

December 12, 2012

To: Editors - Douglas Budget, Platte County Record-Times, Laramie Boomerang and Wyoming Tribune Eagle

From: Larry Sandoval, Public Affairs Officer, Medicine Bow National Forest

Re: Letter to the Editor - Success of 2012 Fire Season

Reflecting on the 2012 Medicine Bow National Forest Fire Season

The severe 2012 wildland fire season will not be forgotten by public land managers, firefighting agencies and the citizens we serve. Exceptionally low snowpack during the winter of 2011 as well as dry spring conditions primed forests and rangelands for an abnormally early fire season and large, complex fires.

Smoke-filled skies were commonplace across Wyoming throughout much of the summer. During June and July, four large wildland fires – Cow Camp, Russell’s Camp, Arapaho and Squirrel Creek - burned nearly 120,000 acres within or adjacent to the Medicine Bow National Forest boundary. Three of those fires occurred on the Laramie Peak Unit of the Medicine Bow, culminating with the 98,000-plus acre “Arapaho Fire,” Wyoming’s largest fire of 2012.

Now that this year’s fire season is over and I have had some time to reflect on what transpired, I would like to offer some thoughts on the successes we experienced and the lessons we learned during this unprecedented fire season.

First, I would like to thank our federal, state and local (counties and rural fire departments) partners for the successful cooperation and coordination each of these fires required. All four fires burned across mixed jurisdictions and ownership, including lands managed by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), Forest Service, State of Wyoming and private lands.

Each fire on the Laramie Peak Unit was managed under “Unified Command,” meaning each fire, regardless of land ownership or jurisdiction, was managed under the command of one incident commander and management team. In a crisis situation, where high-stakes decisions must be quickly made, this command structure requires the utmost in cooperation, coordination and trust among affected local, state and federal entities. This is exactly what happened with these fires as Albany, Converse and Platte Counties all worked diligently with the Wyoming State Division of Forestry, BLM and U.S. Forest Service to make timely decisions and support the incident management teams responsible for suppressing these fires.

As was previously mentioned, low snowpack greatly affected fuel moisture content of trees, grasses and shrubs going into this year’s fire season. According to the National Climatic Data Center, drought indices for June 2012 showed “extreme drought” compared to “moderately moist” (i.e. no drought) conditions in June 2011. These conditions ultimately contributed to extreme fire behavior rarely seen in this part of the Rocky Mountains.

Under normal conditions, cooler nighttime temperatures and higher relative humidity would typically moderate fire behavior and provide more potential options for firefighters to safely attack a fire. However, each of our large fires (especially Arapaho and Squirrel Creek) bucked the norm and burned dangerously unpredictable at night.

High temperatures and high winds drove extreme fire behavior and growth in each of our fires; however, when winds aligned with the topography, a “perfect storm” scenario contributed to the Arapaho Fire growing by nearly 32,000 acres on June 29 and more than 37,000 additional acres on June 30. Such extreme conditions and fire behavior is humbling, even to the most experienced firefighters with a suite of technology and tools available to them.

These fires burned many thousands of acres while impacting the lives of many people and natural resources. It is my great relief that no serious injuries or loss of life occurred. At the end of the day, for all who were involved, these are successes that we can all be thankful for.

The employees of the Medicine Bow-Routt/Thunder Basin would like to thank and commend the communities involved with each of these fires. Whether it was the generous giving of food, water and other donations to help displaced residents, or simple gestures such as sharing “Thank You Firefighter” posters with crews, the outpouring of community support was recognized and is sincerely appreciated.

As we prepare for the 2013 fire season, I am hopeful that drought conditions will improve such that we do not need to put our 2012 lessons learned into practice. However, should the need arise I am confident that we would once again be successful in working with our firefighting partners and communities.

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