

## After the fire: Part 1: Fire in the wilderness ... and the range

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The difference between good and bad is many times a matter of perspective, particularly when it comes to public lands management. What ranchers call good, environmental interests typically call bad, and what is good according to environmentalists is frequently at odds with the ideas espoused by those who make a living off the land.

That said, few would say the East Slide Rock Ridge fire that encompassed some 54,000 acres near Jarbidge in August was entirely a good thing - after all, fighting the blaze put 700 firefighters on the lines, cost taxpayers nearly \$9 million and drew critical attention from as far away as Carson City.

The East Slide Rock Ridge fire burned fewer acres in comparison to the Murphy Complex fire (which burned more than 650,000 acres in northeastern Nevada and southern Idaho in 2007) and Jarbidge Clover fire (nearly 200,000 acres in 2005), but the fact the area was swept by three large conflagrations in four years has raised questions about the long-term effectiveness of fire prevention and management techniques currently in practice.

From the still-smoldering ashes of the fire, a clearer picture can be seen of why the East Slide Rock Ridge blaze went from good to bad and, more importantly, what can be done to prevent such fires in the future.

Discussions with the people most affected by wildfire - those whose homes are on the range and those charged with the proper management of the resources on that land - also reveal a burning passion for the land and that some fires burn hot in the memory long after they have been extinguished.

### A ranger's dilemma, a rancher's fear

Dave Ashby didn't even have the luxury of an official title the evening of Aug. 8, when thunderstorms rolled over the southern peaks of the Jarbidge Wilderness and ignited what would become the East Slide Rock Ridge fire.

However, the acting district ranger for the U.S. Forest Service's Ruby Mountains Ranger District had no question as to how to handle the small blaze.

"Fire is a healthy part of the environment," Ashby said, "and there are a lot of dead and dying trees in that area."

Beetle-infested alpine fir, orange and brown in death, dot the mountainside stands of trees in the Jarbidge Wilderness, waiting for a spark to transform them into wooded pyres.

"It's not a matter of if it would burn, but when," Ashby said.

Forest Service officials recognized the tinderbox conditions and the unhealthy effect on the forest and decided to ignite a number of prescribed burns to clean out the dead and dying fuel load. For two years, Forest Service personnel tried to remediate the area in spring and fall - with surprising results.

"It just wouldn't burn," Ashby said, citing high fuel moisture due to lingering snowpack in the wilderness.

The size of the fire - the perimeter of which remained at less than 1,500 acres for more than a week - coupled with its location in the rugged, difficult-to-access wilderness, supported the decision to let it burn.

"From a fire ecology standpoint, (the fire) was doing a good thing," he said.

The ranger also said fire modeling software, used in managing fires nationwide, simulated the fire 1,000 times - with encouraging results.

“Ninety-nine-point-eight percent of the (fire) starts never left the forest,” Ashby said.

The biggest factor in the decision, though, was firefighter safety.

“We looked at the fire when it was at 100 acres,” Ashby said. “It wasn't worth it to put all those people at risk.”

First a team of smoke jumpers and then the Great Basin Fire Use Team kept tabs on the fire, which grew slowly and in a mostly predictable manner inside the wilderness boundary, far from human habitation.

Then, in one day the situation went from manageable to dangerous.

An unforecast wind event - a happening Ashby said some meteorologists called a “one-in-a-100-year event” - blew through the area Aug. 19, improbably driving flames down from the bowl-like area in which it was confined, down the Jarbidge River and as far as three miles away.

“How could the fire use team plan for that?” Ashby asked rhetorically. “It blew it over all the natural barriers.”

The fire had more than tripled in size and, more importantly, now was in a position to move from the dead and dying timber in the mountainous wilderness toward the quicksilver fuels of sagebrush and grasses - and toward livestock grazing on those areas.

“Once the fire got to that size, (the fire use team) couldn't contain it,” Ashby said.

The decision was made to bring in the Rocky Mountain Incident Management Team, but even they couldn't move quickly enough to prevent what happened between Aug. 24-25.

A weather forecast Ashby called “not good” was proved true later that day as sustained winds of 45 miles per hour with gusts to 60 mph buffeted the area, fanning flames in the tree stands to as high as 200 feet.

For the safety of the fire crews, Ashby reluctantly ordered a retreat. “It's nervewracking,” he said. “It'll keep you up at night.”

“We knew it was going to blow the fire up,” said Ashby. “We pulled the firefighters out - they just didn't feel safe.”

In less than two days, the perimeter of the fire more than doubled in size, from 18,177 acres to 39,690 acres. Although the fire never seriously threatened any homes, anxiety grew exponentially, as well.

“When you are sitting in Murphy's Hot Springs or Jarbidge and you see 200-foot flames,” Ashby sympathized, “you're scared.”

It certainly could have been worse

Cattle owned by Chet Bracketts' family has roamed the lush pastures north of Jarbidge for more than 120 years, so it can safely be said he's invested in the land.

Be sure it's not about the money.

“In all reality, economically speaking, most ranchers would do better to sell off all their cattle and put their money in the stock market,” he said. “The reason we’re here is we love the land, we love the wildlife and we love the lifestyle.”

Bracketts also is a man who says what he means and means what he says, and his words were measured accordingly when he spoke of the handling of the East Slide Rock Ridge fire.

“Realistically, the firefighters did really well,” he said. “I have great admiration for them - they have a really difficult job.”

Making an educated estimate, Bracketts expects to have two of his pasture allotments closed in the wake of the East Slide Rock Ridge blaze - about 6,000 to 7,000 acres. While significant, that closure pales in comparison to the 20,000-30,000 acres of allotments off-limits because of the Murphy Complex fire.

Despite the fact the fire escaped containment and impacted his operation, Bracketts supported the plan to let the fire burn in the wilderness.

“As far as the administration of the fire, I know the Forest Service had a let-burn policy which, in itself, is normally a good thing.”

He paused for moment, then continued, “It’s a dangerous situation, to let a fire burn in the middle of August. Dangerous.”

Another pause, then, “Truthfully, I can’t second-guess the way they handled it, though. It was an on-the-ground situation and I think they did a good job.

“It certainly could have been worse.”

While understandably disturbed by the loss of grazing land to fires in back-to-back years, Bracketts’ ire blazed hotter over the year-old Murphy Complex than the latest blaze, or, more specifically, what he felt was poor management due to outside interference.

“There was better fuels management on this (East Slide Rock Ridge) fire,” he said. “The Murphy ground was involved in litigation over watersheds, which prevented us from using forage and contributed to fuel buildup.

“Lack of fuels management led to that catastrophe.”

That may sound like an indictment of federal land managers, but Bracketts is quite pleased with the relationship area ranchers and rangers have forged.

“I don’t agree with (the Forest Service and BLM) in every instance,” Bracketts said, “and while it’s not perfect, we have made tremendous strides in the last 40 to 50 years.

“I could second-guess them, too,” he admitted, “but we ought to be supporting the people on the ground and let the Forest Service and the BLM get on with managing the land.”

Instead, the targets of Bracketts’ anger are more distant.

“My frustrations are with the environmental community who wants to second-guess, who do their second-guessing far removed from the situation,” he said. “Some people have an agenda that transcends taking care of the land, and those are the ones I take to task.

“The No. 1 thing is I think we need to let land managers manage the land - not the courts, not someone in Boise, not someone in Salt Lake City.”