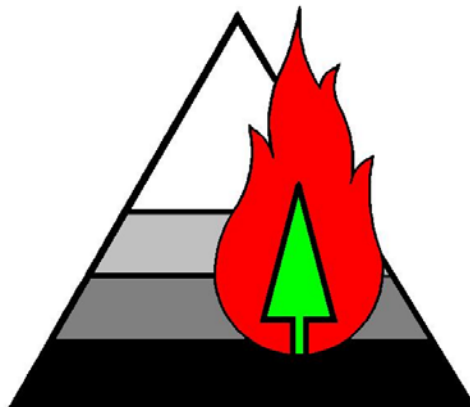




**Wildland Firefighting
&
Structure Protection
in Montana**

**Position Paper
2008**



MONTANA COUNTY FIRE WARDENS' ASSOCIATION

Executive Summary

Fire has been a historic event in Montana for centuries but it seems the struggle to find solutions to this natural activity have arrived at a crossroads in Montana. Since the well remembered “Summer of Fire” in Yellowstone in 1988 local fire departments in Montana have played a major role in protecting resources, people and property. This role continues today with the mission of fire agencies to prevent harm and protect those we serve.

Local fire agencies recognize the responsibility they have and believe that our role in wildland fire is one of partnership with our residents and the other wildland agencies. We are for the most part the structural firefighters in Montana who also fulfill our mission in the wildland fire suppression arena. As part of our goal to prevent harm we encourage the property owners within our jurisdictions to assume their responsibility to keep batteries in their smoke detectors, wear their seat belts and do fuel mitigation if they live in a fire prone area.

With that being said, the fire departments throughout Montana are very confused about the roles of Montana DNRC and the Federal Fire agencies; the U. S. Forest Service, the Bureau of Land Management, the Bureau of Indian Affairs and the National Park Service. During the past few years a change has occurred primarily driven by audits, funding and mismanagement of forests. A varied lists of strategic plans, position papers, actions by Incident Commanders and inconsistent implementation of a variety of “policies” leaves us wondering what we can expect next from those we have long considered partners.

During the past several decades Federal Fire Policy has led to unmanaged and overgrown forests with the result being a natural fire prone ecosystem tuning into a source of dangerous destructive fires that burn thousands of acres and that threaten and burn communities. As agencies look for solutions the costs have risen, now we find ourselves driven by money to find a way out that suggests the people living in Montana are responsible, not the policy makers that created the conditions.

As part of this search for a financially responsible party, the Federal agencies are pointing their fingers at State and County governments and local communities to pay for the costs of fire suppression. While it is easy for the Federal fire agencies to suggest a homeowner living in the trees or the fire department protecting them should pay the bill, little recognition is given for their efforts and contributions.

The Montana State Fire Chiefs’ Association represents every fire department, municipality, fire district, fire service area, and volunteer fire company that has a Fire Chief. This encompasses approximately 400 departments within the State of Montana. While all departments are not registered paying members of the Chief’s Association we all share a common goal of protecting our fire fighters and communities from harm.

The Fire Wardens' Association represents the Fire Wardens from the 56 counties within the State of Montana. This organization is strongest in the eastern half of the State where counties play the primary role in the suppression of wildland fires.

The partnership between the State of Montana Department of Natural Resources and local fire agencies is key to successful protection of our communities. The goal of maintaining this relationship cannot be minimized, as decisions are made on fire suppression policy this must remain in the forefront as a priority. To implement strategies that erode this coordinated effort could be catastrophic to the public we all represent.

This partnership has a couple of nuances that are generally misunderstood by many. First, local fire agencies provide initial attack on wildland fires when no one else is available. Fire departments provide a no-cost benefit to the State and Federal fire agencies much of the year. We are prepared to respond 24/7, 365 days per year and require no call out time, reducing that requirement to our cooperators. As early and late season fires have emerged local government is there for initial and extended attack before State and Federal agencies are operationally ready. Second, local government fills this role as part of their commitment to their partners and local taxpayers pay for that preparedness and response. This fire response takes place even when the State or Federal wildland agency has the jurisdictional or shares joint responsibility.

The purpose of this document is to highlight the issues and concerns of your local fire agencies. As part of this paper we raise issues, make suggestions and recommendations concerning current and long term fire responsibilities. The Montana Fire Chiefs' and Fire Wardens' Wildland Committee appreciates the efforts of Chairman Cobb and the Legislative Interim Fire Suppression Committee. We understand the challenges you face in making decisions to protect lives, property and resources of the residents of the State of Montana. We are hopeful our list of concerns, issues and recommendations will be useful in your process.

Montana Fire Chiefs' and Fire Wardens' Position Paper on Wildland Fire

We would like to address five primary areas of concern to our members:

- The implementation of the Federal Fire Policy and the Federal Fire agencies' Appropriate Management Response Policy
- Montana DNRC's role and their position on the draft Community And Structure Fire Protection
- Montana DNRC's needs and our support and recommendations for this important partner of Montana's fire service
- Local government's role and position in fire suppression, including large fire operations
- Policy governing growth and development

We reference several documents and they are included as an addendum in this paper.

First, let us state that we concur with the assessments listed in the Legislative Fire Suppression Committee draft, The Outlook of Fire, on why cost and size of fires have increased in the past 20+ years. While we recognize there are locations in the State where relationships between agencies are difficult there are also other areas where integration of fire suppression resources from local, state and federal agencies work closely together, this does provide us with something to strive for. For many years all of the agencies have worked together especially during initial attack. This role has expanded since the 1988 fire season when local government fire agencies became a significant part of the suppression resources utilized in the State. While both the U.S. Forest Service and Montana DNRC provide statistics on the number of fires stopped during initial attack efforts, both recognize that a large portion of those fires are "caught" and contained by local agencies. Local government is a cooperator and partner in the protection of lives and property from wildfire. This is a critical function of fire agencies at all levels and difficult if not impossible to separate. During initial attack operations, boundaries have been nearly invisible and the only objective is to prevent harm by containment of a potentially hazardous fire. However, with the direction the State DNRC and Federal agencies are taking with Appropriate Management Response and Community and Structure Fire Protection, the integration and cooperation could rapidly deteriorate.

Support for Montana DNRC

The connection between Montana DNRC fire operations and local government is vital and has steadily improved over the past few years. However, we are concerned this may not continue if DNRC does not support local agencies and structure protection. We recognize DNRC is in a difficult position with partners on both sides but they must maintain a strong and binding connection to the local fire agencies in Montana as their primary goal. Excluding our concerns, we provide and support the following recommendations:

- Increased support for fire business administration and personnel
 - This will reduce costs and improve local support where FEMA reimbursement is necessary
- Increased support for air operations

- Local fire agencies have been and can continue to provide significant numbers of fire engines for ground operations but strongly encourage improving the availability of helicopters by funding additional pilots and aircraft
- Restructuring of DNRC Fire to provide line authority within the Fire Bureau, Land Offices and their fire units
 - Continuity and consistency within DNRC Fire is difficult to find. Each land office and every fire unit works independently. We believe that restructuring fire operations so that fire managers at the State level directly supervise those in the land office and land office fire supervisors directly overseeing unit level fire personnel will make the DNRC more efficient and effective.
- Increased emphasis on local and state cooperation, and not the separation being caused by Federal fire policy
 - Montana DNRC needs to remember who provides their support, it is not the Federal agencies, but the citizens and communities of Montana
 - Montana DNRC needs to increase their coordination with local government, if the direction they take aligns them with the current direction of Federal fire policy it is going to lead to disintegration of local response and cooperation
- Add Rural Fire Coordinators in every Land Office
 - To improve cooperation a Rural Fire Coordinator should be funded at every DNRC land office. This will provide someone specifically responsible for working with local fire agencies
 - Provide for support throughout the state which will result in improved training, cooperation and effectiveness of State and local fire forces

Growth and Development Policy

As part of the current politically charged fire climate it seems that those who live in the wildland urban interface are being targeted as the responsible parties for costs of suppression. It is easy to forget that for the most part there was, and still is, no guideline in place to limit this growth or to provide construction standards for those who build there. Federal fire agencies seem to accept no responsibility for their part of mismanagement of our forest that has contributed greatly to the dangerous fire conditions. The Montana State Legislature has failed to provide appropriate legislation that establishes and supports counties and fire departments in limiting or conditioning growth. Appropriate legislation needs to be established which must include the tools and funding mechanisms for enforcement. Everyone owns a piece of the wildland urban interface problem but those who are most capable of making appropriate and effective change need to recognize their role in the overall situation, not just in recovering costs.

In addition to our support of funding for fire operations we also ask the legislature to support appropriate laws and rules that assist counties and fire agencies in the protection of lives and property.

These include:

- Establishing enforceable policy for zoning or similar rules that give local government effective means of managing growth in fire prone areas
- Coordinating with MACO, the League of Cities and Towns and local fire agencies to ensure the legislation adopted is functional in its purpose and implementation
- Establishing building regulations through the Dept. of Labor and Industry Building Codes Division for construction standards in high fire hazard areas
- Legislation must include a funding mechanism to support implementation and enforcement of these policies
- Counties must work closely with the Legislature in implementing the requirements established through growth management legislation and building standards
- Policies and standards should include requirements for water supply and safe road access

Appropriate Management Response (AMR)

Much has been said about Appropriate Management Response or the acronym AMR. You have heard it stated that it is not a let it burn policy and that it has been around for a long time. However, local fire agencies have concerns that it is a let it burn policy that directly impacts the communities and towns in Montana. George Weldon, Acting Director of Fire and Aviation Management for the USFS Northern Region was interviewed and his beliefs expressed in an article in On Earth Magazine,

“Weldon says that firefighters misdirected resources in two ways this past summer. They spent too much energy protecting structures, and they put too much effort into “initial attack,” which means extinguishing freshly started fires before they get big. In fact, 98 percent of all fires that started this year in the northern Rockies were extinguished within a few hours. This record would have conferred bragging rights two decades ago, but Weldon believes this approach is not sustainable; firefighters should have let more fires burn.”

Mr. Weldon is a policy maker with the U.S. Forest Service and is directing his firefighters to allow more fires to burn. While we can all appreciate the challenge of bringing our forests back into something resembling a natural state, this policy will threaten thousands of residents and communities. If, in fact, the USFS and other Federal agencies want to adopt this policy they must provide for the protection of communities first. Instead of support, the same article states,

“If people don't like smoke or they are nervous with fires burning from June until the end of September, they are in the wrong place,” says Weldon. ”

We should be concerned when a long time Federal Fire Official suggests Montanans should move so he can allow fires to burn. Placing fiscal issues and forest management ahead of people is unacceptable.

While AMR suggests that we should allow fire to take its natural course, this approach is just as much a concern as the previous Federal “Smokey Bear” policy that got us here by extinguishing every fire. Some middle ground must be found. One challenge seems to be in a lack of consistency at the Federal level on implementation of AMR. Mr. Weldon suggests more fires should be allowed to burn and AMR does provide for “point protection” or “perimeter control” around homes. However, a current draft, Community and Structure Fire Protection, suggests just the opposite. It states:

We should be using standard wildland fire protection tactics which we are trained for and have the equipment to implement. We will not engage in tactical actions directly upon or immediately adjacent to a private structure (wrapping, foaming, gelling, and installing sprinkler systems) or extensive hazardous fuels modification.

The exact tactics identified as those not to use are the same standard wildland fire protection tactics we have been trained to use. This confusing direction is a misguided course that is impossible to follow and impractical in its application.

The following were some of last year’s Appropriate Management Response fires in Montana and we must ask ourselves if they truly reflect a savings. How do we really know?

Sawmill	\$	20,000,000.00
Rombo	\$	7,200,000.00
Fool Creek	\$	4,400,000.00
Ahorn	\$	6,000,000.00
Conger	\$	908,000.00

The inconsistent AMR message includes:

- Safety as our first concern, but it will force local and State fire agencies to operate independently
- Doing a better job of managing fires but let more, and larger fires burn
- Providing point and perimeter protection for communities while removing the funding and suppression tools to do so
- Holding homeowners accountable for the costs of fires that start on overgrown Federal forests, but do no management on those forests

For its part, the State of Montana cannot accept the premise that it is appropriate to let fires burn. The Montana Codes Annotated are clear:

76-13-212. Duty of landowner to protect against fire. (1) An owner of land shall protect against the starting or existence of fire and shall suppress the spread of fire on that land. This protection and suppression must be in conformity with reasonable rules and standards for adequate fire protection adopted by the department.

The newly adopted State Fire Policy, MCA 76-13-115 states:

(6) all private property owners and federal and state public land management agencies have a responsibility to manage resources, mitigate fire hazards, and otherwise prevent fires on their property;

How can the State of Montana, City and County governments and local fire officials enforce burning regulations or statutes on a private landowner if Montana supports or even allows Federal Fire agencies to take any action, except full suppression—or furthermore, accept any financial obligation evolving from their failing to suppress?

In conclusion, Appropriate Management Response has little to do with the safety of firefighters. It is a mechanism for Federal land and financial management and a means for those agencies to transfer the costs of their fires to State and local agencies. We want to continue to partner with the Federal agencies to protect the residents and communities we were both created to serve. The solution truly lies in a cooperative approach with local government being included as a full partner in the process and not as a group who only accepts what the Federal agencies hand to us. This must come with recognition for the contributions we provide in both suppression and current financial contributions to fire operations. In this current political arena this goes completely unnoticed.

Recommendations:

- The State of Montana should not follow the Federal recommendations on fire policy but work more closely with local government for solutions that benefit Montana
- Direct the federal agencies to take suppression action and financial responsibility for the problems they created from lack of forest management
- If the federal agencies are going to adhere to “let it burn” policy they must be responsible for those costs and losses incurred by State and Local agencies
- Before the implementation of new policies that allow for increased numbers and larger fires, the agencies should first provide community protection, i.e.; fire breaks separating federal land from communities and increased funding and time for fuels work on federal, State and private ground surrounding communities
- Montana DNRC should not accept responsibility for protecting areas of Federal land where fire use is a priority
- The State of Montana should not accept responsibility for costs incurred as a result of Federal fire policy

Community and Structure Fire Protection

The most recent draft of the Community and Structure Fire Protection document gives direction to fire managers for fire operations in and around structures. The most immediate and greatest concern to the Fire Chiefs’ and Fire Wardens’ Associations is that the State of Montana is listed as a partner in this document. How can the Montana legislature and Department of Natural Resources support or adhere to a policy contrary to their mission?

Much of western Montana is within forest fire protection districts that pay the State of Montana and through land exchange, Federal agencies to protect them from fire. The assessment records in the appendix reflect that revenue for providing that protection. As indicated in MCA 76-13-208:

76-13-208. Nature of assessments for wildland fire protection. All payments required of landowners by part 1 and this part are assessments for benefits actually received by those owners in the protection of their lands and are not a tax upon the property of the owners.

“For benefits actually received”, requires that protection of their property actually takes place.

State law refers in a number of sections to the responsibility of landowners to suppress fire. However, the suggestion that we hold private property owners accountable for fires that start on Federal ground and then don't hold the government agencies to the same standard is difficult to justify. MCA 76-13-212 reads:

76-13-212. Duty of landowner to protect against fire. (1) An owner of land shall protect against the starting or existence of fire and shall suppress the spread of fire on that land. This protection and suppression must be in conformity with reasonable rules and standards for adequate fire protection adopted by the department.

(2) (a) The provisions of 76-13-201 apply to an owner of land that is classified as forest land under 76-13-107 and that is within a wildland fire protection district.

The same section goes on to say who is responsible for that protection if the landowners are unable to provide it:

(b) If an owner of land does not provide for protection against the starting or existence of fire and for fire suppression and the land does not meet the criteria in subsection (2)(a), the owner may request that the department provide protection as provided in 76-13-105.

Can the State of Montana and the DNRC support a document limiting structure protection? The entire Forest Fire Protection Fee funding structure is based on assessing small landowners for just that—wildland fire protection. MCA 76-13-201 states:

76-13-201. Costs for protection from fire. (1) An owner of land classified as forest land that is within a wildland fire protection district or that is otherwise under contract for fire protection by a recognized agency is subject to the fees for fire protection provided in this section.

(2) The department shall provide fire protection to the land described in subsection (1) at a cost to the landowner of not more than \$45 for each landowner in the protection district and of not more than an additional 25 cents per acre per year for each acre in excess of 20 acres owned by each landowner in each protection district, as necessary to yield the amount of money provided for in 76-13-207. Assessment, payment, and collection of the fire protection costs must be in accordance with 76-13-207.

(3) Other charges may not be assessed to a participating landowner except in cases of proved negligence on the part of the landowner or the landowner's agent or in the event of a violation of 50-63-103.

Phrases like “**shall provide fire protection**” mean exactly that. For the Montana DNRC to embrace a policy that is detrimental to their citizens and contrary to their mission is unacceptable. Just last legislative session these assessments were increased by 25%. In the County Co-op Program DNRC is committed to support local agencies when their local capacity is exceeded. How does DNRC support a document which is contrary to their current agreements and commitment to the residents and communities of Montana?

In addition to being just plain wrong, the Fire Associations also believe it is illegal for Montana DNRC to take this step. It is contrary to their mission and everything they are funded to do. Acceptance and support of this policy will bring strong legal action by insurance companies and homeowners whose homes are damaged as a result.

Additionally, the Community and Structure Fire Protection draft states, “Our first and foremost intent is to keep our firefighters and public safe.” Nothing could be more detrimental to firefighter safety than to create and support a policy that is first not supported by the rank and file firefighters and secondly, will create a division between local, State and Federal agencies. Local agencies will be forced to take independent action such as burnouts along federal or State boundaries to keep fires from burning into their subdivisions and communities. How can this policy be construed as supporting safety?

Local government recognizes that everyone has a role to play in protecting structures. Homeowners have been and are accepting more responsibility, including subdivisions and developed areas. They need to do more. However we must remember that most homes in Montana don't burn or need costly fire protection from fires that start on their ground. Their local fire department extinguishes these fires before they become a threat. What they need is protection from the fires that start on overgrown forests that come raging unchecked into their property. An aerial flight over many areas in Montana shows that private land is much better prepared for fire than their neighboring State or Federal landowner.

The State Fire Policy, which went into effect less than one year ago, details the Legislature's direction for DNRC: (emphasis added)

76-13-115. State fire policy. The legislature finds and declares that:

- (1) **the safety of the public** and of firefighters is paramount in all wildfire suppression activities;
- (2) **it is a priority to minimize property and resource loss** resulting from wildfire and to minimize expense to Montana taxpayers, which is generally accomplished through an aggressive and rapid initial attack effort;

- (3) **interagency cooperation and coordination among local, state, and federal agencies are intended and encouraged**, including cooperation when restricting activity or closing areas to access becomes necessary;
- (4) fire prevention, hazard reduction, and loss mitigation are fundamental components of this policy;
- (5) all property in Montana has wildfire protection from a recognized fire protection entity;
- (6) **all private property owners and federal and state public land management agencies have a responsibility to manage resources, mitigate fire hazards, and otherwise prevent fires on their property**;
- (7) **sound forest management activities to reduce fire risk, such as thinning, prescribed burning**, and insect and disease treatments, improve the overall diversity and vigor of forested landscapes and improve the condition of related water, wildlife, recreation, and aesthetic resources; and
- (8) **development of fire protection guidelines for the wildland-urban interface is critical to improving public safety and for reducing risk and loss.**

Outside the established laws of the State of Montana, DNRC has no authority to participate in the support of the Community and Structure Protection draft proposal; the leadership of DNRC would be outside it's authority in supporting this change in their mission.

Recommendations

- DNRC must remove the State of Montana as a supporter of this document
- DNRC must adhere to their established mission to protect private property
- DNRC cannot be governed by Federal Fire Policy
- All agencies need to continue to change the culture within the forested zones increasing the accountability of homeowners.
 - Educating and supporting homeowners in mitigation and construction standards
 - Strong enforcement of burning regulations
- Create fire breaks around communities
 - If the federal fire agencies are going to allow more fire to burn then we first need to require them to take steps to protect the public and provide a place where perimeter control can be accomplished
- Continue to support funding for fuels treatment on private ground
- Fund and increase the number of DNRC community forestry personnel
- Require the Federal agencies to accept responsibility for their role in our current fire situation
 - Thinning and logging operations must take place
 - Financial responsibility cannot be transferred from those responsible for allowing fires to burn

Funding for Montana State Fire Operations

Funding for State fire operations comes from varied and sometimes confusing sources. First, let's address the local government contributions. Local fire agencies including volunteer fire companies, rural fire districts, fire service fee areas, towns and municipal fire departments provide emergency services 24/7, 365 days per year. In most jurisdictions this includes response to wildland fires in and around their jurisdiction. They regularly cross boundaries to stop threatening fires and save State and Federal agencies the cost associated with this action.

These same agencies provide emergency response and structural fire protection to State universities, Dept. of Transportation facilities, DNRC structures, and numerous other State properties. The same local fire departments respond to U.S. Forest Service facilities and Ranger Stations, BLM and other Federal property, all without any funding for their services.

Local taxpayers already commit a significant amount of funding to their own protection and we recognize this is appropriate. In addition to the local funding for fire protection there are two primary categories of financial support to the State of Montana. These include direct protection funding through Forest Fire Protection fees and the County Co-op Program which covers all 56 counties but has primary impact in the eastern portion of the State.

Within the counties that have "forested zones", a Forest Fire Protection fee is levied on every property owner within a forest fire protection district. This assessment has been modified and increased over the years. It was first implemented as stated in 76-13-208 "for the benefits actually received" by the property owner. Over the years, DNRC has taken significant liberty with this section and used the money within their budget. There is no accounting on how and where these direct protection revenues are expended. The difficulty in separating this funding, within DNRC's budget, from the general fund budget is reflective of the complex fire problem that exists. It is also reflective of the larger issue of separating local and State fire suppression responsibilities. In the last legislative session this fee was increased approximately 25%. As granted in law this provides for approximately 1/3 of DNRC's appropriated budget.

County Co-op Program funds equipment for most of the counties in Montana. Under this program local agencies assume responsibility for fire operations and when they exceed their capabilities they are supported by Montana DNRC.

At times, especially during a large fire season, it is difficult to separate DNRC's actions on direct protection from those on county co-op protection. During extreme fire seasons DNRC adds suppression forces to county co-op areas, providing initial attack that responds with local initial attack resources. We believe this action is necessary and the right thing to do but it does raise questions concerning the funding methods for fire protection.

The options for fire funding presented in the Fire Suppression Committees draft “The Outlook for Fire” identifies three areas to target for possible increased revenue:

- Landowners in the wildland urban interface;
- Landowners who benefit from direct protections service and county cooperative assistance; or
- The state general fund.

These options have been looked at on a number of occasions. As previously mentioned, the landowners in the wildland urban interface pay for protection through Forest Fire Protection fees paid to the State and in most of these areas, also support a local fire response through property taxes or fire service fees, paying their share through the general fund. These landowners live in the wildland urban interface because that is where the private property exists in western Montana. There have never been restrictions or requirements to manage growth into this rural timbered setting. An important issue to remember is that fires that impact residential structures and communities do not start there. When they start in the subdivision setting 99.999+% of these fires are extinguished by the local fire department before they can become a threat. For the most part the fires in Montana that destroy private property, including homes, start on unmanaged federal ground or in State forests and burn into developed areas.

The other misconception is that the fires that destroy homes or cost large amounts of money are only in the forested wildland urban interface. While records from DNRC are limited a report in 2003 showed that on a 10-year average, 21% of fire costs were from fires in County Co-op Protection areas. Since that time there have been fire seasons that burned a large number of acres with high fire costs in these areas.

Additionally, the effects of fire touch everyone in the State of Montana. Firefighters, landowners, business, tourism, the timber and mining industries, ranchers and farmers—all are affected by fire. It doesn't matter where you live in Montana—major city, small town, rural area or an isolated remote location—everyone sees and recognizes the impact. Natural events in Montana produce increased costs; however, the cost of dealing with most natural catastrophes is funded through the General Fund. The high cost snow removal, mud slides on highways, damage from wind events or floods all increase the costs in Montana. When impacts exceed funded general fund money, DES or Governor emergency funds are utilized. Within the current fire regime, all are at risk from direct influence of fire and potentially, the financial, health and environmental effects large fires bring.

Recommendation

- Fund fire suppression costs from the general fund
 - Continued targeting of small groups will never provide an effective mechanism for appropriate funding. When small areas are targeted it impacts those areas ability to pass other necessary funding for schools and fire departments

Large Fire Suppression

As part of their role in protecting lives, property and the environment local fire agencies participate in large fire operations. This participation from experienced and trained local firefighters is an integral part of protecting Montana. In addition to fire response within Montana, local agencies supply to other States the same response they provide to us. In times of large fires, no one can provide enough resources independently, requiring exchanges of resources across boundaries. This is an integral part of all government agencies' primary responsibility. Whether it is a wildland fire in Montana, a hurricane in Louisiana or a terrorist act in New York City, local, state and federal agencies play the primary role of supporting and protecting the public.

The exchange of funding between local fire agencies and the State or Federal government is no different than the exchanges done between State and Federal agencies. All public agencies have a fiduciary responsibility to their taxpayers to ensure the appropriate compensation for the use of their resources. While local government is willing to respond with or on behalf of their partners at no cost for initial attack, when funding is available local taxpayers deserve some form of repayment for their contribution to this cooperative program.

When severity revenue is available, the best and lowest cost is the local agency. They are familiar with the area, do not have to be provided lodging and food support—they go home at night. Local responders know the area, can operate independently and do not need to be attached to an agency engine in order to get to a fire. This makes them a much more reliable and valuable resource. During extended attack, local agencies easily transition into this role. Their personnel are qualified to fill roles in the management team on larger incidents and there is no time wasted in getting to know the capabilities of personnel. Today's large fires almost always involve wildland urban interface and structures. No fire suppression personnel are better suited for this role than local fire agencies.

Some private contractors have indicated that local agencies have begun to build equipment with the expectation that they will be utilized on larger State and Federal fires. Statistics will show that nothing is further from the truth. Fire agencies in Montana have been involved in wildland fire since the late 80's. Local fire departments came to the aid of their respective States and their Federal partners when no one else was available. Local government fire agencies provided a much larger portion of the wildland suppression component in the 80's and 90's than they currently provide. An improved economy, fewer volunteers and the addition of private contractors who were not available for many years have reduced the participation of local agencies.

The local fire agencies can be described in one word: consistent. We have always been there for our partners. We will provide trained responders days, nights and weekends and without the need to take last minute courses to make sure our personnel meet the requirements. We will be available even if it rains for two years. We will provide experience because we are professional fire and emergency service providers who are dedicated to serving the public, 24/7, 365.

Recommendations

- Support the use of local government and private contractors in the suppression of wildland fires
- Support the current dispatch system that utilizes the closest resources and most cost effective and efficient resources
- Do not attempt to legislate the right of local agencies to fight the ravages of fire in or out of the State of Montana
- Do not limit the right of local elected officials to make decisions on how and when their fire agencies resources are utilized in fire suppression

Conclusion

The fire environment is complex and challenging in Montana and the one thing that we agree on is that protection of the public and of firefighters is number one. Additionally, all agencies, especially local government fire agencies must be involved at the national level encouraging our representatives to stop the ill-conceived policies that threaten our number one priority.

Federal agencies operating within the State of Montana must recognize and assume their responsibilities. They must take time to develop and implement protection for the public and communities in Montana before embarking on dangerous strategies for the sake of funding and ecosystem restoration. Federal property does not exist in a vacuum, it is part of the overall community and culture, and people do live in and around federal property. To suggest that if they don't like smoke and fire they are in the wrong place is ignorant of their responsibilities to those taxpayers who support them.

The Montana Department of Natural Resources must recognize its primary responsibility to work with local government within Montana. The direction the agency seems to be taking, aligning more with the Federal agencies, has no support within the Department of Natural Resources and if followed will have immediate and long term negative consequences within the State of Montana. The Fire Associations strongly encourage DNRC to return to their mission of strong initial attack and protection of private property. The failure to do so will result in destroyed relationships, reduced safety to the public and firefighters, and increased costs to the State.

Local governments and fire agencies need to continue to work towards solutions in the wildland urban interface. Changing the culture to encourage increased fuel removal, better methods of construction, water supply and access is a necessity. We pledge to increase our work efforts toward these goals at the local level.

While we have provided recommendations to the Fire Suppression Committee, we are all aware that the fire problems we face cannot be legislated out of existence. However, simply looking for solutions to the financial dilemma is not the answer. To put the fiscal implications before the welfare of communities cannot be acceptable to anyone. If that course is pursued it will be difficult for all agencies and the public.

In conclusion, your Fire Chiefs' and Fire Wardens' Associations want to thank the Legislative Fire Suppression Committee for the opportunity to be a participant in this important work. The Fire Associations are a representative section of the State and we ask that you take our recommendations seriously. Our representatives are willing and desire, an opportunity to sit down with the committee members and discuss any or all of these recommendations in more detail. We thank you for your support and we will be available at any time to assist you.

Appendix

MONTANA STATE FIRE CHIEFS' & FIRE WARDENS' WILDLAND FIRE COMMITTEE

Scott Waldron	Chairman	Frenchtown Rural Fire District	406/626-5791	swaldron@frenchtownfire.org
Rich Cowger	Fire Chiefs	Columbus City/Rural Fire	406/322-4302	rcowger@columbusfirerescue.com
Tom Kuntz	Fire Chiefs	Red Lodge VFD	406/446-3480	firechief@montana.net
Doug Martens	Fire Wardens	Rosebud Co. Fire Dept.	406/351-1574	dmartens@rosebudcountymt.com
Brett Waters	Fire Wardens	Central Valley Rural Fire District	406/388-4480	bwaters@belgradefire.com
Bob Fry	Fire Wardens		406/220-8329	bobfry@mcn.net

MONTANA FIRE WARDENS' ASSOCIATION

Doug Martens	Rosebud County Fire Dept.	406/364-4270	dmartens@rosebudcountymt.com
Brett Waters	Central Valley Rural Fire District	406/388-4480	bwaters@belgradefire.com
Rick Seidlitz	Meagher County Fire Dept.	406/547-3397	sheriff@sheriff.meagherco.org
Floyd Fisher		406/568-2598	gvcso@midrivers.com

**MONTANA STATE FIRE CHIEFS' ASSOCIATION
BOARD OF DIRECTORS
2007-09**

NAME	TITLE	ADDRESS	PHONE	EMAIL
Ken Mergenthaler	President	Chief Eastgate VFD PO Box 735 East Helena, MT 59635	406.431.2450 (b) 406.431.2450 (c)	Eastgate@initco.net kmergenthaler@mt.gov
Rich Cowger	1 st V.P.	Chief Columbus City/Rural Fire PO Box 653 Columbus, MT 59019	406.322.4302 (b) 406.322.1180 (f) 406.321.1180 (c)	rcowger@columbusfirerescue.com
Tom Kuntz	2 nd V.P.	Chief Red Lodge VFD PO Box 318 Red Lodge, MT 59068	406.446.3480 (b) 406.855.6198 (c)	firechief@montana.net
Chuck Winn	WFCA V.P.	Chief Bozeman FD PO Box 1230 Bozeman, MT 59771-1230	406.582.2350 (b) 406.582.2355 (f)	cwinn@bozeman.net
Steve Larson	Past President	Chief Helena FD 300 Neill Ave. Helena, MT 59601	406.447.8472 (b) 406.447.8467 (f) 406.431.7665 (c)	slarson@ci.helena.mt.us
William 'Bill' Rash	Director	Chief Lockwood Fire & Rescue 3329 Driftwood Ln. Billings, MT 59101	406.252.1460 (b) 406.256.8237 (f) 406.855.0400 (c)	brash@lockwoodfire.com
Jason Manley	Director	Chief Lewistown Fire Rescue 305 W. Watson St. Lewistown, MT 59457	406.535.1780 (b) 406.535.3052 (f) 406.366.7008 (c)	jmanley@ci.lewistown.mt.us
Allen Lorenz	<i>Ex-Officio</i>	State Fire Marshal 2225 11 th Ave. Helena, Mt 59601	406.444.2050 (b)	alorenz@mt.gov
Butch Weedon	<i>Ex-Officio</i>	Director Fire Training School 750 6 th St. SW Great Falls, MT 59404	406.761.7885 (b)	bweedon@montana.edu
Ted Mead	<i>Ex-Officio</i>	Chief Fire Mgmt. Bureau DNRC	406.542.4304 (b)	tmead@mt.gov

DRAFT DRAFT DRAFT DRAFT DRAFT DRAFT



COMMUNITY AND STRUCTURE FIRE PROTECTION

Guidelines for the Northern Rockies and Great Basin January 2008

Background

Structure protection is a large cost center for all agencies, and clarification on what, how and where we will accomplish our structure protection roles and responsibilities must be identified. There needs to be common expectations among all agencies, local government and the public on how structure protection will be handled within the Great Basin and Northern Rockies.

Wildland fire agencies have primary responsibility for fire suppression within their respective protection areas. Wildland fire agencies have a responsibility to prevent a wildfire from spreading into areas where there are structures, and to assist local fire agencies in protecting communities and structures from the advancing wildland fire.

Leaders Intent

Our first and foremost intent is to keep our firefighters and the public safe. Once that safety can be ensured then we will work towards keeping the wildland fire away from structures and communities. Our strategies and tactics should be based on that intent. When there is a need to engage in structure protection we need to ensure that we are taking safe, appropriate and reasonable tactical actions that are cost effective. We should be using standard wildland fire protection tactics which we are trained for and have the equipment to implement. We will not engage in tactical actions directly upon or immediately adjacent to a private structure (wrapping, foaming, gelling, and installing sprinkler systems) or extensive hazardous fuels modification. The owner is responsible for any actions taken directly upon or adjacent to a private structure and modification of fuels on their property.

Unified Efforts

There may be cases where another fire protection entity has the responsibility for structure fire suppression and/or also wildland fire. We will engage in a unified effort with local fire agencies to ensure that there is a shared responsibility. When the management of a wildland fire has the potential to impact another entity's protection or

DRAFT DRAFT DRAFT DRAFT DRAFT DRAFT

jurisdictional responsibility, we need to engage in dialogue with those parties. It becomes especially critical when the values at risk involve structures. Those discussions should be initiated in advance of a wildland fire impacting another entity's area of responsibility.

Discussions should include roles and responsibilities, what capabilities each party has, how the parties will interface with each other, and how responsibilities for costs will be addressed. The tactical need for structure engines (Type 1 or 2) will be determined and financially supported by the local fire agencies.

It is important to:

- **Partner** with communities, home and landowners to identify financial and technical assistance opportunities to mitigate potential wildland urban interface losses.
- Identify **if** there is another entity that has the responsibility for wildland fire protection and/or structure protection and if there is an entity that has responsibility for structure suppression.
- Identify **where** those areas are.
- **Define** the roles, responsibilities, and capabilities of the parties regarding wildland fire protection and structure fire protection when there are areas of overlapping responsibility. Define the roles, responsibilities, and capabilities of the entity providing structure suppression.
- **Identify** how the parties will interface when planned actions or when the wildland fire impacts another's protection or jurisdictional responsibility.
- Identify the roles and financial responsibilities of each party and **document** the rationale when plans or contingencies require structure protection.
- Document the **rationale** for the actions taken if structure protection is provided and there is not another entity that has structure protection responsibility.

Capabilities

Jurisdictional entities such as rural fire departments may have limited capability within their own areas of jurisdiction to respond to the potential impacts created by a wildfire. It is important to understand what capability they do have and if they have options to reach out to others to enhance that capability, either tactically or financially.

Definitions

The following are defined:

Wildland Fire Protection: Any non-structure fire that occurs in the wildland with the primary responsibility of protecting natural resources and watersheds from damage. State and federal forestry or land management and some local government agencies normally provide wildland fire protection.

DRAFT DRAFT DRAFT DRAFT DRAFT DRAFT

Structure Fire Protection: Protecting a structure from the threat of damage from an advancing wildland fire. This involves the use of standard wildland protection tactics, control methods, and equipment, including fire control lines and the extinguishments of spot fires near or on the structure. The protection can be provided by both the rural and/or local government fire department and the wildland fire protection agency.

Structure Fire Suppression: Interior or exterior actions taken to suppress and extinguish a burning structure or improvement associated with standard fire protection equipment and training. This is the responsibility of local government entities; however there are areas where there is no structural fire agency in place.

DRAFT DRAFT DRAFT DRAFT DRAFT

The outlook of fire

The west is prone to wildland fire. Montana is no exception. As wildland fires increase in severity and size, so does the cost of suppression in terms of real dollars and other affects. The professional forestry community has produced a number of documents detailing the reasons behind the increasing severity and costs of fire. They include:

- Extended drought in the west;
- Increased development in the wildland urban interface, the area where development meets forestlands;
- An increase in fuel load in the forest from drought, disease and lack of funding for proper management; and
- Lack of integration of resources from local, state and federal agencies.

These factors may explain why fires increasing in severity and cost, but on the Montana landscape there are other issues that increase the complexity of fire suppression. Such factors are:

- Diverging fire suppression polices between federal and state agencies;
- Decreased federal funding for land management activities;
- Lack of resources to fully fund DNRC initial attack operations;
- Increased gas and diesel fuel costs;
- Uncertainty of the future of Plum Creek Lands;
- Increased, and often unfunded, utilization of local government resources;
- Rising complexity of fires;
- Decreased access to area wide resources;
- Widespread affects of poor air quality;
- Spotty rehabilitation of burnt lands and watersheds;
- Concern for succession planning in the fire management field;
- Stress on Montana wildland fire fighters; and
- Increased budget pressures on federal agencies to decrease fire suppression costs.

These factors will continue to hamper fire suppression activities. Those pressures remain long after the last fire is declared contained. After on the ground work is completed, the financial side continues. The process of cost sharing with federal partners and obtaining FEMA reimbursement is often not completed within the fiscal year. This creates another set of Montana concerns such as:

- The ability to cash flow the entire cost of fire, prior to obtaining payment from federal partners;
- Ability for DNRC to maintain operations until a supplemental appropriation can be approved by the legislature;
- The pressure to settle one fire season, while another fire season begins; and
- Stress on the limited number of individuals who are dedicated to the business side of fire.

When all factors are rolled together, the day to day fire suppression and the business aftermath are becoming increasingly difficult to manage, and increasingly difficult for the state to fund. The traditional funding mechanism to pay state costs through a supplemental appropriation was not viable for the past fire season and resulted in a special session to appropriate funds to cover the cost. This raised the question of "Who should pay the state share?" Should it be?

- Landowners in the wildland urban interface;
- Landowners who benefit from direct protection services and county cooperative assistance; or
- The state general fund.

DRAFT DRAFT DRAFT DRAFT DRAFT DRAFT

Fire season is a regular part of life in Montana. Given the identified pressures, pending changes and financial issues, the outcome of future fire seasons is at risk. The state must examine proposals to make changes to the status quo to make an impact on the future success of fire suppression.

Conclusion:

- With limited resources, it is just a matter of time before numerous houses or even a few towns burn.
- Stress of fire season will continue to rise, affecting landowners, firefighters, business owners and the public.
- With limited resources to fight fires, the costs for fire suppression will continue to grow.
- Small businesses from tourism to farms and ranches will continue to be hurt from fires as they are unable to be compensated for business losses due to fires.
- With the declining federal forest fuel reduction program and no comparable state programs, even where fuel reduction is possible, there will be little or none completed, therefore contributing to future fires.
- Conflict will grow between the state, federal, private and local policies regarding fire suppression, thus affecting cooperation of how fires are fought and suppressed.

The screenshot shows the top portion of the myonearth website. At the top, there is a dark navigation bar with the text "myonearth" in white, followed by "Sign In" and "Register" in a smaller font. Below this, there are links for "Subscribe to onEarth" and an RSS icon. The main header area is light green and features the "onearth" logo in large, bold, green letters. Underneath the logo, it reads "AN INDEPENDENT PUBLICATION OF THE NATURAL RESOURCES DEFENSE COUNCIL". A search bar with a green "SEARCH" button is positioned below the logo. To the left of the search bar, there is a vertical list of navigation items, each preceded by a small black dot: Culture, Science/Tech, Health, Energy, Nature, Politics, Business, Multimedia, and Blogs. The bottom of the screenshot shows a dark horizontal bar.

Our Trial By Fire

by Richard Manning

ISSUE: [Winter 2008](#), [FEATURE STORIES](#) | December 1, 2007



In August 2007, firefighters

battled 10 separate fires along a local access road to Interstate 90. Michael Gallacher

Beset by heat and drought, the West burns up

This was a record fire year in the West, but most are these days. Wildfire began on schedule in the Southwest, but by July the heavy action was in the northern Rockies. Forest fires roared across more than 600,000 acres of Montana, where I live, close to 30 major fires, some lasting from mid-June until first snowfall in October. Idaho had it worse, with roughly the same number of fires as Montana but more than two million acres burned. The two states took the brunt of the action but were not far out of line with the rest of the West. All told, as much as eight million acres of western wildlands burned (the same as in each of the past three years); the climax came in Southern California with brushfires that claimed almost 2,000 homes and at least seven lives, engulfing close to half a million acres in less than a week.

More than 20 years ago, credible science warned us that the American West would face a conflagration unless we reversed a policy on forest fires that left forests choked with fuels, and unless we reversed global warming. Instead, this nation bickered away those 20 years. Perhaps we wouldn't have had we known that global warming means being endlessly anxious and frightened, living in a soup of smoke for months on end, bristling at every change of wind that might blow the whole business up into a firestorm capable of inhaling entire towns in minutes.

Even before this record season, a group of researchers writing in *Science* linked the worsening fires to global warming. They found that "since 1986, longer, warmer summers have resulted in a fourfold increase in major wildfires and a sixfold increase in the area of forest burned, compared to the period from 1970 to 1986."

In the West, fire is a keystone issue, in the same sense that there are keystone species in ecosystems. I have used its power to unravel mysteries of nature and, increasingly, human nature for more than 20 years, my knowledge tempered by a particular fire. All of us who think about fire can cite a moment of conversion, a fire that surpasses all expectations, that makes one unlearn everything taught by precedent, that irrevocably changes the way one views the natural world. Personally experiencing such a fire is the only way to begin to comprehend the scale of what we face today.

My own conversion by fire came in 1989, in Canyon Creek.

That fire had burned the previous summer toward the southern end of Montana's Bob Marshall Wilderness. The Forest Service decided then to let it burn as part of a newly minted and largely untried policy that recognized fire's regenerative role in Rocky Mountain forests. So this fire fizzled and popped around a few thousand acres through July and August, largely unnoticed in what was rapidly building as a record fire year. I was one of the un-noticers then, a newspaper reporter charged with covering Montana's fires, and there were bigger fish frying. That was the year of Yellowstone National Park's spectacular self-immolation, and Yellowstone was getting all the press.

Nonetheless, a perfect storm came on the evening of September 6. The jet stream dropped very close to ground level and slammed gale-force winds straight into the face of the Canyon Creek fire, driving it east across 40 miles of timber in a single night, spilling it out onto the plains near Augusta. No recorded fire had ever run that far, that quickly. In a matter of hours, it grew from a few thousand to 250,000 acres--in an era when a big blaze was 10,000 acres.

I call it my fire to this day, but it was, in fact, Orville Daniels's fire. He was the supervisor of the Lolo National Forest, which includes the part of the Bob Marshall where it began, and it was he who made the decision on July 1 to let it burn. Thus his name became an epithet among the ranchers and residents of mountain towns that were threatened by his escaped fire. The smoke plume was visible from the windows of the governor's mansion in Helena, about 50 miles to the southeast.

The Forest Service reacted to the resulting political inferno by rushing out a video spinning the agency's take on the story. Daniels went on camera and said his decision had been sound when he made it but seemed a blunder in retrospect. So what does he say in light of today's conflagrations and 19 years of subsequent experience with wilderness fire?

"I said it was a good decision at the time I made it," says Daniels, now retired, "but circumstances changed. If I look back now, though, it was an even better decision than I thought. It has proven to be a very, very valuable fire."

There were three big fires in the Bob Marshall Wilderness complex this year, including one called Conger Creek, which burned inside the perimeter of the 1988 fire. The Forest Service more or less ignored Conger Creek and spent a mere \$900,000 herding it a bit. Despite the lack of attention, it grew to only 25,000 acres, simply because the Canyon Creek fire had eaten so much fuel 19 years ago. Meantime, the agency actively fought the two other fires, Ahorn and Fool Creek, both in areas that had not burned in 1988, and spent \$25 million doing so. Notwithstanding those efforts, the two fires grew to 52,000 and 60,000 acres, respectively. So arguably, Canyon Creek was "valuable" to the tune of more than \$24 million, the payoff from fighting fire with fire 19 years ago.

Michael Gallacher
(Page 2 of 3)

All of this underscores the success of one of the most controversial policies ever hatched in public lands management: the Forest Service's wilderness fire policy. This simply reasons that fire has always been a part of the northern Rockies and ought to be allowed to go on playing its role of dissipating energy in forest ecosystems. Absent fire, the energy does not go away, but piles up to be vented later. Fuel that would have burned off in minor fires accumulates to create major ones.

The idea became popularly and bluntly known as the let-it-burn policy. It has been the subject of fierce debate both within and outside the Forest Service and other land management agencies for more than 30 years. Yet in light of today's conditions, the policy has been validated.

"It's the most successful resource program the northern region has," says George Weldon, deputy director for fire, aviation, and air in the Forest Service's Northern Region, the agency's top fire guy in Montana and northern Idaho. He makes his case with a map showing the last 10 years' worth of fire in and around the Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness, which straddles the Idaho-Montana state line.

(This was the scene of the Forest Service's first experimental wildland fire, in 1972, then an act of heresy; Daniels was the supervisor who let it burn.)

For nearly 30 years, the let-it-burn policy has allowed fire to run its course only in formally designated wilderness--about 16 percent of the total Forest Service area in the West--and in national parks. Even then, fires deemed capable of breaking out of the wilderness are routinely fought. The wilderness fires show on the map as black specks, while those outside are big, black blobs, orders of magnitude larger.

I interviewed Weldon a couple of days after a weekend of rain ended the worst of our fire season in September. During the course of the preceding three months, he had commanded the spending of \$165 million in the northern Rockies, only a fraction of the \$1.3 billion spent nationwide on fires by all federal agencies. He ordered up the helicopters, air tankers, boots on the ground, a militaristic enterprise with corresponding Pentagon-like fiscal appetites. Facing progressively hotter fire seasons from here on out, what will he do? Surge?

The rolling catastrophe of fire that is our western future owes its existence to two factors. One is global warming, and the other was of the Forest Service's own making. In 1910, just five years after the agency was founded, fire in northern Idaho roared to life before the wind and burned over most of the northern part of the state and western Montana, three million acres in all, one contiguous wienie roast. The fire shocked the nation with overstated headlines about a "timber famine," so the agency began putting out all fires. Over the next half century, the Forest Service trained firefighters, invented smoke jumpers, acquired an air force, and enforced with sackings a policy that said all new fires were to be extinguished by 10 a.m. on the day following their start.

Fire suppression also created a swaggering subculture, crews that called themselves hotshots, and tough-guy smoke jumpers, men--mostly they were men in those days--who believed they commanded nature. "We were trained that we could put out any fire," Weldon says. "All we needed was more air tankers, more smoke jumpers, and more hotshot crews. More smoke jumpers, more air tankers, and more hotshot crews wouldn't have put these fires out this year."

Weldon himself was a smoke jumper for eight years at the pinnacle of Forest Service hubris. "In the 1970s and 1980s we were able to basically exclude fires from these fire-dependent ecosystems mainly because it rained a lot," he says. "We thought it was because of us. But mainly it was because it used to rain."

On July 6, 2007, the temperature in Missoula reached 107, the highest ever recorded there. The daily average high for the month was 96.5 degrees, 12.9 degrees above normal. Throughout western Montana, July 2007 was the hottest month on record. Total rainfall was 0.03 inch. The first half of August was almost as bad, leaving live trees holding less moisture than kiln-dried lumber. "Once these fires get started we don't have all that much influence over them," Weldon says.

The major lesson for the year, he adds, came in one of those big fires in the Bob Marshall, the Ahorn, which the Forest Service attacked because of fears it would rage out onto the plains to bite the town of Augusta, the same town threatened by Orville Daniels's fire in 1988, a town with a memory.

"[The Ahorn] was a fire we went after very aggressively," Weldon says. "We put in a couple loads of smoke jumpers, a hotshot crew, aviation assets. We spent a lot of money on that fire. We exposed a lot of folks. We crashed a helicopter. We had a shelter deployment on that fire." (The reference is to a trapped firefighter who pulls open a pouch always on his belt, rips open the metallic fabric pup tent inside, and huddles in it while the fire roars over, hoping it will pass quickly enough to allow oxygen to return to ground level before he suffocates. Among some, the shelter is known as a shake-and-bake.) Despite all this, Weldon says, "We influenced that fire very minimally, and we spent \$18 million trying."

Federal and state agencies fight fires this way today because of politics. In the face of two decades' worth of clear evidence that it is a stupid thing to do, people continue to build houses and whole towns in or near forests, often taking no precautions such as thinning trees or adopting fire-resistant construction

methods. Headwaters Economics, a nonprofit group in Bozeman, Montana, completed a study toward summer's end that said if the current pattern of building continues in the northern Rockies, firefighting costs could quickly consume nearly all the Forest Service's current annual budget of \$4.5 billion. Yet residents insist on protection, and politicians, local and otherwise, have very little stomach for letting houses burn.

President George Bush arrived on the scene of October's Southern California fires while the flames still raged, to promise that government would ensure our security. And Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger vowed that with federal and state help, Californians would be able to "rebuild this area as quickly as possible," repeating the message he had delivered to Congress in 2003 after fire had burned some of the exact same acres. "I'm looking for federal money for the people, for the victims of the fire," he testified then, "so that people can rebuild their homes and rebuild their businesses as quickly as possible." That is, rebuild in chaparral, the brush that regrows quickly enough to explode every few years.

Scientists say that the fall fires in California were probably not linked to global warming, but were simply the normal course of events when wet years are followed by drought years and the Santa Ana winds provide a trigger. "That is a fire-prone environment regardless of whether we are in a climate-change scenario," Tom Wordell, a wildland fire analyst at the National Interagency Fire Center in Boise, Idaho, told the *Los Angeles Times*. "I don't want to be callous, because many people are homeless and suffering, but if you live in a snakepit you're going to get bit."

So if we have not learned prudence in the normal course of events, how will we respond when the fires grow worse--as they will, even in California, with global warming?



In August 2007, firefighters

battled 10 separate fires along a local access road to Interstate 90. Michael Gallacher

(Page 3 of 3)

I like fire best because it overrules us. George Weldon told me something in our recent conversation that I have never heard from a public official. To paraphrase: *I'm from the federal government and I'm here to tell you I can't help you.* He says global warming has pushed us past the point where firefighters or even politicians can decide whether to protect badly placed homes and towns.

"I think it is disrespectful to tell people we are going to protect their structures when we don't have the capability," he says. "What's different is that the environment we are living in and working in is going to demand that we look at it differently. I don't think we have a choice."

Weldon says that firefighters misdirected resources in two ways this past summer. They spent too much energy protecting structures, and they put too much effort into "initial attack," which means extinguishing freshly started fires before they get big. In fact, 98 percent of all fires that started this year in the northern Rockies were extinguished within a few hours. This record would have conferred bragging rights two decades ago, but Weldon believes this approach is not sustainable; firefighters should have let more fires burn.

According to Weldon, his agency's goal is restoring fire to the ecosystem, and firefighters can't meet that goal as long as they spend most of their funds and energies fighting fires at the edges of towns, steering them away from buildings. He'd like to spend more time steering fires toward something, toward areas that need to burn, areas choked with fuel, areas that, if burned now, will become strategic firebreaks against future fires. In other words, global warming is going to force something that looks very much like the wilderness fire policy--but outside of wilderness too. The combination of fire suppression and global warming has pushed us past the point of control. We no longer have all that much influence; now fire will write its own policy.

"If people don't like smoke or they are nervous with fires burning from June until the end of September, they are in the wrong place," says Weldon.

Canyon Creek burned in 1988, but it was really in 1989 that I became a convert to the creative power of fire. That year I joined a group of biologists on a walk through the fire site, and nothing I had seen before prepared me for the scene. It was a time of Forest Service videos and pamphlets telling us how forest fire would burn in a "mosaic," burning here and there, skipping patches and ridges, all to restore diversity to the system. The result would be fewer trees, but healthier and larger ones. Some of us had begun thinking about fire as no more menacing than Bambi.

Canyon Creek corrected our thinking by leaving a moonscape of total and fierce destruction. We walked ankle-deep in ash, seeing not a living thing for miles on end, a landscape of still-standing black ghost trees. Then some of those same biologists dug up something called the Ayres map, the result of a timber survey of what is now the Bob Marshall, drafted in 1899. It showed enormous prairies, burned areas, and very little forest--only about 5 percent of the landscape. That is, a great sprawl of wilderness whole generations have regarded as forest primeval wasn't forest at all. The forest was man-made by fire suppression.

Savannah, not forest, was probably the normal state of affairs in the Bob Marshall before white settlement, a fact of considerable import to ecologists. Presettlement conditions are generally regarded as baseline, which is to say, the last time an ecosystem has been healthy. The fact that Canyon Creek has regrown vegetation--much of it shrubs and brush, approximating the Ayres map--and in the process has become excellent habitat for such as elk and grizzly bear tells us this is where the land wants to go and ought to go.

Given the enormity of Canyon Creek and the evidence of the Ayres map, ecologists began looking back beyond the puny fires of recent history for a more sweeping precedent. They began wondering if there were lessons to be learned from 1910, the very fire that spawned the policy of fire suppression.

That year two days of 75-mile-an-hour winds blew up a fire in northern Idaho on August 20 and 21, sending it sprawling across those three million acres and killing 85 people, most of them firefighters. It's still the biggest fire on record in the country, but probably only because records don't go back very far. Such fires may have been relatively normal--every century or so--before. No one knows for sure. But the fear is that global warming will make them a lot more normal.

The fires of 2007 could in fact have been a lot worse than they were here in the northern Rockies; firefighters got some lucky breaks. Late August brought a shift toward cooler weather, a little rain, and none of the howling winds that can haunt that month. Wind could have written a very different story.

Four times in the past 10 years I have expected to wake up not to fires around the edge of Missoula, my town of 100,000 people, but to a firestorm the equal of 1910. So I asked Weldon if he could imagine such a thing occurring, if conditions aligned.

"Absolutely," he says. "We lined up in 2000. We lined up in 2003. Even a little bit we were lined up in 2006. We were definitely lined up in 2007. It's not a question of if; it is a question of when."

The example of 1910 says such a fire could happen without global warming, even could be a good thing for modern, fuel-choked forests. But with global warming we don't get fire; we get fire squared. We now have an idea what this fiercer fire means for the humans of the place; we are only guessing what it means for flora and fauna. This ecosystem thrived on and recovered from normal fire, but all bets are off on how it will do facing year on year of escalating, sweltering desiccation. Global warming could well deprive fire of its creativity and leave us facing a single-minded, angry god.