set up in the State capitol at Salem to lead the multi-million dollar battle by some 8,000 firefighters throughout Oregon. The UCC was staffed by USDA Forest Service, USDI Bureau of Land Management, and Oregon Department of Forestry personnel. The



Spectacular fire in crowns of subalpine fir trees on the Clear Fire, in the Blue Mountains of northeast Oregon, near Anthony Lakes Ski Area—about 30 miles northwest of Baker, OR. (August 1986).

new fire organization system, of which incident command centers are a part, was implemented in March 1984. The system—known as NIIMS, National Interagency Incident Management System—had been used successfully on a smaller

scale in Region 6 of the Forest Service for two fire seasons before getting its hardest test in 1986.

A unified area command transition team was established in Baker on August 8 to set up standards and organizations to take over fires

once they were at the mop-up stage. This unusual organization and procedure was established because of the number of contained/controlled fires the Forest would need to "take back" from the various off-Forest fire teams.

At the peak of activity during the week of August 3, 3,795 people were involved in the firefighting efforts on the Baker Unified Area Command.

By Saturday, August 9, seven of the BUAC fires were controlled, and the Clear Fire was contained. The situation had stabilized and plans were made for reassignment or demobilization of some of the dozens of crews.

The estimated final fire acreages for the eight project fires in this command were: Blue Canyon, 220 acres; Clear, 6,140 acres; Cornet, 2,130 acres; Dark Canyon, 1,300 acres; Eagle, 315 acres; Huckleberry, 11,400 acres; Lost Cow, 670 acres; Sunflower/Cottonwood, 5,130 acres. (Additional acreages outside the National Forest boundaries in the BLM and private ownership are not included in these figures.)

Second Lightning Bust Hits

Sunday afternoon, August 10, Phase II of northeast Oregon's "summer of fire" started when, in a very few hours, another severe dry lightning storm brought an incredible 2,271 lightning strikes to northeastern Oregon, covering the Vale BLM District, the Wallowa-Whitman, Umatilla, and Malheur National Forests, and adjacent private lands protected by the ODF.

This storm resulted in over 200 new reported fires.

Resources already involved in large fire suppression and mop-up were transferred back into initial attack in the immediate vicinity of past fires in the Baker area and into areas of new fires in the Wallowa Valley, about 70 miles northeast of Baker. (The new lightning storm was so severe at the Clear Fire near Anthony Lakes that crews were pulled off the firelines. A "mini-tornado" came through Clear Fire Camp, scattering papers, maps, supplies.) Of the six Wallowa-Whitman Ranger Districts and 648,000-acre national recreation area, only Pine District, south of the Eagle Cap Wilderness, remained relatively unaffected by the new fire strikes.

To indicate the severity of the situation of Sunday evening, August 10, the Wallowa Valley zone fire management officer said, "By late Sunday afternoon, we had manned five or six fires. Our resources were thin. Flying over the million-acre-plus Hells Canyon National Recreation Area (HCNRA), Eagle Cap and Wallowa Valley Ranger Districts, we had identified at least 20 significant fires by dark; during the night dozens and dozens more were reported. Another lightning storm on Monday brought the total of significant fires to at least 75." The Idaho portion of the HCNRA also had strikes and fires, including the 12,000-acre Little Granite fire in the Hells Canyon Wilderness. In the daily report from the Boise Interagency Fire Center came the statement not

often seen by fire people: "All resources committed."

On Monday, the BUAC team met with local agency people to prioritize resources for managing fires on lands north of Joseph and Enterprise, to select a plan for management of the multiple, large-fire situation there. Working together, Wallowa Valley District Ranger Frank Olson, Eagle Cap District Ranger Bob Casey, and HCNRA Project Manager Al Deffler, agreed to form a second unified area command for fires north and east of Joseph and to place orders for additional fire teams. The two ODF teams and two Class I interagency teams in place north of Joseph agreed that the developing situation would need numerous additional forces.

The Baker Unified Area Command now managed two fire complexes—North Fork and La Grande. Three incident complexes were set up on the adjacent Umatilla Forest—Granite, Desolation, and Tower. The newly organized Wallowa Unified Area Command was divided into the Grossman, Kuhn, Joseph, Buckhorn, and Imnaha Incident complexes, each of which had multiple large fires to be managed by an interagency incident command team.

Additional and unique problems presented by the large fires in the Wallowa Unified Area Command were compounded by the extremes of terrain (Hells Canyon and Joseph Canyon range from 3,000 to 5,000 feet deep, with 50 to 80 percent slopes). Congested air traffic going into the tiny Joseph and

Enterprise Airports, often 150 arrivals/departures per day, presented major challenges until the FAA moved in to install a mobile air traffic control tower. Heavy smoke from the fires, from field burning and an inversion hampered accurate mapping of fires and contributed to the concerns of rural residents and people in the small towns of the Wallowa Valley. Logistics involved in the transfer of crews and overhead into the camps contributed to the complexity; a second expanded dispatch organization to support the fires in the Wallowa Valley was set up at the La Grande Fire Center, 60 miles west. The number of fires burning near boundaries of the Eagle Cap and Hells Canyon Wildernesses presented problems to decision makers: contain, control, confine? And some fires were burning in privately held rural areas outside the boundaries of any fire protection jurisdiction.

Over the mountains to the west of the Wallowa Valley, Mt. Emily stands sentinel over the town of La Grande and the Grande Ronde Valley. At the foot of the mountain are a number of rural residences—small ranches and farms, most with valuable homes and outbuildings. The strikes of August 10 also started a fire on the lower slopes of Mt. Emily, threatening these homes, some of which were voluntarily evacuated by their owners. Volunteers and rural fire departments from the adjacent communities played primary roles in preventing the spread of this relatively small, but potentially disastrous, fire from spreading into the populated areas

at the base of the mountain. A Class I team, based at Eastern Oregon State College in La Grande, managed this Frizzell fire, as well as numerous other La Grande Complex fires.

Also in the La Grande Ranger District, a number of strikes and fires were reported in the Mt. Fanny and Mt. Moriah areas, to the east across the Grande Ronde Valley from Mt. Emily. Dozens of other fires were scattered south and west nearly 60 miles to the southernmost Forest boundary near the small mining town of Granite and on the adjacent Umatilla National Forest.

On August 17, 5,741 men and women were involved in fire suppression efforts on the Wallowa-Whitman in all the complexes, at the La Grande Fire Center, and at the Supervisor's Office in Baker. Eight retardant aircraft were used from the La Grande Fire Center and from Grangeville, McCall, and Boise, Idaho. Thirty-five light, medium, and heavy helicopters were in use. Communications included radios, radio telephones, satellites, and telephone hookups from six different regional phone companies and from the Oregon Army and Air National Guards. Computers were hooked up in nearly every fire camp. All nine Forest Service Regions participated; 106 National Forests were represented. The population of Baker County was increased by 50 percent and Wallowa County's population was doubled.

By August 18, the fire situation had stabilized in the BUAC, leaving

only the Clear Fire complex with off-Forest teams. The WUAC fire situation began to stabilize on August 20, when weather conditions helped cool the fires. The incredible job of getting 5,000 people back to their home units was begun in earnest, but some mop-up operations lasted until well after Labor Day.

Estimated final acreages for fires started by the August 10 lightning strikes were: Roberts Butte, 1,175 acres; Kuhn, 750 acres; Middle Point, 2,620 acres; Fire Ridge, 860 acres; Joseph Canyon and Starvation Creek (burned together), 26,600 acres (all in Wallowa Valley Fire Zone, and on BLM and private lands). In the La Grande Complex: Frizzell, 670 acres; Pine Butte, 145 acres; Spring Creek, 440 acres; Three-Cabin Ridge, 205 acres. In the Hells Canyon National Recreation Area and adjoining private

lands: Sheep Divide, 1,300 acres; Corral Creek, 1,380 acres; Grouse, 1,450 acres; Little Granite (Idaho HCNRA), 12,020 acres; Middle Ridge (Idaho HCNRA), 1,250 acres; Pumpkin, 14,050 acres.

The total estimated cost of fire suppression on this National Forest in August of 1986 reached \$22,866,000, not including the costs of out-of-Region transportation of fire crews and overhead.

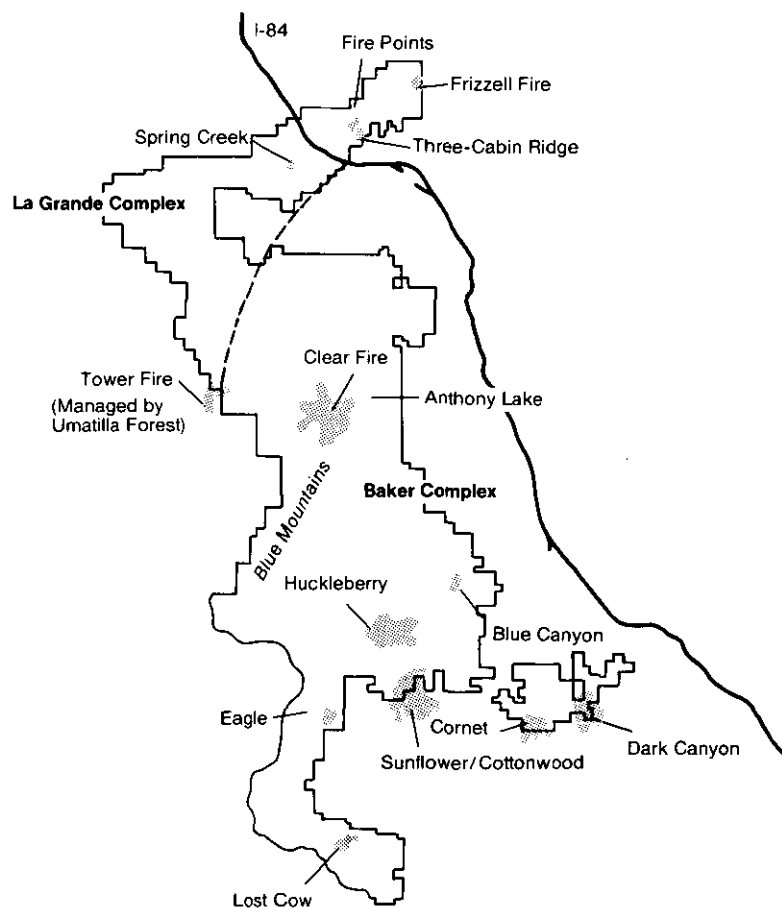
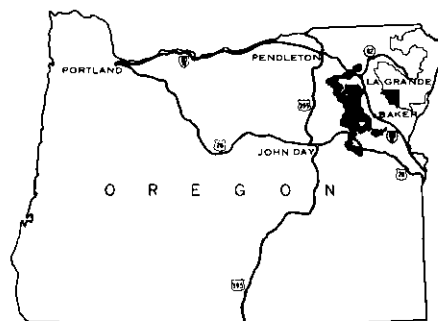
Fires Affect All Plant Communities

Lightning strikes started fires at nearly all the elevational zones on the Forest, from about 1,300 feet in Hells Canyon to 7,800 feet near Anthony Lakes. Fires affected all vegetative models represented on the Forest, with predictably mixed results. Soil structure in a number of watersheds was altered in varying degrees, depending on intensity of burns, requiring watershed rehabili-



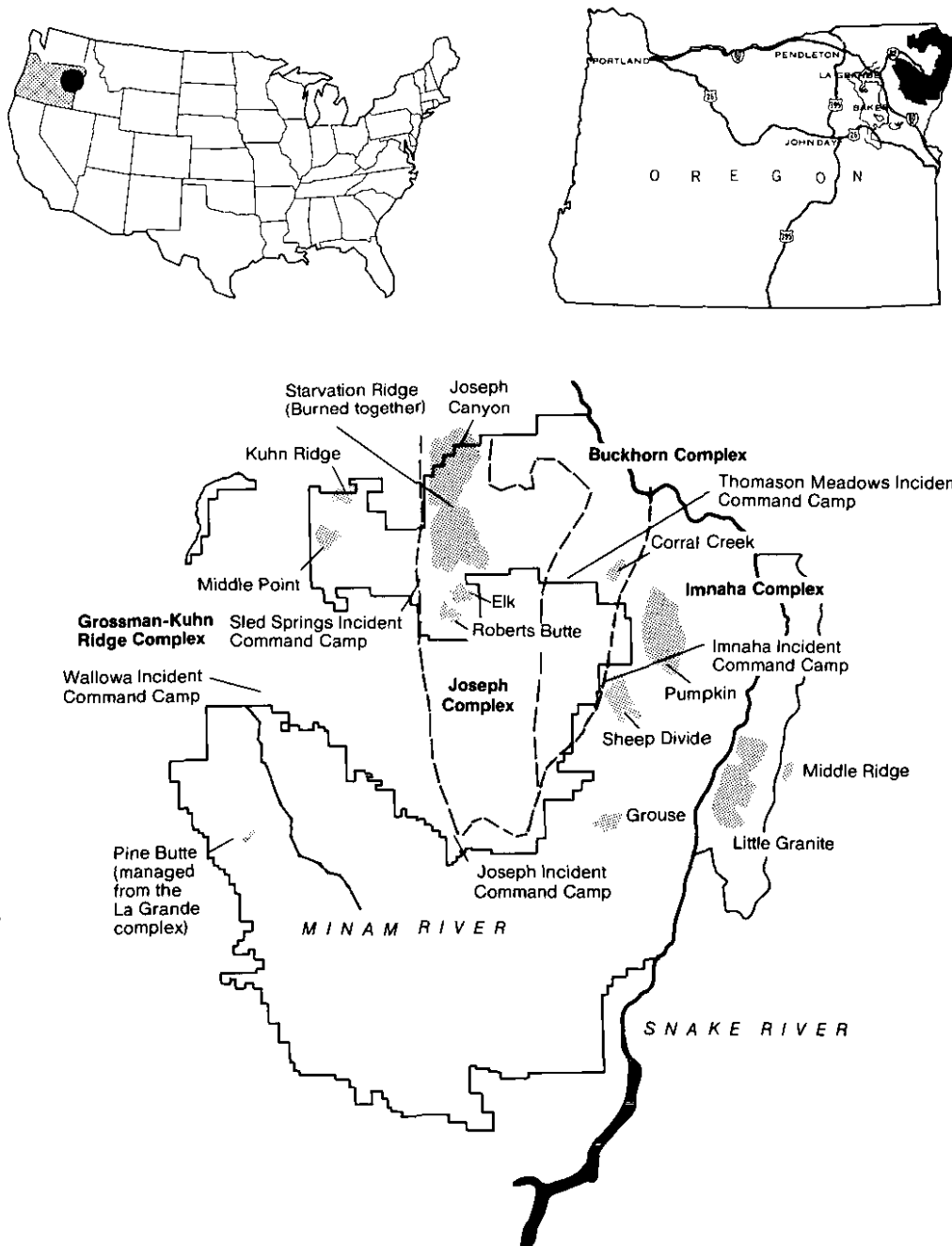
Imnaha River, which flows into the Snake River on the Oregon side of Hells Canyon. Near the site of the Pumpkin and Sheep Divide fires, August 1986.

Baker Unified Area Command (South Half)
August 3-18, 1986



These two maps show only the major fires that burned in the Baker and Wallowa Unified Areas during August 1986.

**Wallowa Unified Area Command (North Half)
August 10-23, 1986**



tation measures. Forage opportunities on most parts of the Forest will be enhanced because of fires in grassland communities. Visual qualities have been affected in many areas. A significant number of prehistoric and historic sites were destroyed or damaged.

Overall, fires on the Wallowa Unified Area Command followed the historic 60- to 100-year fire patterns, whereas fires on the Baker Unified Area Command generally burned hotter and in more continuously heavy fuels compared to previous large fires representing that area's pattern of a large fire every 60 years. Estimated available commercial forest acreage that was burned amounted to about 13,000 acres in the Wallowa Unified Area Command. Available commercial forest that was burned on the Baker Unified Area Command amounted to an estimated 19,850 acres.

Since the highest priority in all fire complexes was the protection of life and property, the existence of structures within and near the Forest boundaries presented the greatest challenge and caused the greatest expenditure of fire suppression resources. An example of this situation is the Frizzell Fire on Mt. Emily, which was only 670 acres but required a significantly large number of suppression forces because of its proximity to ranch homes and outbuildings.

Where Did They All Come From?

Many of the 338 fire crews and overhead came from home units throughout the Nation. State fire protection agencies from Oregon,

Washington, California, Nevada, Minnesota, Wisconsin, South Dakota, South Carolina, and Texas sent fire crews or overhead. All Regions of the Forest Service were represented, with crews from 106 National Forests.

(Toward the third week in August, some crews had been fighting fire for nearly 3 weeks, so relief crews were sent into many of the mop-up operations. One bus unloaded an eager crew from the South along a fire-blackened, grim, still-smoldering mountainside near Anthony Lakes, in the rugged Elkhorn Mountain Range. Exhausted crews looked at one another in amazement when they heard the enthusiastic newcomers say, "Y'all have the nicest country we ever did see!" These new crew members from the southern States were good sports about the daily extremes in temperature in the Elkhorn and Wallowa Mountains—33 degrees at 4 a.m. and 93 degrees at 4 p.m. The commissaries ran out of long johns!)

Before the incident command teams were demobilized, personnel from the BLM, National Park Service, Oregon Air and Army National Guards, the Bureau of Indian Affairs, U.S. Air Force, National Weather Service, Fish and Wildlife Service and Federal Aviation Administration had been involved. The assistance of local agencies—rural fire departments, sheriff's departments, Oregon State Police, local police, and school districts—was outstanding. The cooperation of local city/county officials and the valiant efforts of

local businesses contributed in large measure to the successful suppression efforts.

"It Seemed Like the Whole World Was Calling Up . . ."

Hardly a single resident of Baker, Union, and Wallowa counties in northeast Oregon was unaffected by the fire activity. They owned businesses that provided supplies and services; they (and often their equipment) were hired to work in fire camps or in fire suppression; they had operating mines, ranches, or logging operations near the fires; they were recreationists, or they simply were interested. It is "their" Forest and "their" BLM land—and it often seemed as if they were all calling on the phone simultaneously.

From throughout the Nation came thousands of phone calls from individuals, from television and radio networks, from newspapers and magazines, from State and Federal officials and politicians, from the families of firefighters. The number and diversity of inquiries were massive; these counties became the Nation's hotspot for news. These calls were handled day and night by the Forest's switchboard operators, receptionists, and interagency incident information officers. Information centers were set up in towns and in fire camps, and sometimes at crossroads in sight of the fires.

In addition, IIO's hosted dozens of walk-in "customers"—volunteers, county and State officials, off-duty overhead wanting to know "what was going on." Each day they

transported information bulletins and maps to over a dozen fire camps, and escorted dozens of TV and radio crews to camps and to the fireline. But with all the hectic activity of the information centers, their primary responsibility was to calm apprehensive local people who needed immediate information. Town meetings were organized; news briefs were distributed throughout towns and in remote rural locations; individuals were contacted—often with lengthy “one-on-one” reassurances. Uniformed IIO’s were posted along major highways where the fires were visible. Dozens of bulletin boards were

erected and updated several times daily.

The small towns and cities of eastern Oregon have cable television, but no live TV stations. The local cable stations each have an “information” channel, utilized by IIO’s for quick dissemination of information, as were thrice-daily fire update tapes on local radio stations. Local news media people and local residents were given priority treatment by the IIO’s, “even if NBC News was waiting in the wings,” as one IIO stated.

The fire situation provided the opportunity for trained IIO’s to disseminate information not only

about the active fire situations, but about “light-hand-on-the-land” fire suppression; about the differences in “appropriate suppression tactics” (contain, confine, control); about interagency cooperation and the Incident Command System; about how past fire suppression philosophies have contributed to overcrowded, insect-infested timber stands.

Perhaps the greatest gratification to information people is the realization that, nationwide, the people of this country have a sense of concern, pride, and “ownership” in their National Forests—and they don’t hesitate to let us know! ■

When a tree burns, here's what goes up in smoke.

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Now just imagine what happens when a whole forest burns.
