

National Fire Plan

Burning the Forests for the Trees

2002 Idaho



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SKULL CREEK -- As usual, the helicopter is heard long before it's seen. Doug Gober and Rick Parker watch it hover above a nose-like ridge that juts between Snow and Roaring creeks and drain into Skull Creek, a tributary of the North Fork of the Clearwater River. They can't see it from their vantage point but the Bell Jet Ranger is dropping hundreds of Ping-Pong-sized plastic balls that will soon burst into white hot flames and start a series of fires in the thick stands of Douglas fir and grand fir.

It might seem strange for Forest Service employees to be starting a forest fire when the federal government has spent better than \$1 billion putting them out this summer. But its testimony to their words that not all fires are bad and the land needs a certain amount of flame-delivered nourishment if it is to remain healthy and resilient. "We are really expecting a habitat benefit out of it, that's the reason for the partnership with the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation," said Gober.



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Fire manager Rick Parker (right) and District Ranger Doug Gober watch a prescribed forest fire. The burn was started last week in roadless country along Skull Creek.

The district ranger hopes this fire will devour much of the downed timber that crisscrosses the forest floor, knock back the understory and give a jump start to aging fields of red stemmed ceanothus. The brush is a favorite food of elk, so the foundation is splitting the bill for the fire with the Forest Service. "It responds really well to being burned. You'll get this real succulent growth," said Gober. Starting a fire does cost money. There is the helicopter time, the fire crew on standby in case

it burns faster than expected and there is pre and post-fire science.

The ground and water are being monitored to see how the blaze effects fish and wildlife habitat. Forest Service crews have laid out random plots in the burn area and recorded the vegetation there before the blaze was started. Once it is out they will go back to see how the fire effected the trees and brush.

For much of the past year water quality monitoring devices have been recording water temperatures in Roaring and Snow creeks as well as solar radiation along their banks. The monitors will be deployed again next year to see if the fire raised water temperatures by burning streamside vegetation. District fire manager Parker said the data will help forest managers in the future when planning more prescribed burns or when managing wildfires for beneficial use.

About 10 minutes after the helicopter makes its first pass, plumes of smoke start puffing up from the timber. The fire is burning in roadless country that bumps up against the Mallard Larkin Pioneer Area and has been proposed for wilderness designation in the Clearwater National Forest plan. The creek bottoms are lush with alder, thimble berry and countless ferns. The higher ground is covered mostly with Douglas fir and grand fir, but there is also ponderosa pine in dryer spots.

It's a place that has seen a lot of fires but precious few in the last 80 years. Much of Skull Creek burned in the large fires of 1919, but Parker says not all of the country was scorched. It is still possible to find 200-year-old trees that either survived the fire or were untouched by it, he says. Since then, nearly every one of the 200 fires that have started in the area have been suppressed. Before the 1,000-acre Snow Fire in 2,000, only about 400 acres had burned from natural fires. That has lead to dense stands of timber and aging brush fields. "It's awful thick over there and we just want to take some of that out," said Parker. Gober would like this fire to burn across about 1,900 acres. But he and Parker don't want all of those acres to be blackened. Instead, they hope the fire will paint a mosaic pattern, burning hot and lethal in a few places, skipping others all together and burning the young trees and brush in the rest of the area.

If all goes well flames will crawl over about 40 to 80 percent of the 1,900 acres in a low-intensity creeping burn. They'll lick the trunks of the big trees but leave them unharmed. Elk habitat will be improved, fish habitat will be unaffected and the vegetation will return to a more natural state. But there is no telling with fire. It could flare and burn more acres than Parker and Gober want or it could rain for two or three days in a row and all the work will be for nothing. It's all part of the risks fire managers take when they decide to start a fire. But Gober and Parker seem to hit it right. The fire was started on Thursday and burned nicely through the weekend despite a few showers. Parker said Monday the many different fires started by the Ping Pong balls are still burning together. "It's filling in a lot of the holes and doing a good job," he said. "We hope it will continue to do that for the next week or so and then get some good rain on it."

The fire was authorized under a categorical exclusion, a Forest Service decision that is small in nature and is not expected to have a negative impact on the environment. It can't be appealed by the public. Even so, before the fire was ignited the agency had to consult with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to make sure threatened species, such as bull trout would not be harmed.

A burn plan and environmental analysis were written that outlined what the desired effects of the fire would be and where it would be allowed to burn. The plan was completed last year, but conditions weren't right for a fire. Early in the season it was too dry and then fall came all at once with cool temperatures and drenching rain.

Fire managers don't want to light a fire too soon when it might get away from them and cost bundles of money to suppress. But at the same time they don't want to wait so long that the fire has trouble burning and the resources don't benefit. "You're always playing this little game. It's either too dry or too wet," said Parker. "The huge thing for me is to get as close to natural fire as I can." That means lighting the fire during the season in which it would naturally burn. On the Clearwater, most natural fires start in August and burn into September.

The best way to mimic nature is not to mimic it at all but let natural fires burn while they are closely monitored. Gober said he wants to see more of that in the North Fork's backcountry. "In this remote area the management of wildland fire has a lot of potential. We've got to use wildfire a lot more than we have," he said. But waiting for the right conditions that allow management of a natural fire can take a long time.