

Message from the Forest Supervisor

We are in a fire season the like of which many of us have not seen in our lifetime. Across the forest we have seen people being displaced from their homes, both public and agency employees, and even seen the unfortunate loss of homes and structures in the West Kootenai. My condolences to all of those who have loss or are displaced.

It has taken us little bit of time to get our communication with everyone to a good place. On that front we and our partners have not always been perfect or timely, but we are striving to do better all of the time. Understandably, this has created a great deal of frustration and anxiety as we deal with emerging incidents. We are not alone this year. Incidents across the Northern Region and nation have taxed our resources to the max. Frustration and anxiety inevitably lead to rumor and blame neither of which is helpful or useful in times like these. We can talk about all of these concerns and issues after the fires are out. For now, I am asking for patience and restraint to allow us to focus on fighting these fires.

I would ask that everyone be as patient as you can and work with us and our partners (Lincoln County, Sanders County, Montana DNRC, and local governments in Eureka, Libby, Troy, and Trout Creek) to get the correct information. I have had more than my share of questions as to how people can help. I truly appreciate how all of the communities have pulled together to help those in need.

People have volunteered to do almost anything to help fight these fires. I have worked within my authority to get those resources that can qualify signed up or pointed in a direction to help. Unfortunately, in many cases, this has not worked out due to the lack of training or certification to work the fires. When folks lack the training or needed certification, it potentially puts all of the firefighters potentially at risk. This is something that I cannot allow. I hope you understand. Firefighter and public safety are the paramount objectives always. It will be a good reason for a lot of these resources to work through the sign up process this winter so we can have more resources next year.

As new fires occur and existing ones grow, our response continues to be to implement strategies and tactics that commit responders only to operations where and when they can be successful, and under conditions where important values actually at risk are protected with the least exposure necessary to responders and the public. We are continuing to be aggressive implementing the tactics that are necessary and have a probability of success. At the same time we continue to be aggressive at recognizing when tactics will have no effect and only increase the exposure of our fire responders and pilots; recognizing at these times we can do point protection, until the fuels or weather change.

All of our communities have a strong component of Forest Service retirees and many of you are being vocal in your critique of our current situation in public and in private. Although I understand why it occurs, to second guess these decisions is not productive. To make strong statements that we could have stopped XYZ fire if we had just put more staff on it or by deploying more aviation, is neither productive nor accurate. It is easy to state but impossible to support these type of blanket statements and declarations. It is unfair to everyone from the Forest Service, other Agencies, Tribes, cooperators, partners, and volunteers who are working so hard on these fires. People working on these fires live in the communities, are impacted by evacuations and the smoke and/or have family, friends, and loved ones impacted. No one is immune. It is hard on us all.

The reason I bring this up is because I need your continued help. I need you to continue to please help share accurate information and help counter or stop rumors and to second guess our decisions. I need your help to stop the strong desire and human tendency to place blame and “what if” decisions. I need your help in sharing the truth that the personnel working on these fires have and continue to do a fantastic job in protecting lives and property using a variety of fire operation tactics. I need your help sharing the message and hard truth that sometimes fire occurs in really bad spots, including within and amongst homes and communities, and it does not matter how hard we hit it at the start, or how many resources we engage, if the conditions are right it will grow and sometimes that includes putting more fire out there to fight the fire.

I know many of you are already doing this and I really appreciate it. I just ask for you to continue and reach out if there is anything you need from us to assist.

I look forward to the day when it rains or snows to get back to our homes and lives, but until then, we are all in it together. Let’s pull together and do our best.