

# Healing the scars of fire



Nature begins healing the scarred Bitterroot Mountains near Hamilton, Mont., just weeks after the worst wildfires in a century roared through the region. Brian Plonka/The Spokesman-Review

## *Anger, frustration smolder after summer of devastation*

**L**ightning-sparked fires devoured 2 million acres in Idaho and Montana this year. But unlike the moonscape that many imagine, the fire left uneven scars through the forests. In many places, beargrass and flowers are already starting to sprout.

Where flames burned hottest, and where firefighters damaged the forest in a desperate bid to halt the flames, hundreds of workers are now in a race to prevent erosion and spring floods.

While nature begins to heal, the bitterness of some residents in fire-ravaged communities lingers like a charred snag.

In the Bitterroot Valley, owners of annihilated homes are talking about suing the federal government. And politicians now are holding hearings that

lambaste federal land management policies.

Spokesman-Review reporter Susan Drumheller and photographer Brian Plonka toured the region Sept. 18-22 for an up-close look at communities tested by fire.

Turn to IN Life to see what they found.

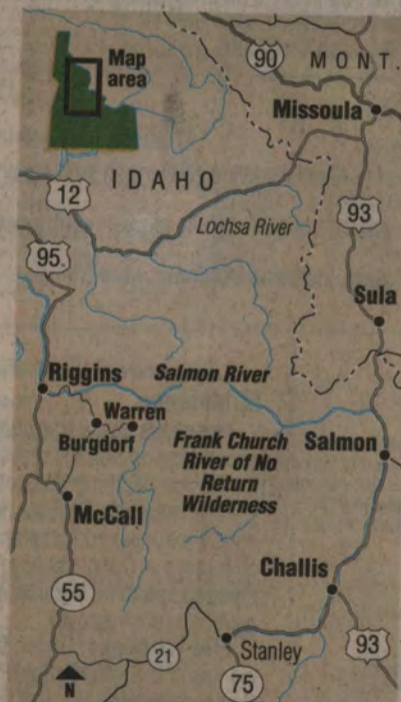
And turn to today's Outdoors & Travel section for a second report, by Outdoors editor Rich Landers

and photographer J. Bart Rayniak, gleaned from a float down the Middle Fork of the Salmon River through the Frank Church River of No Return Wilderness.

See Monday's paper for a closer look at the economic and political fallout from this year's great burn.

### **TESTED BY FIRE** SPECIAL REPORT

See sections F and H



Staff map: Vince Grippi



SECTION



Sunday, October 8, 2000

The Spokesman-Review  
Spokane, Wash./Coeur d'Alene, Idaho

# OUTDOORS & TRAVEL

Inside  
Outdoors/H2  
Travel/H4

Questions about outdoors issues? Dial (509) 459-5508; Fax: (509) 459-5098



Above, game trails contrast against the blackened winter range near Sheep Creek in the Middle Fork of the Salmon River. Below, Bob Kasun of Coeur d'Alene tackles Tappen Falls on the Middle Fork in September.

TESTED BY FIRE



# When flames run wild

*Fire tore through the Frank Church Wilderness, but most remains untouched*

Story by Rich Landers

Photography by J. Bart Rayniak

**E**lk couldn't outrun it and birds couldn't outfly it. The inferno exploded down the Idaho wilderness canyon with speed and fury of Biblical proportions. More than a dozen piles of bones remain on the blackened earth where panicked deer, elk and a bear had succumbed to smoke and flame after seeking refuge in a thicket.

Wind created by the blaze was fierce enough to singe, sandblast and mummify a chukar. The carcass was on a rock outcropping away from flammable vegetation.

The bird's head was cocked back as though it barely had time to say, "What the hell. . ."

Brush Creek had always been a sanctuary for these creatures. On Aug. 18, it was their death chamber.

"The winds and fire came down that drainage like a train," said Rick Dorony, caretaker of the Flying B

Ranch. Dorony had taken a stand that day, using a fire hose to defend the guest ranch buildings at the mouth of Brush Creek on the Middle Fork of the Salmon River.

"Nothing escaped," Dorony said, his clothes black with soot from a morning of ranch chores six weeks after the fire. "If we hadn't been prepared, we'd be dead, too."

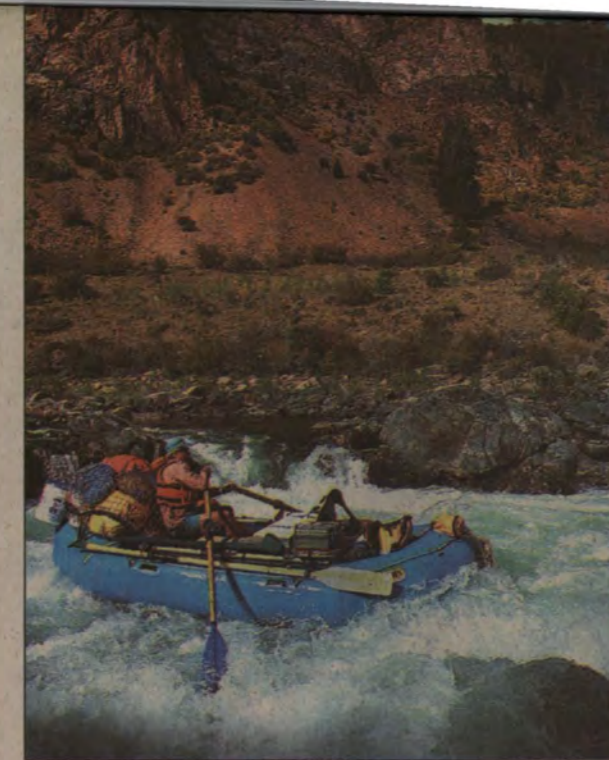
Heroics saved this decades-old ranch that was grandfathered to continue operating inside the Frank Church River of No Return Wilderness. (See related story.)

Outside the private property boundaries, however, the land and the wildlife were on their own.

This is wilderness. Most human intervention with natural forces is prohibited by law.

For the next few decades, the 11,000 people who float the frothing Middle Fork whitewater each summer will judge how well nature takes care of itself.

"As dry as it was and as severe as the fires were, the overall impacts on the Middle Fork area are small," said Sherri Hughes, river ranger for Salmon-Challis National Forest.



This summer's fires affected only 18 miles of the river's 100-mile corridor. River runners next season will see burned snags around several campsites. They'll notice three outhouses were lost.

They're also likely to see a burst of greenery from earth that now looks like charcoal.

What they won't see are scars from miles of weed-friendly fire line. Summer firefighting efforts inside the wilderness were centered around the handful of Forest Service cabins and private inholdings, such as the Flying B Ranch.

Mother Nature does the fire control on the rest of the wilderness for free.

Continued: **Fire/H4**

INSIDE

## Yucatan escape

Off the beaten tourist path in Mexico's popular Yucatan Peninsula are quiet beaches and archaeological wonders.

Travel, H3



## Out & About

# No public life for this cub

Don't expect to see the orphaned, burned cub rescued from Montana's blazing Bitterroot Valley turned into a cultural symbol like Smokey Bear, caged in a zoo and named for a firefighting cartoon character.

Don't even expect this cub to get a name.

Fifty years after Smokey Bear was moved to the National Zoo in Washington to live out his life in public view - he died in 1976 - wildlife officials are sheltering the new cub from the public.

They are adamant about returning him to the

wild as untouched by humans as possible. He gets no visitors as he recovers at a state wildlife shelter from burned paws and near-starvation.

The contrast with Smokey Bear - named for a Forest Service ad campaign character created in the 1940s - symbolizes a shift in thinking about how wild animals should be handled.

Amy Vandehey, a wildlife biologist for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, remembers that bleachers were once set up next to the garbage dump at Yellowstone National Park so visitors could watch bears dine on trash.

Those days are gone in national parks.

The Bitterroot bear is recuperating at the state Fish, Wildlife and Parks Department shelter in Helena, along with eight other bears that were abandoned or whose mothers were

Continued: **Bear/H2**



## TESTED BY FIRE FRANK CHURCH WILDERNESS



At left, bighorn sheep drink from the Middle Fork of the Salmon River's Impassible Canyon. Below, Indian pictographs along the Middle Fork drainage have survived fires for generations.

**Fire**/Continued from H4

supplements his insurance business in Salmon, Idaho. "The fires burned so hot they sterilized the ground. The trails are clogged with downed trees. And who's going to take care of the elk that are likely to starve this winter?"

"When a fire burns a house, you can rebuild in a few months. When fire burns the elk range in an outfitter's permit area, it affects his business for years."

The 15 land-based outfitters operating in the River of No Return Wilderness region lost an average of \$24,000 in business this season, according to the Idaho Outfitters and Guides Association. The group has not predicted the impact on hunting camps for next year.

In Cole's niche of the woods, the fires left a bleak scene. His archery camp was destroyed and some deer and elk will suffer this winter.

But the bigger picture is much brighter, experts say. Here are some of their observations on key recreational resources:

■ **Big-game:** Idaho Fish and Game Department biologists Mike Scott and Greg Painter surveyed the wilderness by aircraft on Sept. 18. They confirmed that wildlife was lost during firestorms in some intensely burned canyons. However, they said prospects for widespread winterkill are low. Overall big-game winter range suffered moderate to little impact, they reported.

University of Idaho biologists say the winter range in certain drainages is in worse condition than the aerial surveys indicate.

"From our own aerial observations, we have noticed the burned grasslands and rocky shrub fields do not appear to be very burned from the air, but on the ground there is absolutely no live vegetation," said Jim Akenson, who had returned to his wilderness base at the Taylor Ranch.

Increased nutrients the fires introduce to tributaries could be a boon to fish starting in about four years.

■ **Trails:** Arterials and ridge trails will be the easiest going in burned areas for a year or so.

Washouts will affect trails in burned areas for a couple of years and windfall will be a maintenance problem for a decade, trail experts say. But only a small portion of the region's trails are seriously affected by fires.

In Montana, for example, only 33 of the 2,234 trail miles in the Flathead National Forest were in burned areas. The Bitterroot National Forest trails were among the hardest hit in Montana, with 250 of 1,513 miles affected.

The region's most heavily impacted trail systems are in the western portion of the River of No Return Wilderness, where a third of the 650 wilderness trail miles maintained by the Payette National Forest were affected.

Most wilderness work must be done with hand tools.

"We started working to clear trails while the fires were still burning," said Clem Pope, trail maintenance coordinator for the Krassle Ranger District. "Arterials to the Chamberlain Basin and Big Creek and Cold Meadows are already passable for pack and saddle stock.

"We won't get to the full repair job or to the secondary trails until next year."

Pressure has been exerted on the Forest Service internally and externally to suspend rules prohibiting use of chain saws in the wilderness.

Clearing trails with hand saws is more expensive and time-consuming than with power saws.

"We figure about \$150 a log for cutting out trails using crosscut saws," said Tom Bonn, trails engineer for the Sawtooth-Challis National Forest. "It's about \$10 to \$15 a log when using chain saws."

Lauri Matthews, one of the forest's wilderness rangers, said maintenance with hand tools isn't necessarily more expensive, it just occurs at a slower pace.

The fires are an opportunity to highlight the effectiveness and skills involved in using mule trains, crosscut saws, shovels, Pulaskis and ingenuity to make wilderness routes passable again, she said.

"This is part of what makes wilderness unique," she said. "It's part of the reason people value wilderness."

"We don't have to abandon that ethic because some people are crying that the sky is falling."

■ **River running:** Rafters can expect a higher than normal number of logs creating hazards in the Middle Fork and possibly the Salmon River next season.

Few other impacts from fires and no changes in river permits are expected, but outfitters and local businesses are worried the world might have a different impression.

"Every report on CNN or other national news this summer showed huge fires and vast blackness," said Grant Simonds, Idaho Outfitters and Guides Association executive director.

"This is an opportunity for the Forest Service to work with the private sector to develop education on fire ecology," he said. The aftermath of fires, he added, can be an attraction for recreational tourists.

Simonds envisions outfitters taking people into the wilderness in rafts and on horses and comparing old burns and new burns to show that fire is normal in Salmon River country.

"Fire has been part of the landscape a lot longer than people," he said. "Despite what you saw on TV this summer, we're already breathing clean mountain air in Salmon while they're still sucking smog in downtown Houston and L.A."





area, where 30 miles of winter range burned while the Akensons trotted away ahead of the flames.

The best-case scenario would be fall rains that encourage new grass growth followed by light snowfall to help these animals survive the first winter after the fires, Akenson said.

Deep snow and cold could decimate herds.

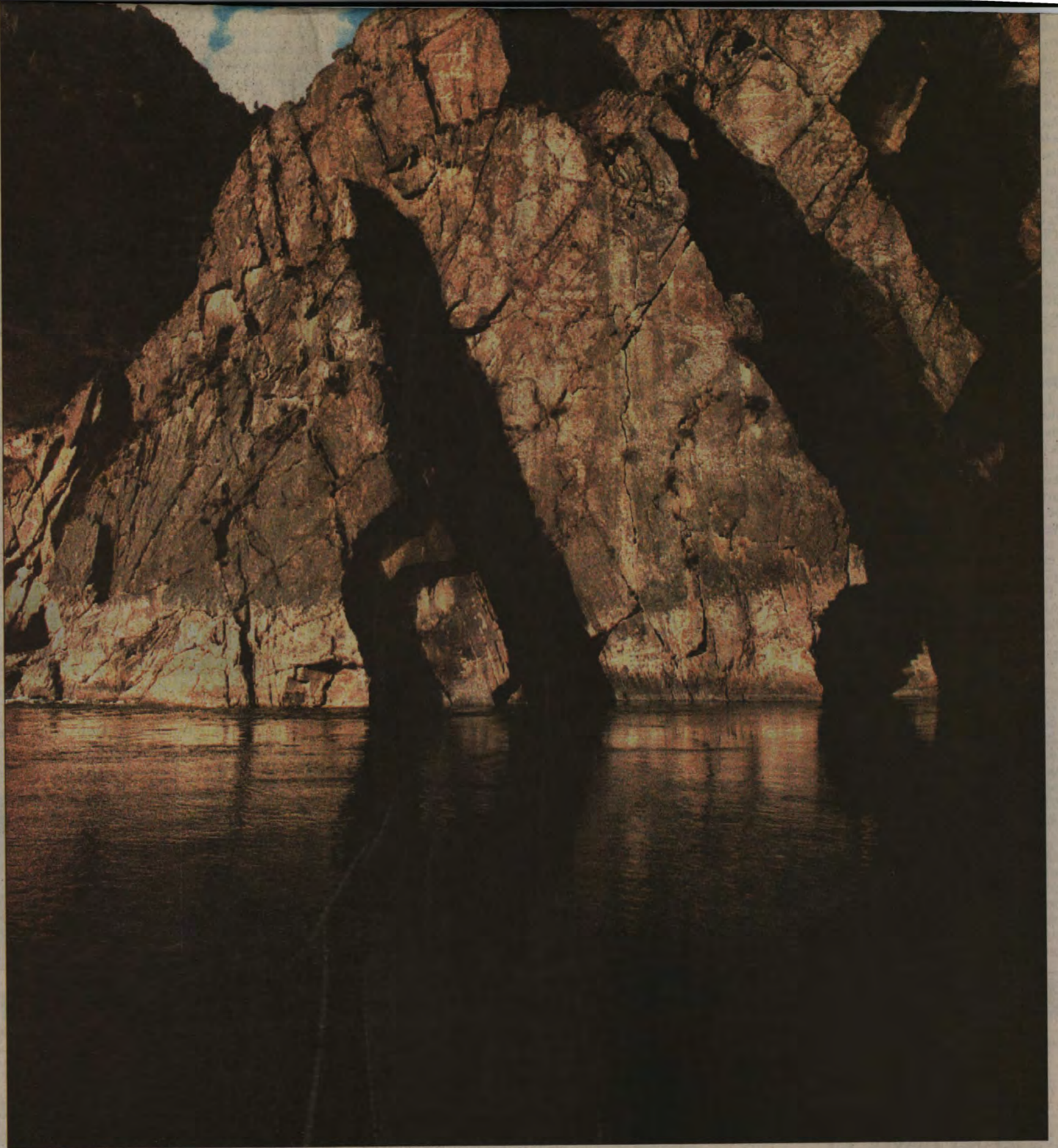
Either way, the grass should be thicker and greener in most burned areas in a year or two, although the jury is still out regarding the loss of bitterbrush and other shrubs important to wintering deer.

Any changes in hunting permit quotas for next fall will be made following the Idaho Fish and Game Department's aerial winter big-game surveys.

■ **Fisheries:** The Middle Fork was stuffed this fall with cutthroat trout eager to take almost anything an angler might dangle in the water. Forest Service and Idaho Fish and Game Department biologists concur that fires and related erosion are not likely to change that scenario.



Above, green shoots sprout from the base of charred water birch just weeks after fire swept through Sheep Creek drainage on the Middle Fork of the Salmon River. At right, The chiseled granite walls of Impassible Canyon are part of the enduring wilderness experience that people come to savor each year.





## TESTED BY FIRE FRANK CHURCH WILDERNESS



One of the summer's firestorms raced from the ridgetops near the Flying B Ranch to the river in less than 45 seconds, then jumped the river.

### Fire: Past blazes have helped shape wilderness beauty

Continued from H1

And Mother Nature's performance evaluation is excellent, experts say.

The Salmon River and its Middle Fork are stunning attractions at the heart of a multi-million dollar recreational tourist industry.

The rivers are scenic masterpieces, even though every square mile of this wilderness has been licked by fire at one time or another.

Holly Akenson, a wildlife biologist for the

University of Idaho, narrowly escaped firestorms at Taylor Ranch, her wilderness base, and later at the Flying B.

"Our sense was that the entire world had burned," she said. "After all, we were at the point where two 175,000-acre fires joined together to form the largest fire in the nation."

However, when Akenson and her husband, Jim, were able to fly over the wilderness, they were equally amazed at how much was left unscathed.

The word catastrophe is an understandable description for the summer's wildfires, especially if you're among the wildlife or property owners in a torched canyon, or an outfitter whose state-designated hunting area has been charred.

"It's a mess in the Frank," said Bruce Cole, a Moscow, Idaho, native whose outfitting

Continued: **Fire/H5**

## Flying B Ranch survives racing wall of flames

*Ranch hands saw hell coming behind hurricane-force winds*

By Rich Landers  
Outdoors editor

On Aug. 18, while flames roared and smoke turned the afternoon sky black as night, Holly Akenson was standing by the Middle Fork of the Salmon River ready for her baptism by fire.

"I knew I could survive by jumping into the river," said the University of Idaho wildlife biologist. "But I worried because it didn't look like any of the people trying to save the Flying B buildings could survive."

One of those firefighters was her husband, Jim. Just five days earlier, the Akensons had fled 22 miles by horse and mule to escape a firestorm that raged down on their cabins at Taylor Ranch, a UI wilderness research base. Unbeknownst to the Akensons, smokejumpers helicoptered into Taylor Ranch shortly after they left and saved all but one building.

The Akensons thought they would be safe at the Flying B, a private guest ranch frequented by river runners and hunters in the Frank Church River of No Return Wilderness.

Shortly after noon on the 18th, fires were in the area but all were relatively calm. Chris McDaniel was delivered from Salmon, Idaho, to the Flying B by airplane so he could ride out of the wilderness with the university's pack stock that had come from Taylor Ranch.

Before the UI student could saddle the mules, the Brush Creek drainage above the ranch exploded with flames.

"1 1/2 later

The hillsides above the ranch were





*the fire front  
to travel at  
more than  
20 mph  
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rugged  
terrain."*

**Holly Akenson**  
wildlife biologist

from the upper drainages.  
"We later estimated the fire front to travel at more than 20 mph over very rugged terrain," Holly said.

The firestorm generated hurricane-force winds of about 100 mph as it swept down the lower canyons to the ranch. Virtually all the animals and many of the birds in several drainages were overtaken by the runaway freight train of fire.

The suspension pack bridge over the Middle Fork was ripped from one of its foundations and snapped like a whip. The force buckled the two supporting 16-inch steel I-beams.

"I was with a couple other women in the irrigated hayfield beside the river," Holly said. "That was a good spot to be, except for the 55 head of horses and mules that were panicked and running in a circle."

After turning the stock into the hayfield, McDaniel joined the other seven men on the scene, including two Forest Service firefighters stationed there, to fight the fire as it came down Brush Creek. But he saw that hell had broken loose.

As he fled toward a safer location, the wind snatched him from his feet and slammed him into a Hawthorne tree, breaking his nose, twisting his knee, severely bruising his arm and then blasting him with debris, sparks and sand.

"I thought I was toast," McDaniel said. "Another guy was flung into a fence. Then it was suddenly calm and everything around us was on fire. That's when everybody started working to save the buildings."

The next day, the ranch staff found dozens of bone piles from wildlife caught in the firestorm. Rick Dorony, the Flying B's caretaker, picked up an owl that was still alive, but its eyes were fried.

They shot one bear, one elk and three deer that were moaning and bleating in agony, their fur completely torched off.

Six weeks later, the scene was changing. Healthy deer, bears, elk and geese were attracted to the ranch's green irrigated hay field. Dozens of brilliant mountain bluebirds fluttered from snag to snag in the charred sagebrush. Coveys of chukars scuttled like gray footballs up the naked black hillside, apparently finding plenty of seeds to stop and peck. A fruit tree that had endured the fire was blooming in mid-September.

Dorony isn't complacent.

"I've been here five years, but I'm not sure I want to stay here until spring so I can dig this place out," he said.

The flat land along the Middle Fork, choice locations for ranches, airstrips and campgrounds, was created by landslides hundreds or thousands of years ago, Dorony explained. These benches were probably formed after fires burned the mountains, making way for landslides and washouts of rock-salt-like granitic soil from drainages that reach up 20 or 30 miles from the river.

"Is there anything we can do?" he said, repeating the question. "Build a little chapel and pray all winter long."



Above, the Pistol Creek fire blew through some areas so quickly it torched the windward side of trees while a mosaic of golden bark on the opposite side was left unscathed. A ponderosa pine, at left, smolders a month after fire roared down the Pistol Creek drainage.



SECTION



**Sunday, October 8, 2000**

The Spokesman-Review  
Spokane, Wash./Coeur d'Alene, Idaho

INLAND NORTHWEST

# IN LIFE

**Rock 'n' writing**

"Almost Famous" focuses  
new attention on rock  
journalists./Entertainment, F3

**Dave Barry/F6**



Nestled in the Salmon National Forest, a cabin wrapped in a makeshift heat shield survived the fires that consumed the area.



# After the blaze, a land scarred

*Forests and homes were destroyed by summer's intense wildfires in Idaho and Montana, leaving ashes and smoldering resentment*

*Story by Susan Drumbeller  
Photography by Brian Plonka*

**W**ildfires have left the landscape around Burgdorf Junction covered in gray stubble.

The road junction, perched high above Riggins in north central Idaho, can be reached from two directions — but either route passes through forests scarred with old burns.

The freshest scar, this year's 64,000-acre Burgdorf Junction fire, still smokes from isolated snags, a reminder of the worst fire season the West has seen in nearly a century.

Nearly 7 million acres burned this year, with some of the hottest fires in Idaho and Montana. The evidence is everywhere, from soil so scorched it repels water to stark toothpick skylines.

The fires reopened old wounds suffered by timber-dependent towns that have turned to tourism in recent years to survive.

But the infernos dealt their harshest blows to dozens of rural homeowners, who lost their cabins and hideaway dream homes in a matter of minutes.

As frost turns to fog near Burgdorf Junction this September morning, it's hard to fathom the heat that blackened these hills. Charred bark glistens. Deadfall is reduced to trails of white ash. Beer cans, hidden for decades in roadside underbrush, are revealed.

But even along Grouse Creek, where the fire burned hottest, beargrass and willows are sprouting. Woodpeckers punctuate the silence with rapid-fire percussion.

Off and on a fire closed the road leading to the tiny hamlet of Warren, Idaho, nearly sealing its fate as a ghost town. Established in 1862, the town once was home to 5,000 pioneers and prospectors. Now it supports a year-round population of about a dozen die-hards.



**An aerial view of the foothills of the Bitterroot Mountains in southwest Montana reveals a landscape blistered by an intense fire that burned as hot as 2,000 degrees.**

Paul and Dawn Shepherd of Riggins stop by the Warren Winter Inn for pie and coffee after delivering timbers to the remaining gold mine. They can sympathize with folks in Warren — the fire was felt in Riggins, too. "The convenience store, they all but folded up," says Dawn Shepherd. One customer asked if the river was boiling.

Shepherd blames the Forest Service for not making it clear that the main Salmon River was open to rafting — Riggins' main attraction — even as the Middle Fork closed. The community is also bitter that more locals weren't hired to fight fires, she says.

Continued: **Fire/F8**



## TESTED BY FIRE A LAND SCARRED

### Fire: Some blame Forest Service for not logging sooner

Continued from F1

The only good the Shepherds can see from the wildfires is an increased supply of timber from salvage logging.

"If it's totally devastated, it's totally devastated," Paul Shepherd says of the forest. "At least even bad logging don't totally devastate it."

Finished with their pie, the Shepherds leave. "You won't hear me complain about the Forest Service or the firefighters," says Shannon Nealey, who cooks at the Inn. "We have a home because of them."

Down at the McCall Ranger Station, Randy Zuniga works on emergency recovery plans for the forest. He doesn't see it as devastated. Only about a quarter of the fire burned extremely hot, he says, and even there the soil is still moist.

"This is how Mother Nature regenerates herself," he says.

#### Forest freeways

The Y Cafe in Challis, Idaho, is a favorite spot for local ranchers and like-minded folks to grab a cup of coffee.

Those seated at the circular table this morning blame the government for this season's wildfires. If the woods were being logged and grazed, they wouldn't be burning up, they say.

"The Forest Service has been running scared from environmentalists for so long," says Tom Chivers, a retired rancher who sold his ranch after losing 60 percent of his Forest Service grazing allotments. "There's usable renewable resources we should be using, and now they're burning up."

Just south of Salmon, Idaho, the Clear Creek fire base camp has taken over a cow field like a militaristic barter fair. A cut-out wooden palm tree rocks in the wind next to a tent labeled "Nomex Land," for the fire-resistant clothing peddled there.

The fire is still burning, but has calmed considerably since late August, when 1,900 people were working here. This nearly 217,000-acre fire is one of the season's most expensive, costing taxpayers about \$70 million so far to fight.

The actual fire is miles from camp, accessible by forest road and dozer trail. On interagency fire maps, it appears as a big ink blot. But out here, it's patchy.

Fingers of black reach down from ridgetops, leaving buffers of spared green and partially burned brown forest. Spot fires, sparked by blown embers, leave target patterns with dead-black bull's-

*"This is the worst I've seen, a fire like this. . . We have to depend on tourists. When we lose them,*



In the Lolo National Forest near Superior, Mont., a long-horned beetle emerges from the incinerated soil and climbs a charred tree after taking cover during the summer of fires.



Below, the carcass of an elk decays into the flame-scarred soil in the Bitterroot National Forest near Sula, Mont. The elk was caught by a raging fire that swept through a steep drainage.



When it's just  
a blank."

**Jack Cook**  
81-year-old  
store owner in  
Salmon, Idaho

eyes.  
Now, crews are repairing the fire breaks that other crews made in desperation. Zeke Stanton, a rehab crew boss from Nevada, oversees work on one break that follows a ridge south of Haystack Mountain.

"It wasn't wide enough and the fire burned too fast," Stanton explains, standing near a hole left from the kilned roots of a tree. "It

was kind of a panicked, futile effort."

In a small clear-cut — a safety zone for firefighters — a bulldozer and excavator perform a raucous, screeching reel. The excavator swipes up timber in its jaws and twirls inward, dropping the trunk. The bulldozer follows, clawing at the earth.

The idea is to replace debris needed to capture snowmelt and stir up the soil to anchor seeds in the spring.

Some 200 miles of fire breaks may need this treatment. At a mile a day per crew, they'll be hard-pressed to finish before winter.

Without it, erosion and flooding will be worse in the spring. Crews first repaired the fire lines around the Blackbird Mine to keep toxic mine tailings from escaping into the creek.

Thousands of felled trees stained blood-red from retardant are piled high along fire breaks as wide as freeways through the Salmon-Challis National Forest.

One 12-mile swath was shaved on a ridgeline above Salmon as the fire marched toward the city and its watershed. Weather reversed the fire's progress, and now the 2 million board feet of timber hastily cut to save the town has been sold to a Louisiana Pacific sawmill in Deerlodge, Mont.

But much felled timber could go to waste, either because it's damaged from the hasty logging job or is too remote to be worth recovering, fire managers say.

### Fire economics

The highway into Salmon passes this stenciled sign across the road from the Salmon-Challis National Forest office: "Clinton and Gore Logging Headquarters. 1-800-Let it burn."

Other signs in downtown store windows thank firefighters. Schoolchildren here wrote thank-you cards, while their mothers baked cookies for delivery to the fire lines.

The town of Salmon choked on wildfire smoke for six weeks. Charlotte Rawls, the hospital's director of patient services, expects to see a lot of pneumonia this winter among locals susceptible to respiratory problems.

"The day we had a Stage 4 alert, you could not see across the street," Rawls says.

The closure of the wilderness and the Middle Fork of the Salmon River took its toll on local businesses. The smoke forced the town to cancel its annual hot air balloon festival.

The federal fire agencies spent \$9.5 million on supplies, motel rooms, pickups and food in Salmon, a town of 3,400 people, but that didn't make up for the loss, says Pete Stasiak, Lemhi

County's economic development director.

He's still compiling the dollar figures, but estimates outfitters and guides alone lost \$1.8 million.

The Idaho Fish and Game Commission recently voted to close hunting in Unit 28 near Salmon because of concerns about still-burning fire danger to hunters and hunting danger to fire workers.

Hunters say elk will starve, so they might as well hunt them. They also dread continued impacts on business in Salmon.

Jack Cook has watched the town's sawmills fold up and shakes his head at the latest mine closure. Now he's seen what the fires have done to local businesses that depend on hunting, rafting and other outdoor pursuits.

"This is the worst I've seen, a fire like this," says Cook, 81, a Salmon native and owner of the Silver Spur Sports store. "We've lost our logging, mining and chinook. We have to depend on tourists. When we lose them, then it's just a blank."

### Homes of Ash

The Sula Country Store is the southern-most



Heavy machinery tosses a once-mighty ponderosa pine into a slash heap deep in the Salmon National Forest along a failed fire line being mopped up.

Continued: Fire/F9



## TESTED BY FIRE A LAND SCARRED

## Fire/Continued from F8

outpost in Montana's Bitterroot Valley for grub and gossip, and near ground zero of the West's most destructive fires.

Dan Ehman stops here for a cup of coffee on his way to look for 140 cattle missing since six fires converged on the valley two months ago.

On Aug. 6, families huddled in the Sula Clubhouse — a community center in the middle of an irrigated field — while the fire jumped the road and fireballs rained from the sky, torching hay bales.

"It was doing that big whirlwind thing," says the 31-year-old father and former rodeo cowboy. "It reminded me of the Wizard of Oz."

About 140 bales of hay burned on the two ranches Ehman manages. Each 1,500-pound bale feeds 50 cattle in a day. Untold miles of back-country fence burned, meaning his cattle could be just about anywhere.

But Ehman's an optimist. He's confident he'll find the herd, and next year, "it's going to open up more grazing land."

While ranches and businesses in the Bitterroot are hurting, the most painful losses are the 70 homes that were reduced to ash and twisted metal.

Hardened streams of molten metal extend from the burned hulk of a snowmobile behind Clayton Dethlefsen's former log home along U.S. Highway 93. Dethlefsen recently moved here from Florida. His aluminum scuba tanks melted like wax in the driveway. The log walls vanished, leaving a crumpled metal roof in the foundation.

Dethlefsen recalls fleeing his home Aug. 6 through a hall of flaming trees on both sides of the highway.

Now the retired U.S. Army Corps of Engineers program manager lives out of the City Center Motel in Hamilton, Mont., and organizes a group of burned-out residents seeking reimbursement for their loss.

He blames the disaster on government policies.

"The fires were allowed to get to disastrous proportions," he says. "They never had the people or intentions to put it out....It used to be policy to put fires out. That policy changed for whatever reason. Probably because of influences of what I would call radical environmentalists."

Dethlefsen's group, Back-fire 2000, believes the fire that incinerated their homes was caused by a back-fire, intentionally set by firefighters to stop the progress of other fires. Instead of stopping them, he says, "They became killer fires and annihilated everything in its wake."

Up Laird Creek, the same firestorm destroyed the Snyder family summer home of 39 years. But John Snyder's sense of humor is still intact, even as he flings burned relics from the former tool shed into the charred cavity of his uninsured cabin.

"A little kid once told me, there's trouble and there's big trouble," chuckles the retired elementary school principal. "This is just trouble."



Stained froth composed of plant life and minerals rotates near a downed tree in a creek flowing through the Payette National Forest near Burgdorf, Idaho. Spring runoff is destined to strip more minerals into the waterways, adding to the fire's legacy of destruction.

on the hillsides to slow runoff. In a quiet draw, a bear picks over the carcass of an elk trapped in the fire. Nearby, a chipmunk chatters from a charcoal stump.

## Facing the fallout

The granite block building that houses the Northern Region Forest Service Headquarters in busy downtown Missoula is a sharp contrast to the log homes nestled in the foothills of the Bitterroot Mountains, now dusted with the season's first snows.

Deputy Regional Forester Kathy McAllister understands the allure of the woods and doesn't expect people to move out just because of wildfires.

The key, she says, is to learn to live with fires by making homes defensible.

Still, "there's probably going to be years when we can't save everybody's homes," she says.

This year was one of those. It was exceptionally dry with an unusually high number of wildfires. Fire managers knew early

any people on, or very few people on, but that's not because we didn't want people on them," says McAllister, who's overseeing an internal investigation of the Sula-area back-fire.

Many firefighters say the back-fire actually saved more homes than burned, but McAllister won't draw any conclusions. And whatever the outcome, back-fires will likely remain a necessary tool in the work against wildfires, she says.

The sheer number of wildfires and the cutbacks in the Forest Service over the last five or six years were the main factors in the shortfall of fire personnel, she says.

The Northern Region alone has cut about 1,000 regular employees in the last five years — more than a quarter of its work force. Lost in the retirements and lay-offs were employees able to fight fire or lead less experienced fire crews, or "pick-up" crews hired from local communities.

As for what happens now on the forests, McAllister says that will depend on what people in the West want the end result to be.

the picture. And thinning around communities to make them better protected, while necessary, would most likely target small diameter trees — the ones timber companies usually don't want, she says.

Now, land managers are in a race to beat the snows and head-off the next possible disaster — flooding.

"Just like we mobilize for suppression, we're looking at how we have to mobilize for this emergency rehabilitation," she says.

Personally, McAllister says she'll remember this fire season forever — in large part for its successes. Success this fire season was defined in terms of everyone arriving home safe at night. No lives were lost in the Montana and Idaho wildfires.

"There are places I visited that make me shake my head and think, 'Oh my God. It's going to be a really long time before we see this one heal up,'" she says.

"But there's other places where I've visited where it's a very, very good thing. We needed to



tailgate he'll leave for them. His other worry is Laird Creek.

"The watershed is denuded," he says. "It's really at risk."

Upstream, rehab crews anchor logs sideways

of the nearly 3,000 fires reported in the Northern and Intermountain forest regions.

The other 4 percent escaped attempts to stop them, she says.

"We had fires out there that we didn't have

pen to paper, when the decisions come out, my hope is we'll all have done that together and there won't be any challenges or delays," she says.

Salvage logging may or may not be a part of

the fact that Mother Nature bats last.

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John Snyder, a resident of Laird Creek in Sula, Mont., sifts through the remains of his home. Snyder lived 35 summers in the area before last summer's firestorm took his home and those of a dozen neighbors.



## TESTED BY FIRE FRANK CHURCH WILDERNESS



At left, bighorn sheep drink from the Middle Fork of the Salmon River's Impassible Canyon. Below, Indian pictographs along the Middle Fork drainage have survived fires for generations.



### Fire/Continued from H4

supplements his insurance business in Salmon, Idaho. "The fires burned so hot they sterilized the ground. The trails are clogged with downed trees. And who's going to take care of the elk that are likely to starve this winter?"

"When a fire burns a house, you can rebuild in a few months. When fire burns the elk range in an outfitter's permit area, it affects his business for years."

The 15 land-based outfitters operating in the River of No Return Wilderness region lost an average of \$24,000 in business this season, according to the Idaho Outfitters and Guides Association. The group has not predicted the impact on hunting camps for next year.

In Cole's niche of the woods, the fires left a bleak scene. His archery camp was destroyed and some deer and elk will suffer this winter.

But the bigger picture is much brighter, experts say. Here are some of their observations on key recreational resources:

■ **Big-game:** Idaho Fish and Game Department biologists Mike Scott and Greg Painter surveyed the wilderness by aircraft on Sept. 18. They confirmed that wildlife was lost during firestorms in some intensely burned canyons. However, they said prospects for widespread winterkill are low. Overall big-game winter range suffered moderate to little impact, they reported.

University of Idaho biologists say the winter range in certain drainages is in worse condition than the aerial surveys indicate.

"From our own aerial observations, we have noticed the burned grasslands and rocky shrub fields do not appear to be very burned from the air, but on the ground there is absolutely no live vegetation," said Jim Akenson, who had returned to his wilderness base at the Taylor Ranch.

Increased nutrients the fires introduce to tributaries could be a boon to fish starting in about four years.

■ **Trails:** Arterials and ridge trails will be the easiest going in burned areas for a year or so.

Washouts will affect trails in burned areas for a couple of years and windfall will be a maintenance problem for a decade, trail experts say. But only a small portion of the region's trails are seriously affected by fires.

In Montana, for example, only 33 of the 2,234 trail miles in the Flathead National Forest were in burned areas. The Bitterroot National Forest trails were among the hardest hit in Montana, with 250 of 1,513 miles affected.

The region's most heavily impacted trail systems are in the western portion of the River of No Return Wilderness, where a third of the 650 wilderness trail miles maintained by the Payette National Forest were affected.

Most wilderness work must be done with hand tools.

"We started working to clear trails while the fires were still burning," said Clem Pope, trail maintenance coordinator for the Krassle Ranger District. "Arterials to the Chamberlain Basin and Big Creek and Cold Meadows are already passable for pack and saddle stock.

"We won't get to the full repair job or to the secondary trails until next year."

Pressure has been exerted on the Forest Service internally and externally to suspend rules prohibiting use of chain saws in the wilderness.

Clearing trails with hand saws is more expensive and time-consuming than with power saws.

"We figure about \$150 a log for cutting out trails using crosscut saws," said Tom Bonn, trails engineer for the Sawtooth-Challis National Forest. "It's about \$10 to \$15 a log when using chain saws."

Lauri Matthews, one of the forest's wilderness rangers, said maintenance with hand tools isn't necessarily more expensive, it just occurs at a slower pace.

The fires are an opportunity to highlight the effectiveness and skills involved in using mule trains, crosscut saws, shovels, Pulaskis and ingenuity to make wilderness routes passable again, she said.

"This is part of what makes wilderness unique," she said. "It's part of the reason people value wilderness."

"We don't have to abandon that ethic because some people are crying that the sky is falling."

■ **River running:** Rafters can expect a higher than normal number of logs creating hazards in the Middle Fork and possibly the Salmon River next season.

Few other impacts from fires and no changes in river permits are expected, but outfitters and local businesses are worried the world might have a different impression.

"Every report on CNN or other national news this summer showed huge fires and vast blackness," said Grant Simonds, Idaho Outfitters and Guides Association executive director.

"This is an opportunity for the Forest Service to work with the private sector to develop education on fire ecology," he said.

The aftermath of fires, he added, can be an attraction for recreational tourists.

Simonds envisions outfitters taking people into the wilderness in rafts and on horses and comparing old burns and new burns to show that fire is normal in Salmon River country.

"Fire has been part of the landscape a lot longer than people," he said. "Despite what you saw on TV this summer, we're already breathing clean mountain air in Salmon while they're still sucking smog in downtown Houston and L.A."





area, where 50 miles of winter range burned while the Akensons trotted away ahead of the flames.

The best-case scenario would be fall rains that encourage new grass growth followed by light snowfall to help these animals survive the first winter after the fires, Akenson said.

Deep snow and cold could decimate herds.

Either way, the grass should be thicker and greener in most burned areas in a year or two, although the jury is still out regarding the loss of bitterbrush and other shrubs important to wintering deer.

Any changes in hunting permit quotas for next fall will be made following the Idaho Fish and Game Department's aerial winter big-game surveys.

■ **Fisheries:** The Middle Fork was stuffed this fall with cutthroat trout eager to take almost anything an angler might dangle in the water. Forest Service and Idaho Fish and Game Department biologists concur that fires and related erosion are not likely to change that scenario.



Above, green shoots sprout from the base of charred water birch just weeks after fire swept through Sheep Creek drainage on the Middle Fork of the Salmon River. At right, The chiseled granite walls of Impassible Canyon are part of the enduring wilderness experience that people come to savor each year.

