



## Private lands increase firefighting demands, says top state forester

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By *TYLER CHRISTENSEN* of the *Missoulian*

As the number of wildfires being fought on private land increases, so too will the cost and risk associated with fire suppression, Montana state forester Bob Harrington said Wednesday.

“Our forests are changing right under our feet,” Harrington said during a meeting with the Missoulian's editorial board.

Private lands that have been in the hands of ranchers, farmers and timber companies for decades are being sold to developers, who are building houses in places with a high potential for wildfire.

And fighting fires on private land, as opposed to public land, presents a greater challenge, Harrington said. Not only does it cost more and put more lives at risk, it also generates more anxiety among landowners because they feel the loss directly, he said.

After a dozen retardant drops - at \$5,000 each - to save a home or piece of land from burning, the money spent fighting a fire may have exceeded the value of the property, but what's on that property is priceless to its owner.

Private landowners, therefore, want more say in how fires are fought on their property - which has made for some heated discussions already this summer. However, the state Department of Natural Resources and Conservation and other firefighting agencies are learning from past mistakes and working to address landowners' concerns before it's too late, Harrington said.

Take, for example, the Black Pulaski fire in Garfield County during the 2003 wildfire season.

“People were ready to shoot each other over how that fire went,” Harrington said.

Landowners disagreed vehemently with fire management over how the fires should be fought, and many didn't approve of some rules, such as mandatory rest periods for firefighters, or methods, such as burnouts conducted ahead of the fire.

Many watched tent cities rise and wondered: “Who are these people? What, exactly, are they doing? Why don't they work harder? Why didn't they save my property?”

“There was no liaison, no contact with locals,” Harrington said.

This year, Type 1 incident teams carry a liaison and find a community member to act as a messenger for community concerns, he said. And Garfield County - which had another large wildfire this summer - was just one of several Montana counties that received Federal Emergency Management Agency grants aimed at better preparing local communities to fight fires.

However, communication problems and disagreements over how fires are fought persist.

The Bundy Railroad fire south of Billings, for instance, was the source of both positive and negative comments from local landowners, Harrington said.

Many of the landowners' concerns were legitimate and should be addressed, he said. On the other hand, there seemed to be some confusion over who leads firefighting efforts and the amount of control those teams have over firefighting resources.

Each individual wildfire is managed by an incident team - on the ground, at that one fire, Harrington explained. The incident team makes all tactical decisions regarding a particular fire, while the National Interagency Fire Center in Boise, Idaho, prioritizes and allocates resources.

The intensity of Montana's wildfires has been escalating and consequently consuming more resources, said Gail Kimbell, the U.S. Forest Service's regional forester for the Northern Region.

"In the last 10 years, we've seen fire behaviors that exceeded all expectations," Kimbell said. Montana's continuing drought and the sheer amount of dry fuels make for more and bigger fires, she said.

At the same time, firefighting agencies are paying a lot of attention to safety. Work-and-rest guidelines, for example, are the result of extensive research, and weren't drawn up arbitrarily or haphazardly. Firefighter safety is No. 1, Kimbell said.

"I don't ever want to have to call another person's family to tell them a family member won't be coming home," she said.

When allocating fire-management resources, top priority is always given to residences, power lines and other infrastructure, she said. But fire managers are increasingly seeing new homes in what was traditionally wild country.

Consider the region around Whitefish Lake, where people are building multimillion-dollar homes.

"If there were a fire in that 100-year-old lodgepole right next to that \$6 million home, we'd put a lot more money into that fire than if it was still just a forest," she said.

While wildland fires might sometimes be permitted to burn without interference, that's not an option near people's homes, Kimbell said.

Statewide, the DNRC is promoting discussion of ways to minimize fire damage to residences. Agency staff are contributing to subdivision reviews, and more emphasis is being given to treating forested areas in proximity to communities, Harrington said.

While the sources of this year's fires are all over the map, most point back to the urban-wildlife interface, Harrington said. In fact, the percentage of human-caused fires, which had been down for the past couple of years, is up again this year.

"A lot of them are people just still not realizing that it's dry out there," he said.

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