



A frightening scene as the Paddock wildfire races across the landscape, burning everything in its path. All told, the fire burned 187,185 acres of land. Many ranchers and landowners were affected. (photo by Debbie Carlock-Newton)

PADDOCK WILDFIRE BURNS HISTORIC BARNs, 100+ CATTLE, CAUSES HARM TO MANY RANCHES AND RANGELANDS

By Steve Stuebner

On the evening of Monday, Aug. 5th, a dry lightning storm passed through Southwest Idaho, sending hundreds of lightning bolts onto dry rangelands that had been cooked by 100-degree heat for nearly a month.

The lightning bolts ignited many wildfires. One of them ignited a major range fire near Paddock Reservoir, located about 20 air miles east of Midvale.

"We were on it Monday night," said David Judy, a local rancher and newly elected president of the Black Canyon Rangeland Fire Protection

Association (RFPA). "I was out there fighting the fire with a 4-wheeler and a 30-gallon water tank. We were out there for six hours trying to put it out, but it was really hot and the wind kept blowing at 20-30 mph at 2-3 a.m. in the morning.

"We had six different wind changes, and it just turned into a monster."

The Midvale Volunteer Fire Department was on scene as well as the Weiser River RFPA. The Bureau

of Land Management was aware of the fire, but it had multiple starts to manage all over Southwest Idaho. Fire weather officials counted 939 lightning strikes in that region. BLM resources were stretched thin by that situation, plus aerial firefighting resources were being used in the giant Durkee fire in E. Oregon.

It was as if an angry Zeus was unleashing a fury of fire at planet earth. The Paddock wildfire zone was in the cross-hairs of that fury.

"It burned the whole North Crane Creek Valley in four hours," Judy said. "It was insane."



The Paddock wildfire burns toward a herd of cattle, silhouetted by eerie flames behind them (photo by David Judy).

The Paddock fire burned more than 50,000 acres of rangeland in the first day, 118,000 acres by day two, 153,000 by day four, and 187,000 acres by day five. By then, it had scorched the middle country between the Crane Creek and Paddock Reservoir and points north of Emmett, and it burned over the top of Squaw Butte (now known as “Sehewoki’l Newenewee’an Katete”) and threatened dozens of homes and ranches along the Ola-Sweet Highway.

A BLM Type 3 firefighting crew from Nevada arrived by day three with 93 personnel, which grew to 205 by Aug. 9 and 359 by Aug. 12. Firefighters focused on backburns and structure protection on the east flank of the fire. Seventy-one homes were evacuated for several days in the Ola-Sweet area; people were placed in emergency housing

in Emmett. Fire department crews from Emmett, Gem County, Eagle, Star, Ada County and Boise also assisted in that effort.

Ranchers who lived out in the middle of the blaze or grazed cattle in that area stayed out there to save their homes and livestock. Amazingly, no one was killed. Ranchers are still looking for lost cattle, but based on a number of interviews with ranchers, the Paddock Fire killed more than 100 cattle – perhaps more – and an unknown number of outbuildings, barns, corrals and haystacks. Hundreds of miles of fence have burned.

The BLM sent what resources they could by night one of the fire, joining the Black Canyon RFPA, Midvale Fire Department and Weiser River RFPA around the Paddock Reservoir area.

“We had a pretty good crew, but we needed 4-5 dozers and we only had one,” Judy said. “The resources were stretched too thin with all of the other fires going on elsewhere.”

“All range fires are frightening, but this one was particularly

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The only vegetation that survived in the Paddock fire zone was near water. Otherwise, it seemed to burn from the valley-bottoms to the top of the mountains. (photo by Steve Stuebner)

devastating to us,” says Aggie Little Brailsford, owner of AL Cattle. She is a descendant of the original sheep king, Andy Little.

“We lost corrals, cows and two horse barns that our grandfather built,” she said. “You come up Jake’s Creek, and there would be that big red barn that Andy Little built. The boys were out there trying to save things till 2-3 in the morning on the day that fire started, and when my foreman got to Crane Creek, the barn and corrals and everything were on fire. They saved the house, but that big red barn is gone. It just breaks my heart.”

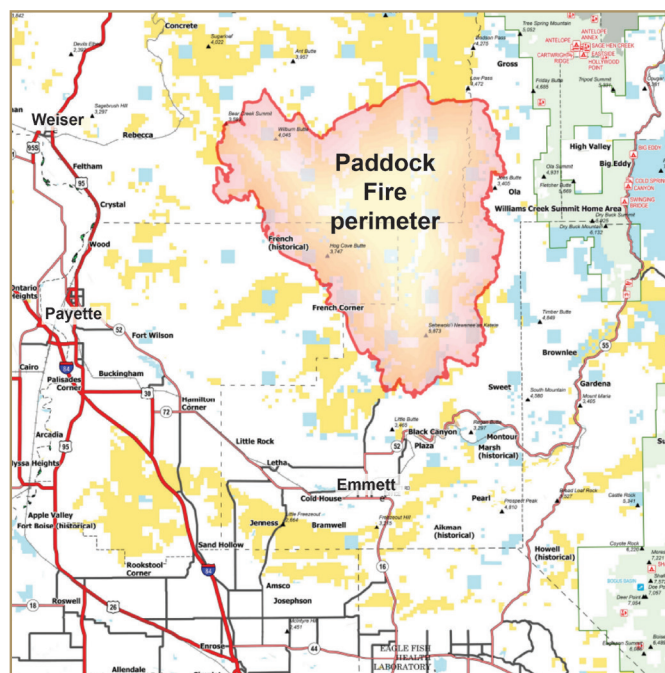
Also heart-breaking: AL Cattle has lost 26 cows; they’ll still searching for another 200 animals. David Judy is looking for 23 cows that may have been lost to the blaze or escaped somewhere into a safe zone. Robert Oxarango, owner of the Van Deusen Ranch, is still searching for 60-70 cow-calf pairs out of 350.

Judy Hinman said she’s lost two bulls and a calf, and her brother has lost at least 20 cows. Many others lost livestock in the fire or the cows were burned to the point where they had to be shot and shipped to the market, if they had any value at all.

“There was no time to get anything out when that fire blew through the North Crane Valley in four hours,” Hinman notes. “It would have been instant death.”

In one sliver of good news, 41 wild horses survived the blaze. The BLM plans to trap and move the wild horses to a place where they have forage to eat.

Perhaps the biggest impact of all is the loss of rangeland for many ranchers who still have two or three months before they would be shipping cattle to market. The total



The Paddock fire burned in very remote, rugged country, adding to the challenge of suppressing the blaze.

Resources available to assist with fire impacts

•**Farm Services Agency** – Contact your local FSA office to learn more about emergency financial assistance for livestock killed by the wildfire, livestock forage and watering systems, and more. FSA has Fact Sheets about three specific programs that could provide relief for producers who have sustained losses due to the Paddock wildfire:

oELAP-Emergency Assistance for Livestock

oLIP-Livestock Indemnity Program

oLFP- Livestock Forage Disaster Program

•**NRCS EQIP** – Provides financial assistance for fencing, livestock water systems, and range improvements such as seeding and grazing through its EQIP program. NRCS officials say they will have a better idea about how much funding is available after the new federal fiscal year begins on Oct. 1.

•**Idaho Cattle Association Fire Relief Fund** – The deadline for applications is Oct. 24.

“The impact of these fires on cattle producers will be felt for many years and some producers may not ever financially recover if they don’t have access to

relief funding assistance,” said Jerry Wroten, Board president of ICA. “The Idaho Cattle Association is here to support producers in a variety of ways and this is just one of the most relevant during this fire season.”

In addition to accepting applications for relief, ICA is accepting donations to the fund. Contact ICA at 208-343-1615 or <http://www.idahocattle.org>

•**D&B** – is reportedly selling fencing materials at wholesale cost. Check with your local D&B store for more information.



Flames everywhere in the early stages of the Paddock fire. (photo courtesy David Judy)

amount of rangeland consumed by the Paddock Fire is 187,185 acres.

Range plants in the fire zone include healthy communities of native perennial grasses and forbs, sagebrush and bitterbrush, and invasive plants such as cheatgrass and medusa-head.

Steve Sutton, who lives by Paddock Reservoir, has lost about 10,000-12,000 acres of fall and winter range by his ranch. “We were at ground zero,” he said. “We saved our house but we lost all of our range.”

Harry Soulen estimates he has lost 35,000 acres of rangeland to the Paddock Fire – land that is a mixture of private, state and BLM land. Oxarango estimates the loss of 15,000-20,000 acres of rangeland in the Sehewoki’l Newenewee’an Katete area.

The list goes on. The Paddock Fire struck right in the heart of pioneer ranching country, causing heavy impacts to ranch families whose ancestors were among the first to settle this part of Idaho, including the extended Little family, Sutton family

and Soulen family.

The importance of these private, state and BLM rangelands to ranchers for livestock grazing can not be overstated.

“A rancher is in the forage business,” notes Dick Gardner, a Ph.D. economist. “They’re in the business of growing grass, either on their own home place, or public lands, making sure there’s plenty of grass, and it’s converted into pounds for calves or lambs that are sold. That’s where they get



Not much to eat: A small cattle herd hangs out in the Paddock Fire zone recently. There's a real shortage of grazing lands for the ranchers whose range got burned up by the fire. (photo by Steve Stuebner)

their revenue."

Without rangelands to finish the grazing season, ranchers affected by the Paddock wildfire are scrambling to find somewhere to graze their livestock. But the entire Paddock fire zone is almost completely blackened by the blaze. Just a few areas around water have live plants for livestock to eat.

David Judy has been grazing cattle around a reservoir in the North Crane area, but he's been supplementing that by trucking in hay. Steve Sutton trailed his cattle to some BLM ground on Harry Soulen's property that was missed by the fire.

Ranchers concerned about next year

With all of his winter range gone, Sutton is contemplating having to sell off two-thirds of his cattle herd this fall – something any rancher would hate to do.

"I've spent a whole lifetime building up my cattle herd," Sutton said. "It's just really hard to imagine losing all

of that. But unfortunately, without someplace to graze my cattle this winter, I'm not sure what else I can do."

"We've lost nearly 100 percent of our spring, summer and fall grazing ground," Oxarango says. "The big question is, where will we go with our cows next year? We know we are not alone."

Indeed, the big question looms: How much time will the BLM want to rest the Paddock fire zone before grazing is allowed once again? Often times, the BLM and the U.S. Forest Service require up to two years of rest, sometimes more, before they allow livestock grazing on burned-over lands. But there have been exceptions.

"Quite honestly, the biggest concern we have is the decision the BLM will make about when we can graze that country again," Soulen said. "If they put a two-year closure on this entire block of ground in the fire zone, you'll be putting hundreds of people

out of business."

"We're going to limp through the rest of this year, but we're hoping we get some fall rain and a good winter to bring these rangeland back to life," Judy added.

After the BLM has time to develop burn-severity maps and soil impacts, the ranchers hope the BLM can be site-specific about what areas need to be closed versus a blanket, area-wide closure.

In the meantime, ranchers are hoping that the BLM will get busy with aerial seeding operations as soon as possible.

"Right now, the BLM should be putting seed out there before the cheatgrass and medusa-head move in," Soulen says.

Debbie Carlock-Newton, chair of the Squaw Creek Soil Conservation District, agrees. "A broadcast seeding would be great because it would bring things back so much faster," she said.



Sagebrush and bitterbrush were heavily impacted by the Paddock fire. Seedings and plantings will occur in the next year to accelerate the restoration effort.

"If we get some fall rains, the grass will come back and it'll be like a golf course out there for the elk," added Sutton.

BLM post-fire rehabilitation plans

After the fire was contained and extinguished, BLM officials have been surveying the damage and determining what kinds of post-fire resources to request from BLM national headquarters for seeding grasslands, sagebrush and bitterbrush stands and range-rehabilitation in general.

Fire suppression costs are estimated to be \$6.3 million. How much money the BLM requests for range-rehabilitation measures remains to be seen, officials said.

Rob Bennett, a BLM natural resources specialist who is working on the post-fire rehabilitation plan with a team of experts, said they are

worried about the impacts of the fire on wildlife, sage grouse habitat, Southern Idaho ground squirrel habitat, livestock grazing allotments, fencing and more.

"We've lost hundreds of miles of fence – that will need to be replaced before livestock is returned to the range," he said.

The BLM also will be working to re-seed dozer fire lines. Any fences that were torn out on BLM lands to make way for dozer fire lines will be replaced at no cost to ranchers, he said.

The BLM has preliminary information about the burn severity in the fire zone, Bennett said. "By and large, it was low to moderate burn intensity, with some parts being more severe," he said.

How will that affect regrowth? "We should have good response from

native grasses and forbs," he said. The fire burned so quickly across the landscape that "there may not be that much mortality with those plants," he said.

Sagebrush and bitterbrush took a major hit, and the BLM and its partner agencies will work on re-seeding the shrubs on the burned landscape. "We plan to fly seed for sagebrush this winter," Bennett said. "With the bitterbrush, we expect to see some re-sprouting, which will depend on fall and winter moisture."

As for how long livestock permittees may have to wait before cattle can be returned to the BLM range, Bennett said, "We do need to allow the perennial grasses to recover. We are going to rest BLM lands from grazing, there will be some rest," he said.

The BLM will meet with permittees this fall to work out the details. But right now, Bennett said the BLM may be looking at resting grazing lands for two grazing seasons or until recovery objectives have been met. "We will make more determinations this fall," he said.

The BLM also plans to do some treatment of areas with invasive plants and noxious weeds to make sure they don't expand, he said. The agency also will do aerial grass-seeding this fall or winter, he said.

Steve Stuebner writes for Conservation the Idaho Way on a regular basis.

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