

Clearwater National Forest Managers Harness Fire in 2003

March 2004



2003 Wildland Fires Benefitted the Land

Clearwater National Forest managers had plenty of opportunity in 2003 to put wildland fire to work. Their decisions allowed fire to play its natural role on the landscape where appropriate.

Fire on the Clearwater

The native forest ecosystems of northern Idaho were born of, then shaped by wildfires.

As stewards of the Clearwater National Forest, we do not need to understand each and every effect of fire.

We must accept that these effects are ancient and profound, and the continued exclusion of fire from these ecosystems will forever change our forests and the creatures that live there.



“We feel that those who love our forests and the creatures that live there must also love fire,” said Clearwater National Forest Supervisor Larry Dawson. “Fire is just as significant as the sun, the rain and the air.”

A History of Suppression

Our fire managers estimate that we have suppressed more than 12,000 fires on the Clearwater National Forest in the last century. As a result, the makeup of our forests is out of balance with historical norms. In many places vegetation crowds together, creating fuels both standing and down, alive and dead, ripe for wildland fire.

While we cannot change forest conditions overnight, we can continue our work implementing the Clearwater’s three-pronged strategy to reintroduce fire and disturbance on the landscape and move our forests toward conditions more like historical norms.

The Three-Pronged Strategy

Forest managers developed a three-pronged strategy for vegetation management prior to the 2003 fire season—and used it successfully. The strategy provides for significant disturbance in our forested landscapes via the following three methods:

- **Fire**—Putting burns of varying severity on the landscape.
- **Lightning**—Managing natural ignitions for beneficial uses.
- **Harvesting**—Removing trees to promote healthy forests.

Fire Terms Defined

Fire managers take specific actions when a wildland fire is discovered based on many factors. A few of the factors include firefighter and public safety, weather and fuel conditions, natural and cultural resource management objectives.

Confine: The least aggressive suppression strategy, confining a wildland fire typically allows it to burn itself out within determined natural or existing boundaries (rocky ridges, streams, roads).

Suppress: To suppress a wildland fire is to stop or limit the fire's spread and eliminate all identified threats from the fire.

Contain/Control: Contain means to take suppression action, as needed, which can reasonably be expected to check a fire's spread under prevailing conditions.

Control means to complete a control line around a fire, any spot fire therefrom and any interior islands to be saved; burnout any unburned areas adjacent to the fire side of the control lines; and cool down hot spots that are immediate threats to the control line until the lines can reasonably be expected to hold under foreseeable conditions.

Prescribed fire: Prescribed fires are fires ignited to meet specific objectives according to prepared plans.

Wildland fire use: The purpose of wildland fire use is to manage naturally ignited fires in order to achieve benefits to natural resources where fire is a major component of the ecosystem.

Many natural resource values can be enhanced by allowing fire to play its natural role as long as private property and social values can be protected.



A wildland fire on the north side of Toboggan Ridge in the North Fork Clearwater River drainage burned with varying intensity in August 2003. "This burn couldn't have been better if we'd designed it," said Assistant Fire Staff Officer Ken Stump.

Forest Service managers understand the critical role fire plays in natural ecosystems.

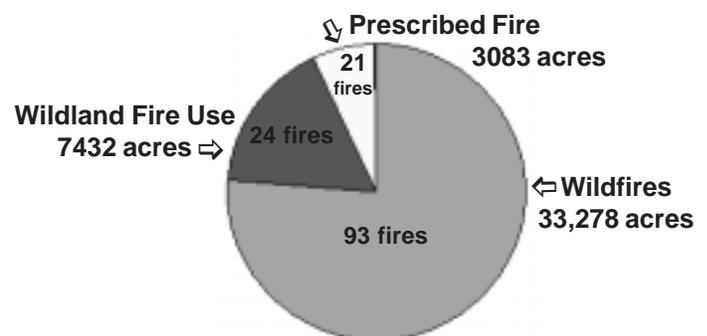
Dale Bosworth, Forest Service Chief:

"The most important thing we can do in a good part of the West is some thinning and burning in a controlled manner."

Larry Dawson, Forest Supervisor:

"We must provide for significant disturbance in our forested landscapes."

2003 Wildland Fire



117 Wildfires
138 Total Fires

40,710 Wildfire Acres
43,793 Total Acres

More acres burned on the Clearwater National Forest in 2003 than in any year since 1919.