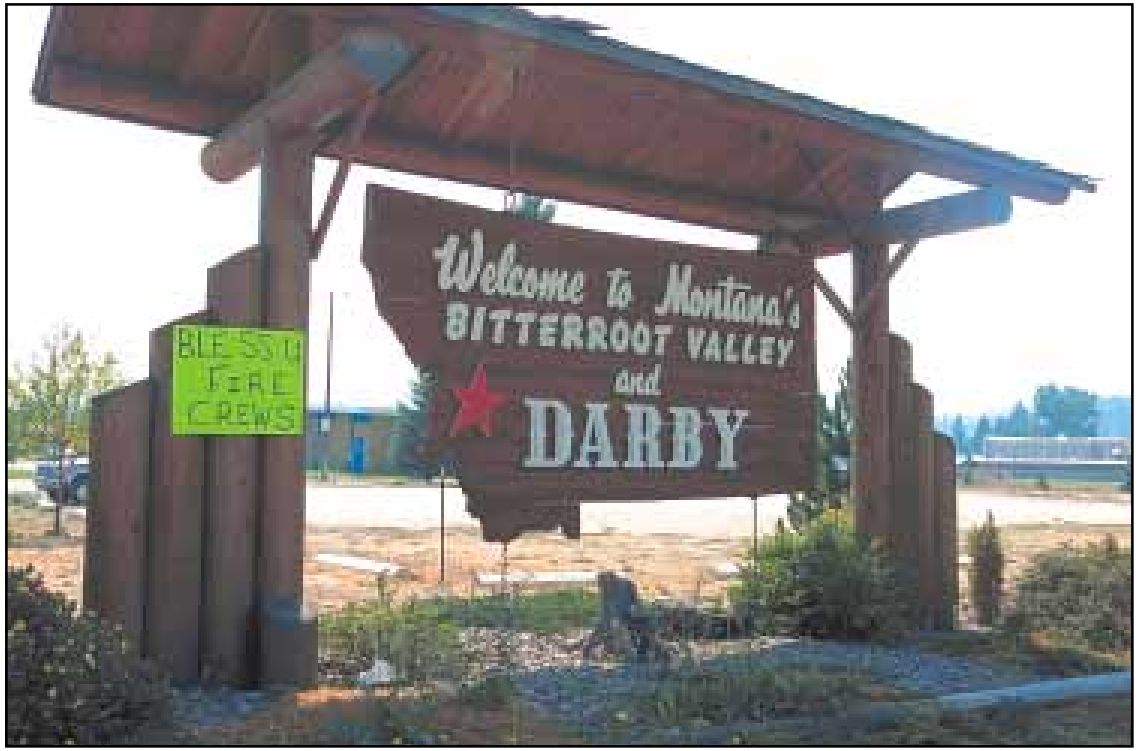
Chapter 4
Effects on People and Communities



Many Bitterroot communities displayed signs thanking firefighers. (photo by Karen Wattenmaker)

Introduction

This chapter describes how the fires of 2000 affected some of the people and communities in Ravalli County. Samples of people's experiences in four geographic areas— West Fork, Blodgett, East Fork and, Skalkaho–Sleeping Child–Rye— are presented here.

West Fork Bitterroot Fires

For residents of the relatively isolated and sparsely populated West Fork, the summer of 2000 was, in the words of one West Forker, "exciting" but "very long." For some, the term "exciting" understates their reactions, "nerve-wracking" is probably more accurate. Several evacuation orders prompted by different fires were issued by the Ravalli County Sheriff's Office, presenting landowners with tough choices of whether to leave for their own safety, or stay and help protect their homes.

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The first large fire of the summer on the Bitterroot occurred in the West Fork. In mid-July, a lightning-caused 10-acre blaze grew to 5,800 acres in a single day, causing the first evacuation of about 25 homes in the West Fork drainage between Mud Creek and Alta, above and downstream of Painted Rocks Reservoir. The Little Blue Fire, as it was called, forced residents out of their homes for a week.

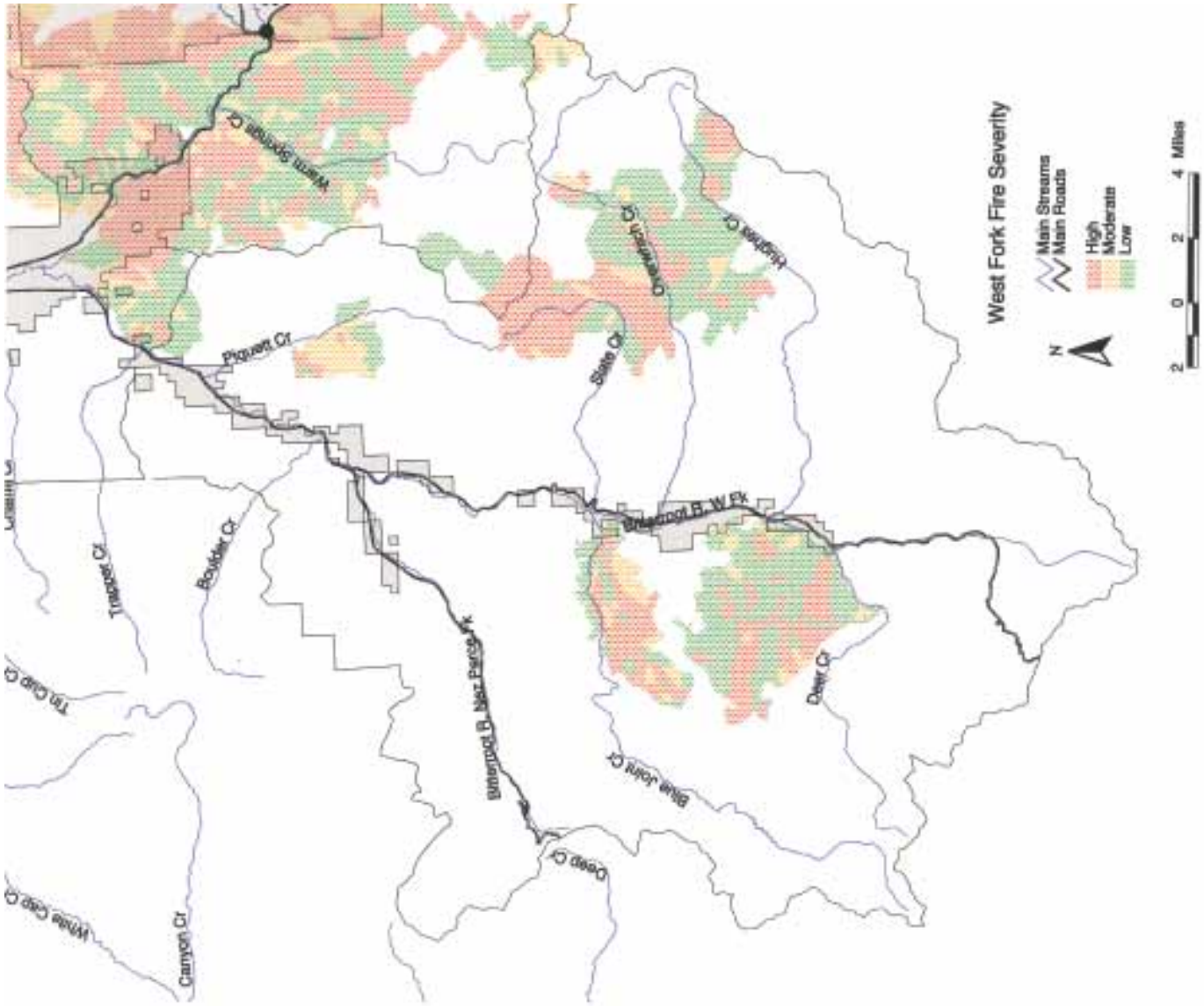
Though the evacuees were back home by July 21, Nature wasn't finished with the West Fork yet. On July 30 and 31, dry lightning sparked more blazes in the south valley, prompting another evacuation in both the upper and lower West Fork areas.

Little Blue Fire. (USDA Forest Service photo)

Among the evacuees were Dick and Sallye Hayes and dozens of their llamas. The couple owns the White Bird Llama Ranch on the Nez Perce Road. Between the mid-July Little Blue Fire, and Razor Fire in August, the Hayes' were forced to evacuate their animals twice. The first time, during Little Blue, they got only a few llamas out when things quieted down enough that the couple believed it was safe to return the animals home.

Then the Razor Fire, sparked by the early August storms, forced a second evacuation for the White Bird Llama Ranch, and this time Dick Hayes managed to get 60 llamas to safety. "We were concerned about having to move them because I had people with trailers to help, but once they started checkpoints at the West Fork Road, we couldn't get in," he said.

Figure 16: West Fork Fire Severity.



Eventually, though, he did get the animals to safer pastures in Corvallis and Victor.

The July 31 dry lightning storm also sparked the Spade Fire downstream and across the West Fork River from the Trapper Creek Job Corps Center. Students there were evacuated, and were temporarily housed at the Darby school. Other residents in the lower West Fork—upstream from Conner to Piquett Creek—were put on evacuation alert.

On August 16, Ravalli County Sheriff Perry Johnson ordered the evacuation of homes upstream of Painted Rocks Reservoir after the Razor Fire jumped from 60 to 1,800 acres in a few days. Three days later, the Taylor Springs Fire was menacing the Hughes Creek area. Again, Sheriff Johnson ordered an evacuation when the fire moved to within two miles of homes along Hughes Creek.

Students there were evacuated, and were temporarily housed at the Darby school.

Two large fires burned on either side of the West Fork Bitterroot River—Taylor Springs on the east and Razor on the west. At one point, fire information officers estimated that 24 homes were trapped in between.

Fortunately, no homes or other buildings were lost in those fires. The century-old Alta Ranger Station—one of the first ranger stations built in the U.S.—was wrapped in flameproof material as a precaution, according to Bitterroot National Forest historian Mary Williams.

It's estimated that less than 100 homes were evacuated along the West Fork during the mid-August evacuations. Not all the homes in the upper West Fork are year-round residences, said Jim Chinn, a detective with the sheriff's office who worked 18 to 22-hour days helping direct evacuations during the peak of the fire season. Nor did some folks wait for the mandatory evacuation order. Some left earlier, driven out by the flames they could see from their yards, or by the thick smoke that made breathing difficult and sometimes hazardous.

Of the homes that were occupied, not everyone opted to leave.

"At first, it was more like, 'It's just typical government overreaction.' But after they saw homes burning (in other neighborhoods), we got more compliance," Chinn said of his experience. "The West Fork is home to some fiercely independent folks who opted to try to take care of their own property," he said.

Two people who decided to stay were Bill and Nancy McKee, who protected their guest lodge upstream of the reservoir with an elaborate sprinkler system draped across buildings and lawn.

"Three times we've loaded the dogs up," Nancy McKee told the *Missoulian* on August 26. Ultimately, the McKees, like perhaps half of the people under a mandatory evacuation order, decided to stick it out.

"We've certainly been given fair warning," Bill McKee told the *Missoulian*. "We're sensitive to when the winds change."

Staying and watching the blaze from his home apparently gave McKee a chance to consider the implications of living so close to nature. Turning a bit philosophical, McKee put it this way, "Just living out here . . .it's a risk you take to live in the woods. It's part of the natural order of things.

"For the whole community from south of the dam, it's been a very exciting. . .a very long summer."

For the 50 or so employees of Triple Creek Guest Ranch on the West Fork Road, it was also a long summer, trying both emotionally and economically. Wayne Kilpatrick, who manages the ranch with his wife Judy, said they were never ordered to evacuate, but they did close the resort for nearly four weeks. "We physically never left the place," he said, "but many of our employees did." Triple Creek Guest Ranch lost significant income during the closure.

There were other economic losses as well, including income lost from Triple Creek-sponsored tourist activities such as guided fly-fishing trips on the Bitterroot River, whitewater rafting on the Salmon River, massage therapy and four-wheel excursions. "Typically, we do 350 guided fishing trips a year. I bet we lost 150 because our busiest month was the month we lost," Kilpatrick said.

Further downstream from the Triple Creek Guest Ranch, near the intersection of the West Fork Road and Conner Cut-Off, a 33-acre pasture was transformed into the Valley Complex fire camp. By mid-August, the Twin Fire camp at Sula merged with the Valley Complex camp, bringing the total firefighting camp population to 1,400 —larger than the town of Darby. In a matter of days, tents, electrical power, mobile showers, first aid, weather forecasting facilities, a 24-hour-a-day dining area, and other services had been set up.

Cooks and students at the Trapper Creek Job Corps helped prepare and serve breakfast at a makeshift continental style buffet before the caterer arrived. Even before the two camps were fully merged, firefighters were drinking 200 pounds of coffee every two to three days, and using 5,000 pounds of ice daily. As Forest Service crew boss Mick McDonald told the *Missoulian*, "It's just like setting up a small city, you start from the ground up."

'We've certainly been given fair warning. We're sensitive to when the winds change.'

Bill McKee, West Fork resident

Blodgett Fire

The Blodgett Fire, which for a time was the highest wildfire priority in the nation, displaced hundreds of families during the first two weeks in August. Even when people were able to return to their homes, the weather was still so hot and dry, and conditions still so dangerous, they could not let their guard down until the weather cooled and the rains came in early September.

Blodgett began, like dozens of other fires that burned in the Bitterroot Valley, at the end of July. Unlike the others fires, Blodgett did not start by lightning; it was human caused and remains under investigation.

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The fire began in the vicinity of the Blodgett campground, near the trailhead to one of the most-used recreation trails in the Bitterroot mountain range. The flames quickly spread up the canyon wall setting trees on fire, sending sparks even higher.

The next day, it grew dramatically, sending a huge plume of smoke into the sky. As the fire moved up and across the mountain, burning debris rolled downhill, igniting even more fires as it went. The fire's rapid growth was frightening to folks living in its path. By August 3, the fire had consumed 1,300 acres; 2,500 acres by August 4; and 5,700 acres by August 8. When it was over, nearly 11,500 acres had burned in an erratic pattern that caused the evacuation of 900 homes.

As the choking smoke thickened, Ravalli County Commissioners declared a state of emergency, and the County Health Department issued a health alert warning people to stay indoors.

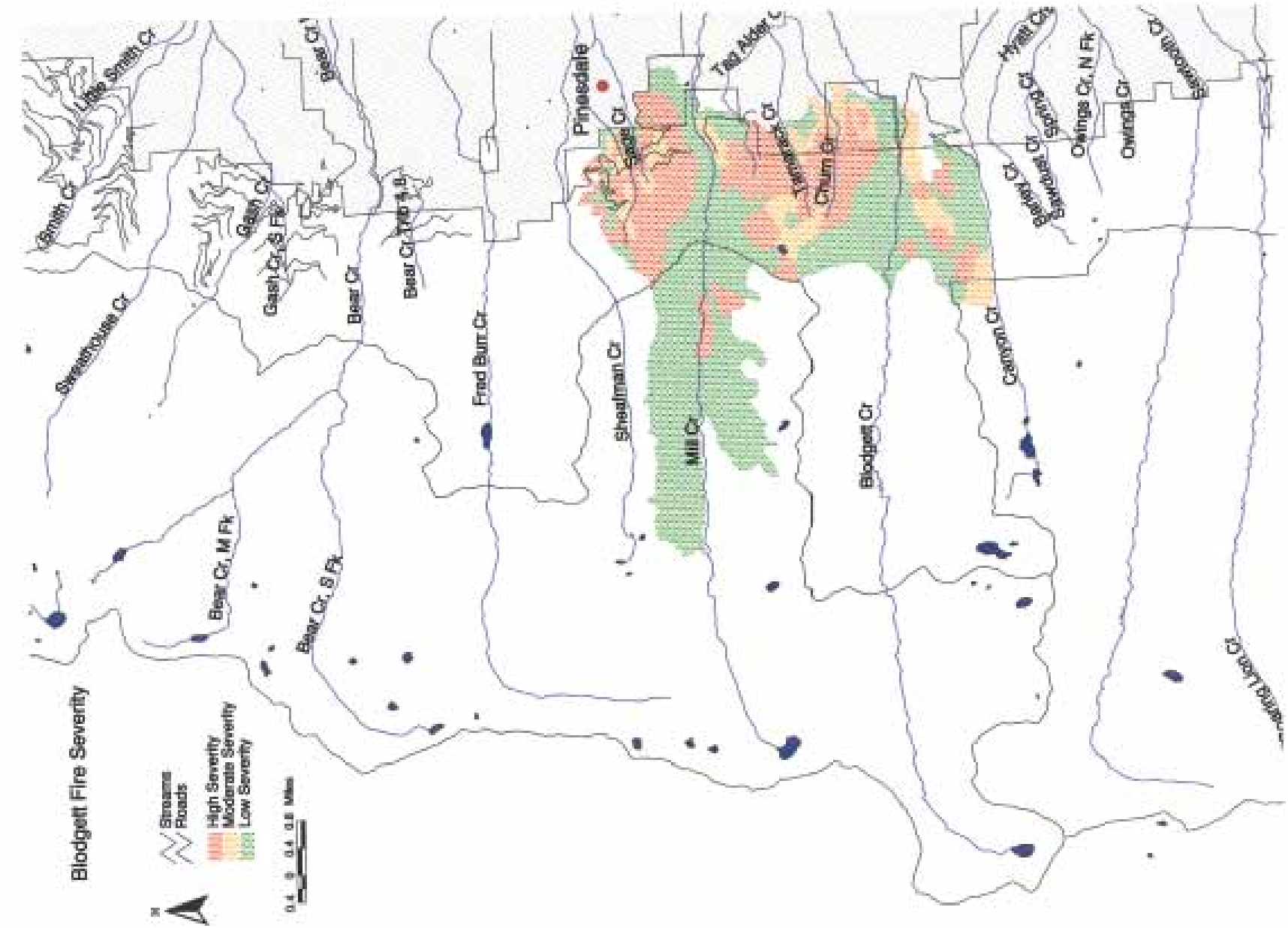
The Red Cross opened shelters at two Hamilton schools and one at Darby Junior High. The next day, two of the shelters were closed for lack of evacuees. Though 50 people were evacuated from 26 homes on Aug. 1, most people opted to stay with family or friends. "We have a wonderful community," said County Commissioner Alan Thompson, who eventually was evacuated himself.

Roadblocks were set up and staffed by the Ravalli County Sheriff's Office, the Pinesdale Police Department and the Montana National Guard.

Tonia Bloom, her husband Marshall and son Seth, made the decision to leave their home on August 1. "We were among the first to be evacuated because the fire made its first big run in our direction—before the East Fork fires came close to houses in that area," Tonia Bloom remembered. "There were slurry bombers overhead and big flames less than a mile from our house."

The Blooms stayed in a Charlos Heights guesthouse for two weeks. "We came back every day," she said. "We irrigated an area behind the house,and checked on the sheep left behind in an irrigated pasture."

Figure 17: Blodgett Fire Severity.



When the evacuation order was lifted two weeks later, the Blooms returned home, but didn't bring family photo albums or other cherished possessions with them, in case they had to evacuate again. The weather had not changed. Temperatures were still high, humidity low and winds erratic.

"Things were still smoldering two or three weeks after we moved back in," Bloom said. "Every afternoon helicopters were overhead doing bucket drops."

The weather had not changed. Temperatures were still high, humidity low and winds erratic.

Blodgett Fire. (USDA Forest Service photo)

On August 3, the fire made a run to the north, threatening the Mill Creek neighborhood, and jumping Blodgett Creek where it engulfed the south side of the lower canyon. The sheriff ordered the evacuation of Blodgett Camp Road.

On August 7, the fire roared out of Mill Creek and made a run towards Pinesdale. At 2 p.m., volunteer firefighters from Hamilton, Corvallis, Pinesdale, Victor, Stevensville and Florence responded to the threat, though some equipment was already on the scene as a precaution.

Hamilton Fire Chief Lloyd "Buzz" Greenup said the valley's volunteer firefighters had been bringing equipment to Pinesdale and other vulnerable places every day when fires were the most active, and returning every night when the fires calmed down. Because of this preparedness, the equipment was already in place when the Blodgett Fire began its run toward Pinesdale.

Pinesdale is tucked into the trees in the urban interface, yet only one house and one cabin were destroyed, both outside of town limits.

Pinesdale residents had been ordered to evacuate the day before, but "a tremendous amount of people" opted to stay, Greenup said. This put him in a position of having to worry about the safety of residents as they fled their homes when the fire neared town.

While he battled blazes in the field, Greenup was also battling rumors when a whisper campaign to discredit Forest Service firefighters began. Spreading through the community as fast as the fires blazed through the mountains was the tale that the Hamilton Volunteer Fire Department had arrived on the scene of the Blodgett Fire, only to be ordered away by Forest Service personnel claiming jurisdiction.

Greenup dismissed the rumors early on, saying the cooperation between his crew and the Forest Service could not have been better. The fire had spread too quickly up the steep, inaccessible face of Blodgett to make suppression an option. I would not put people up in that area," Greenup told the Ravalli County Commission in a statement reported by the *Missoulian*. "I don't issue rappelling lines to my crew and I don't think the Forest Service does either."

The town was spared largely because the fire hit an area that had been cleared of fuels, and because the roads through town gave firefighters good access, according to Greenup. "I'd like to think we had some effect, but what really happened is the fire lost its intensity," he modestly said.

As the days wore on, the fire spread north to the ridge separating Mill and Sheafman Creeks, and south to the north side of Canyon Creek. The fire also spread west into the Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness, where it eventually went out.

East Fork Bitterroot Fires

August 6—named Black Sunday by some—was both frightening and exhilarating to Peg Platt whose home nestles beside the historic and sacred Medicine Tree at the mouth of the East Fork Canyon. Platt, against all advice, opted to remain in her home to protect it. The retired Forest Service employee was directly across the canyon from Dickson Creek when the drainage exploded in flames and the canyon became a sideways chimney, pushing a firestorm up the East Fork. Platt has a series of photographs taken during that first hour. She looks at them today with disbelief. If she had not been there, taking the pictures, she would not believe they could be real. Fire Managers had called a Darby town meeting for late the afternoon of August 6 to update citizens on fires burning on Darby's western horizon.

As 250 people began to gather at the Darby Clubhouse, it was clear that something ominous was happening at that very moment. Above town, along the ridgetop east of Main Street, flames were clearly visible. As the meeting got underway, engines from the Darby Volunteer Fire Department raced south out of town, lights flashing and sirens blaring.

Before 3 p.m. that day firefighters believed they were gaining ground on the then-45,000 acre Valley Complex. But by mid-afternoon an unstable air mass had moved in. The temperature was 92 degrees; relative humidity 11 percent; winds at 20 mph.

The conditions were right for a firestorm. "It would be like opening the damper on your woodstove," Valley Complex Incident Commander Steve Frye told the *Missoulian*.

The erratic and locally unprecedented fire was moving at a mile an hour, and spotting as much

'It would be like opening the damper on your woodstove.'

Steve Frye
Valley Complex Incident Commander

as a mile ahead. Frye estimated that a fireline three-quarters of a mile wide would be needed to stop its advance.

At the Darby town meeting, Incident Commander Frye, with a veteran firefighter's instinct, told the crowd, "I don't think we'll come through the events today without losing homes."

He was right. The fires of Black Sunday took 19 homes and five outbuildings in Rye Creek; 22 homes and two businesses along Highway 93 south of Conner; 10 homes and 20 outbuildings in Laird Creek; and 10 homes and five outbuildings in Dickson Creek.

'The wind was blowing so hard, the little pup tents were flying around.'

Bill Burhop, US Forest Service

Some Dickson Creek residents believe a firefighter-ignited backburn was responsible for the destruction of their homes. Soon after the August 6 firestorm, Bitterroot National Forest Supervisor Rodd Richardson ordered an independent review of the backburn.

In October, two teams of fire investigators hired by the Forest Service Northern Region headquarters in Missoula, issued two reports to detail how the fires moved through the landscape. Dickson Creek homeowners weren't satisfied with the reports, however, calling them brief and inconclusive.

Further south the Maynard Fire had jumped Highway 93 from west to east about a mile south of the Sula Ranger Station, sparking blazes at the Sula fire camp set up in a field near the office. That fire camp had been established first to support the Twin Fire, burning on the Salmon National Forest near Lost Trail Pass, and then the Sula Complex.

Bill Burhop, assistant fire management officer at the Sula District, recalled when fire burned in the fire camp itself and on all four sides of the Sula Ranger Station.

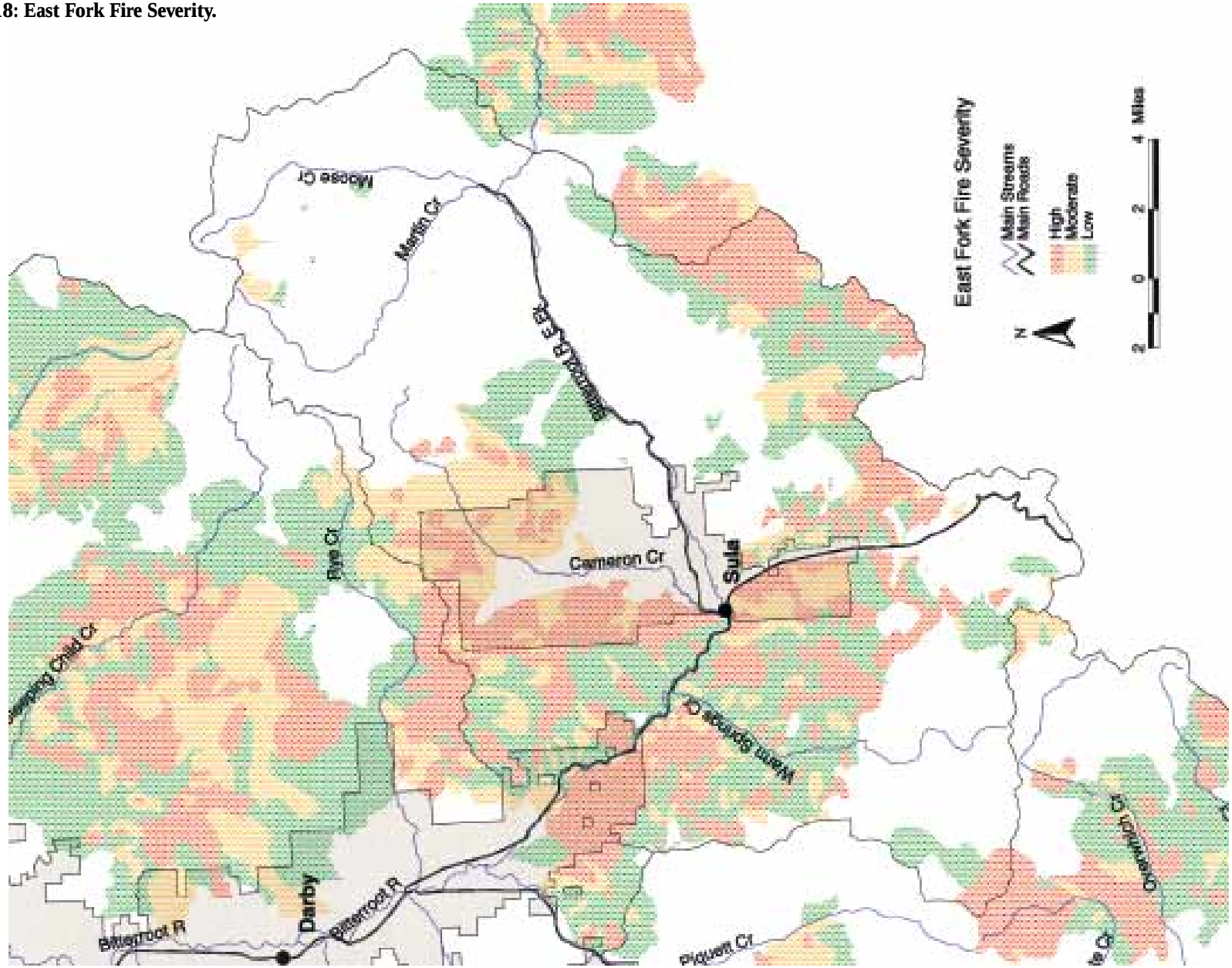
"We had engines on Highway 93 trying to catch the spots, but then it started to spot over the highway, all the way up to Reimel Ridge."

The field caught fire and then flames began moving toward the ranger station. "The wind started blowing so hard, the little pup tents were flying around. I knew the ranger station was going next."

Fire completely surrounded the ranger station. There were spot fires near the corral on the ranger station's east side, and Sula rancher Jerry Ehmann's hay bales north of the ranger station were ablaze. "We had fire on all four sides of us," Burhop said. "We had to do a lot of racing around on the north side of the ranger station. From about two in the afternoon until midnight we never stopped chasing fire."

At the same time, about 100 residents of the East Fork were being evacuated. But with power and phones out in the area, evacuation coordinators could only communicate with the Sula Ranger Station via hand held radio, according to Burhop.

Figure 18: East Fork Fire Severity.



While firefighters battled blazes all around them at the fire camp and ranger station, and listened to the evacuation orders on the radio, the Sula Peak Fire Lookout Tower was burning down. "There were a lot of other things going on. It was a pretty incredible day."

The ranger station survived Black Sunday unscathed, as did the fire camp. Though the caterer's tent was damaged, the caterer still managed to feed firefighters and evacuees who had sought shelter at the Sula Clubhouse.

Sula is ranching country, and the August 6 firestorm hit when cattle were out to pasture and hay had been cut and baled.

Jerry Ehmann, who owns the Camp Creek Ranch on Highway 93 just north of the Sula Ranger Station, and manages the Sula Peak ranch in Sula Basin, lost 130 tons of baled hay from the two ranches —50 tons at Camp Creek and 80 at Sula Peak. Miraculously, all the cows came home. "We're 100 percent. We got all our cattle in."

The 400 cows and calves at Camp Creek, and 800 cow-calf pairs at Sula Peak survived the firestorm uninjured. "They were right in the midst of it," Ehmann said. "This is amazing. I've raised cattle all my life and I didn't know this, but they're survivors."

The only difference Ehmann has seen in his herd is in the black, white-faced cows, which are now black, black-faced cows, probably from the ash. "It looks kind of funny."

The only difference Ehmann has seen in his herd is in the black, white–faced cows, which are now black, black-faced cows, probably from the ash.

Wildlife didn't fare as well. Ehmann said he saw several wild animals that were killed or injured in the blazes.

"I think the worst damage we had is miles and miles and miles of fence that got destroyed. I don't know how we're going to manage the cows next year without the fences. I'm talking about 30 miles of fence. That's my biggest problem."

Dean Ehmann, Jerry's son, spent many days as the fires subsided helping neighbors and checking on remote homes and structures. In his travels, he found a tiny miracle.

A few days after the firestorm went through, he made it up to the Sula Cemetery. It's on a slope above French Basin and generations of Sula residents are buried there. The fence and gate were wood, the slope was covered with pine trees, and the graves lie among native grass and wildflowers. There is no irrigation. Nothing should have been left.

"The fire burned the gateposts and the Sula Cemetery sign, then it split and went around the entire cemetery. All the old wooden grave markers are still there. None of the graves were touched," Dean said. "The Hand of God must have cupped over them as the fire roared through. The fire came together again on the other side and kept on going."

In two of the East Fork's more remote residential areas, Springer Memorial and Bonanza Land, firefighters battled blazes that threatened homes for more than a month.

Frank Serwacki, a Springer Memorial homeowner and volunteer with the Sula Volunteer Fire Department, stayed to protect his and his neighbors' homes, leaving only once in 40 days. His wife Gretchen, commuted back and forth between the Sula Store, where she had evacuated in the couple's motor home, and the Sula Clubhouse, which served as a central gathering spot for East Fork evacuees.

Armed with two backhoes, an excavator, a feller-buncher, engines, pumpers, five miles of sprinklers and 115,000 feet of fire hose, firefighters worked to protect both residential developments.

"If we weren't laying hose we were moving sprinklers where we could around the homes," Serwacki said. "A lot of us were picking up brush. We cleared the roofs and raked a three-foot space down to bare dirt for every structure in Springer. We had people whose job it was to make sure sprinklers weren't plugged. We were pretty damned busy there for 40 days."

Trees were cut a distance of 30 feet from each of Springer's 60 homes, and firelines surrounded both developments.

On the evening of August 31, the Mussigbrod Fire, burning to the east of the Anaconda-Pintler Wilderness, made a fast, hot run toward Springer Memorial, spotting to within less than a half-mile from homes. As Andy Polk, an information officer with the Valley Complex told the *Missoulian*, "There was a wall of fire coming up the side of the mountain."

The fire never got any closer, however, and when it was clear that Springer and Bonanza had been spared, the U.S. Army's 101st Airborne pulled out the five miles of hose and sprinklers.

Valley Complex. (photo by Karen Wattenmaker)

In two of the East Fork's more remote residential areas, Springer Memorial and Bonanza Land, firefighters battled blazes that threatened homes for more than a month.

Skalkaho, Sleeping Child and Rye Creek Fires

On August 6, just hours before the South Valley fires blew up, roaring through neighborhoods, and destroying 51 homes, Nancy Wilkins was visiting property her family owns in the Little Sleeping Child drainage.

Wilkins and her family camp on the property in summers, but on this particular summer day, getting out, not camping out, was on her mind. It was so hot and dry that Wilkins described the afternoon as "if the land itself was about to be set ablaze from spontaneous combustion." She didn't feel safe to be there. It felt alien to her, and threatening.

On August 23, anxious fire bosses predicted that the fire would be at Skalkaho Road in three days. The fire jumped the road 12 hours later.

A massive plume of smoke rose above Sleeping Child Road on the afternoon of August 6, ominous evidence of fires that appeared to be burning to the south and east, in the Little Sleeping Child and Rye Creek drainages.

Black Sunday also took its toll in the lower Rye Creek drainage. Fires spread rapidly in the North Fork Rye Creek and Dugout Creek neighborhoods. Tragically, 20 homes and 5 outbuildings were lost there on August 6.

Though most fire activity was focused further south in the Rye Creek, Conner, and Sula areas where firefighters and homeowners experienced the inferno that destroyed dozens of homes, attention would soon shift further north, to the Skalkaho Road area.

As the Bear Fire spread in Sleeping Child and Little Sleeping Child drainages, residents in both neighborhoods were put on evacuation alert.

By August 23, with temperatures still high, humidities low, and winds gusting, evacuation was mandatory for residents of Skalkaho Road.

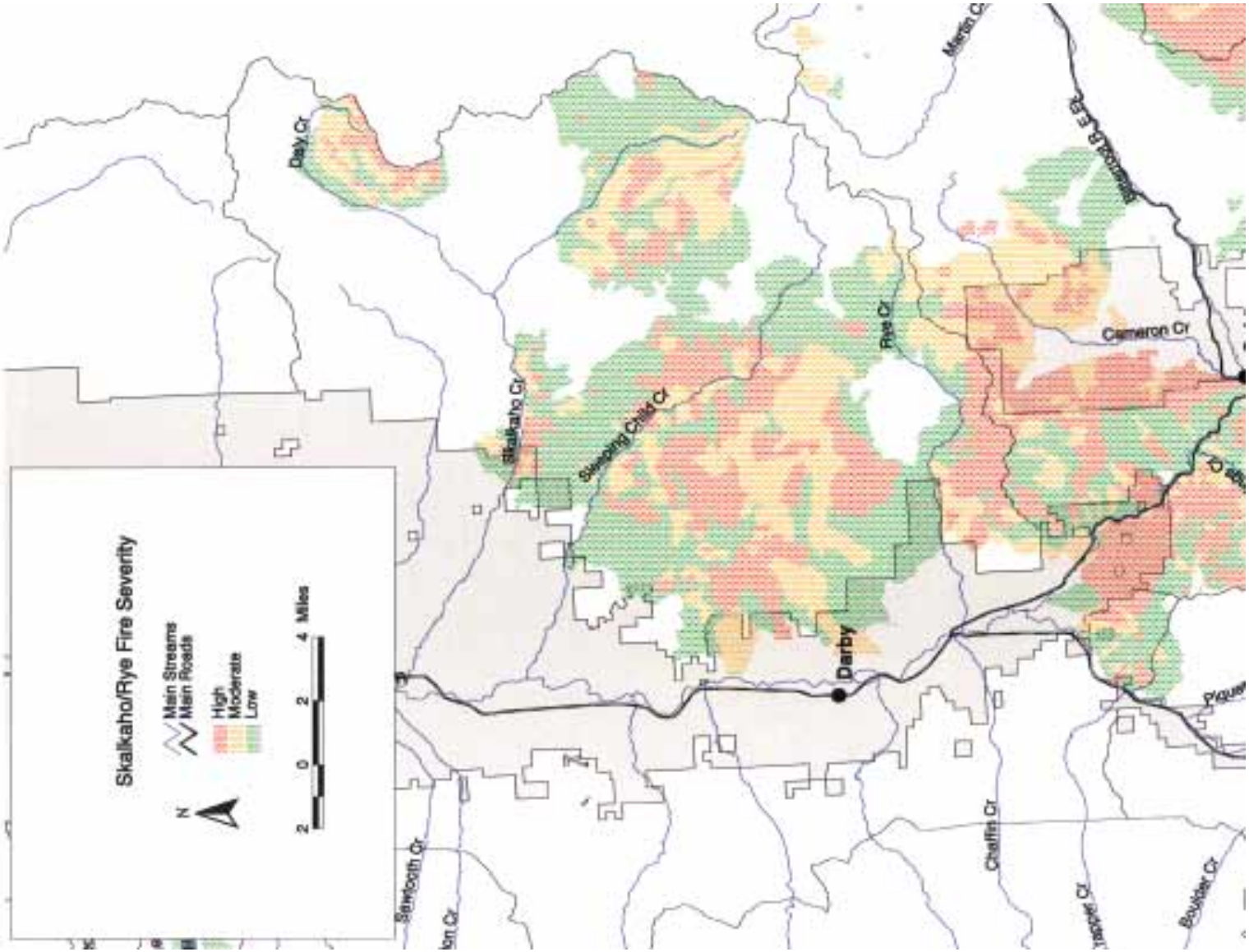
Sometime between midnight and 3 a.m. on August 24, the Skalkaho fire that had been working its way down upper Sleeping Child Road and north, towards the ridge that separates the Skalkaho and Sleeping Child drainages, made a dramatic run up and across the ridge, towards Skalkaho Road.

On August 23, anxious fire bosses predicted that the fire would be at Skalkaho Road in three days. The fire jumped the road 12 hours later.

One Skalkaho resident who opted to stay and protect his home was Matthew Bartley. "It started blowing up at one-thirty, two in the morning," he said, "and got really crazy at three or four."

Despite requests from deputies urging Bartley, his wife and son to leave, the couple stayed, but sent their 14-year-old son to Seattle to stay with relatives. Ravalli County Sheriff Perry Johnson had the authority to order evacuations; if homeowners decided to stay they could, but he would not allow children to stay in evacuation areas.

Figure 19: Skalkaho/Rye Fire Severity.



The fire was burning about two miles from their home, and deputies were going door to door in the neighborhood, warning people to leave.

"There were two police cars full of sheriffs trying to tell me to leave," Bartley remembered. "There were chunks of sparks the size of footballs falling from the sky. So there you were, with the hose."

Another Skalkaho resident did evacuate, moving temporarily to the home of a friend in Hamilton. She and her husband wanted to do the ecologically-correct thing when they landscaped their Skalkaho property by leaving the area natural, without a water-guzzling lawn. But with fire bearing down on her land, she thought perhaps she should have established a protective greenbelt around her home.

'There were chunks of sparks the size of footballs falling from the sky.'

Mathew Bartley

"We live on a bench on the south side," she said. "When it rains the lawn gets green and I mow it. Otherwise it just lies there dormant. We really wanted it to be as natural as possible. We tried to encourage native grasses."

Later though, after she evacuated, "I wondered if I shouldn't start watering. A lot of people did."

Indeed, many of her neighbors intensively irrigated their yards and wet down their homes. Sprinkler systems had been set up on house rooftops along Skalkaho Road, while fire trucks sat, parked in strategic positions long the road, waiting to be dispatched.

Though the Skalkaho landowner never did irrigate her yard during the fiercest days of the firestorm, firefighters gave her yard the OK, since it was surrounded by a walkway—a kind of cement fireline. The native grass she had encouraged in lieu of a more traditional lawn, was mowed so short that had it been set ablaze it would have crept along the ground, and would not have spawned the 150- to 200-foot flame lengths firefighters were seeing in the timber.

Another Skalkaho landowner, John Rose, fled on the night of August 24, after being awakened by a neighbor. He told the *Missoulian*, "I looked out the back door up the canyon and saw a wall of flames, hurried along by 50 mile-per-hour winds. I thought, 'nothing will survive this.' "

Rose's 270-acre homestead was one of the nearest homes to the fire after it jumped the road. His home, and his daughter's home next door, survived unscathed, though Rose lost 70 tons of hay and a barn. Although his neighborhood remained under evacuation, Rose, an outfitter of 34 years, stayed to cook for the firefighters battling the blazes nearby. One night he cooked a 15-pound ham and 20 pounds of potatoes for the firefighters who were surely getting tired of camp food by late August. And he sometimes cooked breakfast for as many as 20 firefighters, "The way to a man's heart," he told the *Missoulian*, "is through his stomach."

On August 24, scattered rain fell, raising humidities and slowing the fire that was burning north, to the ridge separating the Skalkaho and Gird drainages. When it was over, one home on Little Sleeping Child Road was destroyed, and 20 homes lost in the Dugout and North Fork Rye drainages. The Skalkaho fire had caused homeowners to stay and fight or flee for their lives, partially damaging 23 homes. Although there were tragic losses, many more homes were saved thanks to the dedication of heroic firefighters, and thankfully all residents and firefighters avoided serious injury and lived to tell of their experiences.

Through it all, Darby Mayor Forest Hayes kept Darby and south valley residents up-to-date serving as an fire information officer.

Every morning he made the rounds of the fire camps, first Valley Complex Camp at Conner, then Blodgett Camp at the county fairgrounds in Hamilton where he spoke directly with the people managing the fires. Then he'd stop at the Forest Supervisor's Office in Hamilton to pick up the latest infrared maps to post at the Darby information booth in the town park.

"Some days we ran 800 people or better through there," he said.

Although there were tragic losses, many more homes were saved thanks to the dedication of heroic firefighters. (photo by Karen Wattenmaker)

'I looked out the back door up the canyon and saw a wall of flames, hurried long by 50 mile-per-hour winds.'

John Rose, Skalkaho resident

Concern for Animals Equaled that for Humans

Bitterrooters are animal lovers. Horses, cattle, sheep, dogs and cats are as much a part of the landscape as people in the Bitterroot Valley.

As families were evacuated, the animal shelter in Hamilton became a temporary home for displaced pets. The first night of evacuations, about 45 animals arrived. That's when Ethyl Keel, manager of the Bitter Root Humane Association, knew she and her staff had a tremendous job ahead of them.

Folks would come in after a day at their own jobs to walk dogs, cuddle cats, clean cages, do laundry or even just answer the phones.

The staff eventually found themselves caring for 212 pets, in addition to the 80 or so already there. When the shelter staff was dragging their hind quarters, folks would come in after a day at their own jobs to walk dogs, cuddle cats, clean cages, do laundry or even just answer the phones. "Make no mistake; in a time of crisis, there is no better community to live in than ours," said Keel.

Karen Pelkey, owner of the Hamilton pet store Wild About Pets, took in displaced birds. "Birds were critical because the shelter wasn't set up for birds," she said.

But the biggest emergency shelter for displaced animals was the Ravalli County Fairgrounds, which began to look like Noah's Ark, with one difference; the animals were not arriving in pairs, but in herds.

The plight of evacuated animals being housed in stalls and barns, far from home, touched the hearts of volunteers – too many volunteers as it turned out. The animals were so well cared for that some of them got fat.

The community's need for the fairgrounds as a place to bring their animals was so great that it was a deciding factor in the fair board's eventual decision to cancel the county fair, said Fairgrounds Manager Gary Wiley.

With evacuations being ordered and cancelled, animals were coming and going for weeks. Wiley said that at one time there were about 500 pets and stock animals at the fairgrounds. About half of the 156 horse stalls were filled with various animals.

Some marvelous networking occurred between animal shelters, animal control agencies, pet food companies, and the public, bringing in donations from all over the country. The Internet also brought donations from across the nation.