



## LIGHTNING FIRES SPAWN IDAHO INFERNO

### Agencies begin rehab, more fires burn

*Both of these pictures say much more than a thousand words. They're graphic and horrible, but they happened. To not communicate the terrible scope of Idaho's fire damage to public and private landscapes, livestock, wildlife, and people, allows us to look away. Not seeing these images makes it more likely that contributing resource management practices won't change. A perfect storm of conditions spawned Idaho's summer inferno. Some fires would have been monstrous regardless, but as you'll read, proactive management kept some from being worse. —Ed.*

By Steve Stuebner

A series of dry lightning storms in August combined with extremely hot temperatures and very low humidity to create a "perfect storm" of conditions for multiple wildfires to make big galloping runs in numerous locations in Idaho.

The Gem State has been in the national spotlight with the largest wildfire in the nation and the most fires burning in one state. The 279,144-acre Soda fire, which was ignited by lightning on Aug. 10 near the Idaho-Oregon border proceeded to

race through prime sage grouse habitat for several weeks. Approximately 20 Idaho ranchers with federal grazing permits in Owyhee County have been affected by the Soda fire, 592 miles of fencing has burned, and 41 grazing allotments have been affected by the big blaze.

Livestock and ranch buildings burned in the fire but no one has an exact count. "The best guestimate I've heard is about 200-300 head" in terms of cattle losses, said Scott Jensen, University of Idaho Extension Educator for Owyhee County.

*Idaho Inferno, cont. on Page 2*

*Photos courtesy of: Spokane Public Radio ("Clearwater Complex Fire-fighters") and Idaho Department of Lands ("Deer")*

# IDAHO INFERNO, *cont. from Pg. 1*

BLM National Director Neil Kornze came to Boise on Wednesday, Aug. 26 to underscore the importance of restoring the native shrub-steppe landscape in the Owyhees as soon as possible. Kornze called the Soda fire rehabilitation effort the highest priority in the nation. At least 90 percent of the burn zone is prime sage grouse habitat, BLM officials said.

“This is not a short-term commitment, but a long-term commitment to restoring that landscape,” Kornze said. “We have a strong preference to keep the greater sage grouse off the endangered species list. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is watching what we do here, and they want to see an aggressive approach.”

The BLM is working on a Burned Area Emergency Response Plan to plan rehabilitation efforts, and Kornze pledged to use all of the tools available to the agency to rehab the land. “We have to make sure we get seed on the ground at the right time in the right places,” he said. “We need to restore the landscape so it becomes the beautiful sage grouse habitat that it used to be.”

More than 1 million pounds of grass seed and sagebrush seed are stored at the National Interagency Fire Center, he said, and BLM rehab experts will be making plans

to plant that seed in the ground through disc-seeding and aerial seeding in the fall of 2015 and winter of 2015-2016. Kornze said the rehab work is expected to cost “north of \$10 million.”

Elsewhere in Idaho, more than a dozen fires are still burning and threatening rangeland resources, forest resources, livestock, outbuildings and homes, from New Meadows to the Canadian border. The Teepee Springs fire, 478,130 acres and counting on Aug. 31, made a big run to Riggins and portions of it have crossed the Salmon River. The Salmon River Road was closed by the Forest Service on Aug. 27, and pilot cars are shuttling rafters out of the canyon (end of popular wilderness section float trip) when safe passage allows.



*An early range assessment team surveys the Soda Fire damage. Photo: courtesy of Rob Frederickson, NRCS.*



*Wildlife fortunate enough to have survived the Clearwater Complex Fire find precious little browse in its aftermath. Photo courtesy of Idaho Dept. of Lands.*

The Clearwater multi-fire complex between Greer and Kamiah has burned at least 50 homes and structures, an unknown number of cattle, many fences, and caused an undetermined amount of damage to natural resources in the area. So far, 16 ranchers with federal grazing permits on 14 BLM grazing allotments have been affected by the fires, officials said.

The Clearwater complex fires also

were started by lightning on Aug. 10th and spread rapidly into a forested region chock full of homes and ranches. Normally, it's often too wet in the Clearwater country for fires to burn, but this year, with low snowpack and a dry spring, people's wells are going dry and many pasture lands already were brown and nearly useless for livestock.

“It's as dry as it can get up here. It's kind of eerie, quite frankly,” said Leon Slichter, a 5th generation Idahoan who grew up in Grangeville and serves as a commissioner on the Conservation Commission.

When the Clearwater complex made its biggest runs that hot week in mid-August, it forced people to evacuate their homes and ranchers banded together with trailers to pull hundreds of cattle out of harm's way with flames licking at their heels. The Cottonwood Livestock Auction and Feedlot had room to take in the cattle in a safe place and feed the animals until the owners could return home.

Slichter's son works for Avista Corp. and the powerline crews were working around the clock to restore power after lines were burned down. “They could hear propane tanks going off in the middle of the night, and in some places, they heard ammunition getting ignited by the fires and going off. That had to be pretty spooky,” he said.

# IDAHO INFERNO, *cont. from Pg. 2*

In a rare positive story, rancher Frank McIntire saved his home and outbuildings by practicing active land management on his property, located on the north side of the Clearwater River canyon. On Friday, Aug. 14, the wildfire was marching right for his property. McIntire carved out a safe zone in a crop field that was in summer fallow. He put his family in the field and ran a disc around the safe zone several times. Then, he and others went over to their house to try to save it as the fire came closer.

McIntire had already thinned out the forest around his home so the trees were spaced far apart, and he also grazed the area below the timber with his cattle on a regular basis. "When the fire was 100 yards from my house, it died off in the trees, just burning a few stumps," he said. "We were lucky."

His neighbor, however, wasn't as fortunate. He hadn't grazed his land for several years, and McIntire watched the fire "crowning in the trees and really burning hot."

Ironically, Eileen Rowan, a water quality

resource conservationist for the Conservation Commission, has been working on landing a grant to work on Firewise education in the Clearwater Valley. Firewise is a program that provides education about preventative measures that can be taken to safeguard homes and outbuildings from forest fires.

"We had our first public meeting last Wednesday but most people couldn't attend because they'd been evacuated from their homes," Rowan said. "I have a feeling we'll have a lot of interest in the Firewise program. It often takes something catastrophic for people to understand the issue."

Once the Clearwater complex fires die down, "we're going to need funds to rebuild corrals, fences, homes and outbuildings and plant grass seed, trees and shrubs for erosion-control work," Rowan said. "After fire, the soil becomes hydrophobic and can cause a lot of erosion."

Slichter agrees. "There's going to be a lot of erosion to deal with, and I'm also worried about the potential influx of weeds. Right off the bat, I'm thinking about revegetation work, getting something put into the ground ahead of the weeds."

Because about half of the Clearwater complex fire zone lies on private or state land, it will be up to private landowners and the Idaho Department of Lands to work on rehabilitation efforts.

In Owyhee County, ranchers need pasture ground for their livestock, or hay, plus they'll need to repair fences and plant grass seed, Jensen said. About 42,000 acres of private land were burned in the Soda blaze.

"Some guys are finding some available pasture, but I'm sure a lot of guys are scrambling to find something," Jensen said. Other ranchers are placing their cattle in feedlots for the moment until



Numerous homes were lost in the Clearwater Complex Fire. Photo courtesy of Idaho Dept. of Lands.

they find any available pasture. The Idaho Cattle Association recommends that ranchers get in touch with local NRCS offices to find information about opportunities for grazing cover crops or CRP lands.

Curtis Elke, State Conservationist for the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), has pledged to help landowners affected by wildfires with conservation planning and financial assistance to replace fencing and other assets. EQIP funds, Sage Grouse Initiative funds, Emergency Watershed Program funds all will be available to help private property owners, he said. Landowners should contact their local NRCS offices for assistance.

The Farm Service Agency has multiple programs available to assist ranchers and farmers who have been affected by the wildfires, including insurance, the Emergency Livestock Assistance Program, and Livestock Forage Program. Contact your local FSA office for details. □

*Boise writer Steve Stuebner specializes in covering conservation success stories for the Conservation Commission.*



The Soda Fire from the air. Photo: source unknown.

# How you can help!

In true Idaho fashion, neighbors are helping neighbors, churches are offering help, American Red Cross is providing disaster relief, and citizens are stepping up with monetary donations to assist people who have been affected by wildfires statewide.

In Owyhee County, a U.S. Bank account set up by the Owyhee Cattlemen's Association already has received more than \$20,000 in donations to help ranchers affected by the Soda fire. Make checks out to the Owyhee Cattleman's Heritage Fund.

People also can donate hay, fencing, trucking and other items through the OCA web site, <http://www.owyheecattlemen.com/2015/08/donations-accepted-for-ranchers-affected-by-soda-fire>.

In Idaho County, people who have hay for sale or pasture for rent should contact Jim Church, Idaho County Extension Agent in Grangeville, [idaaho@uidaho.edu](mailto:idaaho@uidaho.edu) or 208-983-2667. Landowners who are looking for hay or pasture also should contact Jim Church at the contacts above.

Landowners affected by the fires should contact their local soil and water conservation district for assistance. Find districts near you: See <http://swc.idaho.gov/what-we-do/district-support>.

The Idaho State Department of Agriculture provides information about grazing regulations on public land and also has listed various relief resources on its website. [www.agri.idaho.gov](http://www.agri.idaho.gov) Contact Brooke Jacobson, Range Management Specialist, [brooke.jacobson@agri.idaho.gov](mailto:brooke.jacobson@agri.idaho.gov); 208-332-8561.

Low-interest loans: The Conservation Commission offers low-interest loans (2.5 -3.5% interest) for equipment/projects that have a conservation benefit (fencing,

pivots). Terms are 7-15 years. How to apply: <http://swc.idaho.gov/what-we-do/conservation-loans>.

American Red Cross Disaster Relief: A One-Stop-Shop relief office has been set up in Kamiah: <http://www.redcross.org/news/article/id/boise/Multi-Agency-Resource-Center-a-One-Stop-Shop-Offering-Relief-and-Recovery-Resources-Opens-in-Kamiah-Tomorrow>.

Donations and Fund-Raising: Several fund-raising events are being quickly arranged to help victims of the Soda fire, including a big fund-raiser by the Vision Community Church in Marsing on Sunday, Sept. 13, starting at 6:30 p.m. at the Marsing Community Center. Sizzler restaurants have offered to donate enough food to feed 800 people, organizers said. A silent auction will be held that evening as well.

Another fund-raiser will be held at the Indian Creek Steakhouse in Caldwell on Oct. 3. See <http://indiancreeksteakhouse.com> for more information.

GoFundMe page for Fire Recovery Fund - Owyhee Ranchers: <http://www.gofundme.com/bz2g5ark>.

In the Clearwater fire complex area, several donation funds have been set up:

- Kamiah Community Credit Union is matching donations dollar for dollar up



Hay, clothing, and food was donated by and to Idahoans affected by fires around the state.



to \$100,000. Contact the credit union for more information: <http://www.kamiahccu.org>.

- Kamiah Relief Fund, Umpqua Bank, 147 W. Main Street, Grangeville, ID 83530. <https://www.umpquabank.com/locations/idaho/grangeville/grangeville/>.

- Potlatch No. 1 Federal Credit Union fund: <https://www.p1fcu.org/fire-relief-donation-account>.

For more information, see this Facebook page, Kamiah Distributions & Donations, <https://www.facebook.com/KamiahDonations>. □

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