

Idaho ranchers hit hard by Pony/Elk wildfires; How do we avoid such huge fires in the future?

By Steve Stuebner

On a hot, dark night in early August, a multitude of lightning bolts struck the foothills and mountains north of Mountain Home, igniting numerous wildfires. Grass, shrubs and timber were tinder-dry after months of no rain and below-normal snowpack, so the fires took off in a hurry.

Local ranchers immediately jumped in dozers to stop the blazes. Trained to fight fire through the Mountain Home Rangeland Fire Protection Association, they coordinated their actions with the Bureau of Land Management.

"There was lightning everywhere, and I was listening to the fire channel frequency to the Danskin Lookout, and he started calling in fire reports everywhere," says Randy Davison, a Prairie rancher. "And we just went, 'Oh my god.' And then it went crazy from there."

The winds were blowing at least 30 to 40 mph. Combined with the hot temperatures, the Pony Complex fires quickly raced across the foothills from Mountain Home to Black's Creek, and the Elk Complex burned across the South Fork of the Boise River canyon and advanced northward toward Davison's home in Prairie. Giant mushroom clouds forewarned of the danger.

The ranchers' cattle, meanwhile, were grazing on summer range, several miles away or more.

Ranchers jumped on horseback in hopes of moving their cattle out of harm's way. Jeff Arrizabalaga went to Wilson Flat in hopes of rescuing his cattle and some cattle belonging to Charlie Lyons.

"It was a hot son of a b-----," said Arrizabalaga. "We tried to get over there and get them out of there, and out of the front of it, by the time we got over there and started on them, it was a horse race to try and get them gathered out of there, and you can't gather cows when you're going that fast."

In the heat of the moment, Arrizabalaga spied a place to escape the flames next to Anderson Ranch Dam.

"We come out on the road there by the dam," he says. "By the time we got there, the fire was already on top of us,



Ranchers quickly responded to lightning-caused fires on the night of Aug. 8th for the Mountain Home Fire Protection Association, but there were too many ignitions to control, and the Pony and Elk fire complexes quickly burned together into a giant conflagration that eventually burned 280,000 acres in a matter of a couple weeks.



The Davisons watched the Elk Complex fire jump the South Fork of the Boise River canyon and come marching directly at their ranch in Prairie. They worked around the clock digging fireline to save the ranch.

so we had to drive them down to the boat ramp by the water, and hold them there until it blow on by us. We got a bunch of them, but not near enough. I mean it came so fast you didn't dare look back."

Randy Davison, meanwhile, managed to save some of Lyons' summer range with dozer work, and he and his family tried to save their ranch and neighbors' homes in Prairie. They could see the fire coming right at them.

"It come roaring up out of the river canyon, I don't know how high the flames were," Davison says. "We were already digging line, because we knew it was coming. It was wild. If it hadn't been for all of the community, the tractors, the BLM resources and the air support, we wouldn't have had a chance."

The Davisons dug fireline with dozers around the clock to stop the fire's advance while the BLM and Forest Service aerial attack dropped fire retardant on grazing pastures near their home. Together, they saved the community of Prairie.

On Day 3, the Elk Complex fire got worse, burning 50,000 acres in a single day. It burned over the top of cattle, sheep, wildlife, and charred 38 homes and 43 outbuildings in Fall Creek.

Rich Harvey, incident commander of the Elk Complex fire, explained the severe fire conditions.



"So you have all of this receptive fuel, you've got a lot of this heat built up from these lightning strikes, you've got a general uphill topography run, and it TOOK OFF," Harvey said. "You've got extreme fire behavior at incredible rates of spread, throwing spots and ember showers half a mile in front of it. You put a big smoke column up, plume dominated, and it starts to suck in more oxygen, and on this day, DISASTER, from a fire spread standpoint. And disaster for anything in its way."

Several ranchers lost a total of at least 100 cattle to the fires, in terms of direct losses. But two bands of sheep narrowly escaped the blaze. "There were a couple of bands of sheep in the House Mountain area, they actually had to be abandoned by the herders," Harvey said. "The good news, a lot of those sheep showed up at the reservoir a couple of days later. Kind of miraculously actually."

The fires also burned elk, deer, black bear, grouse and even osprey.

"We usually don't see direct mortality on a broad scale, with the exception of bears," said Josh Royse, Conservation Officer for the Idaho Department of Fish and Game. "Bears usually climb trees to get away from danger, and we know that's not a very safe place to be in a fire."

On Day 3, the Elk Complex Fire charred 50,000 acres in a day, blowing over the top of livestock, wildlife and cabins.

Ranchers like Charlie Lyons had to send over 45 burned cattle to slaughter because of severe injuries. "With the dead cattle and the burnt cattle, I'll probably lose one-quarter of the herd," Lyons said. "I think I'm going to come out better than I expected."

But an even larger concern for Lyons, as well as others, is the loss of summer range. "From the standpoint of my public range, I lost it all," he said.

That means he won't be able to graze his cattle on federal land the rest of this summer, and for the next two years, to allow time for the range to heal.

Mountain Home Rancher Preston Lord also lost a lot of his summer range. "So now we've got to figure out where we're going to go with these cows," Lord said. "I don't think it pencils to feed them \$200 hay. I raise a lot of hay, but when that's done, I'll probably have to sell cows."

Lyons is still contemplating his options. "I haven't got my head wrapped around it yet. I think I'll sell down, so I can manage what I have for the next couple of years, and maybe get a second job fighting fire, I don't know."

If ranchers need to downsize their herds to get by for now, at least cattle prices are favorable. In the meantime,

officials with the Idaho Department of Agriculture, Natural Resources Conservation Service, the BLM and the Forest Service were looking into alternative pastures for ranchers. The fires burned the summer range of at least 20 ranchers whose cattle graze on BLM and Forest Service land in the fire zones.



"Well, if someone is burned out of their allotment, hopefully there are some other pastures available," said Holly Hampton, range conservationist for the Boise National Forest. "Typically, if we had other vacant allotments available on the forest, we could help locate them there. But this was a pretty devastating fire for us, so we've burned the majority of our allotments."

After BLM or Forest Service lands burn, ranchers typically have to stay off grazing allotments for 2 years, meaning they have to find alternative pastures or downsize their herds. Support agencies such as the Idaho State Department of Agriculture, Natural Resources Conservation Service and Farm Service Agency are all working on finding alternatives for ranchers.

In the meantime, NRCS has made some Conservation Reserve farm pastures available on an emergency basis in Elmore County.

The Idaho State Department of Agriculture has set up a web page for ranchers needing help. "The web page the Department of Agriculture put up is a one-stop place for producers to go," said John Biar, range management specialist for ISDA. "There's information for emergency loans, and we put together contact information for people to talk to, to help them through this."



The NRCS made CRP farmlands in Elmore County available for grazing.

The BLM also is looking for vacant grazing allotments, but there isn't much available. "By and large, Idaho BLM is fairly fully allocated. There are very few vacant allotments across the state," said Jeff Foss, deputy state director of the BLM.

Staying off the federal range for two years is normally what the agencies prescribe after fires. "Typically, we have a policy of two year's rest, and then we'll go

in and evaluate," Hampton said. "But maybe some of the pastures didn't burn, so we could still use those pastures. We hope we can put livestock back on as soon as possible. It's hard for these folks to find other ground for their animals. We'll do what we can."

In late August, the Pony and Elk complex fires were contained as they burned into last year's Trinity Ridge Fire. All told, they burned a total of 281,000 acres. Now the agencies are evaluating what kinds of rehabilitation measures will be needed. Fire officials said about 80 percent of the fire zone burned very intense and hot, meaning soil-stabilization measures will be vital and necessary to avoid major erosion problems.

"We're working with these teams of specialists to say, where should we aerially seed, where can we disk seed, what kind of erosion structures do we need to put in place, all to increase the likelihood of natural revegetation," Foss said. "That's a vital component to restoring an area after a wildfire, and getting it to a point where grazing can come back to its permitted level."

Idaho Fish and Game will be seeking volunteers to help to plant sagebrush and bitterbrush in the fire zones.

"We know that winter range is our bottleneck for our mule deer populations, so that's where we are really focusing our efforts for habitat improvement and restoration," Royse said. "So, certainly there will be bitterbrush planting. We need all the help we can get. For sage-grouse restoration, sagebrush is critically important."

In a community meeting in Fairfield, Gov. Butch Otter urged the BLM and the Forest Service to do more active range management to prevent large, destructive fires. An estimated 24,000 acres of sage-grouse habitat burned.

"If you use our management practices to remove the fuels, you don't get those hot burns and even with lightning strikes, if you've removed the fine fuels, the cheatgrass, you won't get these large hot fires that we're getting," Otter said. "We're in the process of keeping the sage hen off the endangered species list. The greatest threat to keeping the species off the list happens to be fire."

Mountain Home ranchers agree that more proactive management is needed.

"I guess I'm not a big fan of the BLM right now," said Preston Lord. "We need some intense grazing. We need to have some common sense in this thing. I understand that there's a time not to be on that, when the grass is green and growing, I understand that. But when the grass gets ripe and produces a seed head, the cattle, and the deer and elk can come in here, and graze it off. When they keep us off for 2-3 years, all they're asking for is another one of these," motioning to the fire-blackened ground.



Photo by Kirsten Severud

Idaho Fish and Game is recruiting more volunteers for bitterbrush and sagebrush planting in the aftermath of the fires to benefit mule deer and sage-grouse.

BLMs restoration goals generally are to promote native vegetation on the range, said Jeff Foss. So with that in mind, "we want to ensure adequate rest of seeded and restored rangelands to increase the success of rangeland restoration." With more native vegetation growing on sites, it should be less vulnerable to wildfire, Foss said. "A major goal is to break the cheatgrass/wildfire cycle."



Ranchers would like to see more prescribed burning on rangelands to create mosaics in the sagebrush and prevent big wildfires in the future.

Lord and Gov. Otter feel the same way about breaking the fire cycle, but if the range grows back to cheatgrass where annual grasses already dominate the landscape, they feel livestock grazing should occur sooner.

Cheatgrass is a very flammable exotic grass that was accidentally imported into the western United States in the late 1800s. While native shrub-steppe plants may need two growing seasons of rest after a wildfire to re-establish, cheatgrass grows back with a vengeance immediately following a fire. If rested for two years, cheatgrass fields could be more than



Cheatgrass, an exotic annual grass, has a big seed head and will usually out-compete native vegetation after a wildfire event.

a foot high, ready to burn.

Foss says the BLM is evaluating the use of targeted grazing to reduce fine fuels. "Proactive management is key," he said. "Targeted grazing is one tool in the tool box. That's one of the things we're evaluating in the sage-grouse EIS, that'll be done by 2014. So targeted grazing is one of the tools, I know it's in the governor's alternatives that we're looking at closely, to reduce fuel loads."

Rancher Charlie Lyons thinks the BLM and the Forest Service should do more prescribed burning in the spring or fall to reduce excessive fuels, create mosaics in the sagebrush, and inject a shot of nitrogen into the soil.

"That's what I find to be so flipping frustrating. This thing did not have to happen. It doesn't have to go black for 200,000 acres," Lyons said. "We need a lot more flexibility. If the BLM decides to do a prescribed burn, it's almost 7-8 years out before they can even attempt it. Due to the law



Preston Lord



Charlie Lyons

suits, litigation, they have to do NEPA, so you've got all of this paperwork, and then some you've got some little (bleep) at the end who sues them over it."

Foss says the BLM does see prescribed burning as a management tool. But with caution. "There's definitely a role for fire, for thinning, but we want to be careful too because fire is the No. 1 threat to sage-grouse, so we want to be careful that we don't use fire to damage sage-grouse habitat," he said.

The Mountain Home and Prairie ranchers, meanwhile, are figuring out what to do next.

"The bigger picture, two years out, is a little bit daunting," Lyons says. "I'll make small pokes at it. There's people out there that'll help me. Farm Credit, the people who have been through it, dealt with it. They'll give me a better perspective. Right now, it's the small picture.... I just never pictured the whole ranch going up at once."

Preston Lord vows to forge ahead. "This is our livelihood and we try to take care of things because my family, my grandfather bought the place in 1957. We're not planning on leaving. We love it here, and we love this lifestyle," Lord said.

The Davisons are working with their neighbors to form a Prairie Rangeland Fire Protection Association to bolster volunteer firefighting resources. "We were getting close to getting that done, and we'll finish that," he said. "The whole community working together is just great."



Randy Davison

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