

5 Changes Needed to Prevent More Wildfire Deaths



14 HOURS AGO • BY BILLIE STANTON
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TWIN FALLS • Wildfire veterans with decades of experience have a different perspective than the Washington bureaucrats to whom they ultimately answer. But while the wheels of bureaucracy grind slowly, the people putting their lives on the line point to some simple, straightforward solutions to the dangers they confront.

Wage timely, forceful attacks on fires when they first materialize, they suggest. Schedule safer, more effective work shifts rather than sending crews into the fray in the afternoon, when they're exhausted, the fire is burning hottest and winds pick up and shift flames in various directions.

Let fires that don't threaten lives or properties burn themselves out rather than attacking every fire in the middle of nowhere, they advise, as the ecology of many areas depends on occasional wildfires to burn out excess fuels. And perhaps most important: Stand down when danger looms.

Let it Burn

National wildfires policy was borne of the "Big Blowup" of Aug. 20-21, 1910, when forest fires killed 85 people, burned 3 million acres and destroyed several towns in Idaho, Montana and Washington.

But the push to suppress all wildfires may not be serving the nation well today — practically, financially or environmentally, fire managers suggest.

The fire-prevention and -suppression approach held steady for more than 100 years, with one interlude in the 1970s, when the public heeded scientific findings that wildfires can help forest ecology.

That controlled "let it burn" approach came to a quick halt after the 1988 fires in Yellowstone — the nation's original national park and the crown jewel of its parks system.

The beloved icon of the West was ravaged by fires from that June until November, with more than 150,000 acres burned. The public was apoplectic.

Today, of course, visitors to Yellowstone can see the park's swift recovery. Reports of its death

Service and BLM.

“We have a lot of opportunities to use fire to meet that objective, but it takes a lot of courage,” Robertson said. “There’s more smoke, you have to talk to the public, the fire has longer duration, and there are many more chances for a bad day with a weather event.”

“These are risks we have to take. Otherwise, we just put off the inevitable. I think technology could help a lot with that.”

“A lot of areas rely on fire. That’s part of the natural ecosystem,” says Eric Hipke, a fire safety video specialist in Boise for the Wildland Fire Safety Training Annual Refresher. On small fires that don’t threaten properties, “let them do their thing.”

Hitting it hard - early

Even if fire suppression is eased, and remote fires are managed and allowed to burn out, many wildfires still must be fought.

When a wildfire first is spotted, it’s usually burning 2 or 3 acres.

“You have a golden 48 hours,” notes James R. “Jim” Cook, a 37-year wildfire veteran who recently retired in Boise. “On almost all fires, you’ve got two days where if you can get ahead of it, you’ve got it.”

Any delay can result in big, deadly blazes such as the South Canyon and Yarnell Hill fires. Such fires require more manpower, air resources and, usually, millions of dollars. They also heighten the risks to fire crews.

“I’ve had cases where they didn’t want to give us retardant because the fire wasn’t off to the races,” said Hipke, who narrowly escaped the South Canyon Fire. “But if you can get in in the morning before it blows out, you can put out a fire.”

A sensible schedule

Most important, delayed attacks on wildfires can result in fatalities — almost all of which occur between 3 and 6 p.m.

“As long as we keep putting people out on these fires in the hottest part of the day, this is going to keep happening,” Hipke said. “There’s that 3 to 6 p.m. range — with 4:30 being the bull’s eye. That’s when everybody is dying on these fires.”

Mid-afternoon is not only the hottest part of the day, but also the time when winds kick up and change direction. And it’s the period when firefighters are most exhausted and least alert.

Hipke suggests bi-modal shifts. “Get out early, fight while you can, then stand down and get back on it at 6 p.m. when it dies down. You’re way more effective, and you’re not in danger.”

If crews set up camp in the safest spot near the fire, “they can have food, water and fuel for their chainsaws, and they’re already there. They wake up at 5 and at 6 (a.m.) start work.”

Larry Edwards, a veteran hotshot now retired in Montana, recalls the “10 a.m. rule” of the 1970s and ‘80s. The fire had to be put out or reduced to less than 10 acres by 10 a.m.

“If you had to work all night, that’s what you did. The people above me were always trying to do a decent job of saying, ‘Let’s go put this danged thing out.’ They didn’t fiddle around so much,” Edwards said. “In recent years, there’s been a reluctance to hit things hard and put ‘em out.”

“Every year, hundreds of times, crews pull out and say, ‘We can’t be here at 2 in the afternoon,’” said Chris Cuoco, the Grand Junction, Colo., meteorologist whose Red Flag Warning of high winds wasn’t transmitted to the South Canyon firefighters.

“Sit back and watch the show,” advises Ted Putnam, Ph.D., a psychologist and veteran smokejumper. “I did that with my smokejumper crew in Utah once. I felt bad about it, but I thought, ‘There’s not enough time to build the fire line.’

“I walked out behind the hotshot crew; I said, ‘It’s not worth risking my men.’ When I left, because the fire’s rolling up the hill and burning where we were, it’s the most sickening feeling there is to think: ‘Did he take his people in?’

“Pretty soon,” Putnam said, “here came the hotshot crew, and he (the supervisor) said, ‘Good call, Putnam.’ When you have other crews in there, there is tremendous pressure to go in. You don’t want to look like cowards.”

Tapping Technology for Better Communication

Another lesson that needs to be learned, several say, is to exploit technologies that can reduce risks and heighten awareness of fire behavior.

Some survivors of the Yarnell Hill Fire victims have been loudly lamenting the lack of GPS devices among the 19 Granite Mountain Hotshots. Aircraft above couldn’t see the men for the smoke, or they could have dropped retardant and saved lives, the theory goes.

For wildfire supervisors, smart tablets, such as iPads, are invaluable, says Robertson.

On fires that escape initial attack, such as South Canyon, Thirtymile, Cramer and Yarnell, “Somebody’s making decisions. But the only information they get is a perimeter on a map,” he



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Files for Roger Roth and James Thrash are saved at the McCall Smokejumper base. The two died in the South Canyon Fire in 1994 west of Glenwood Springs.

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said.

“As incident commander, I want to be able to get videos and photos and fire behavior and send that back in. I think we miss opportunities where we don’t have to just throw all the resources at it we can,” Robertson said.

A key factor in the South Canyon deaths was a dispatcher’s failure to transmit a Red Flag Warning of a cold front bringing high, shifting winds that would inflate the fire.

Robertson, who survived the South Canyon Fire, has good reason to push for better communication.

“Those weather reports are all on our website now,” he said. “My phone alerts me for a high wind warning. My phone beeps at me and tells me.

“Where I live, every high school freshman is getting an iPad at school. And we have four in the state of Oregon, the BLM does,” he said. “If you eliminate the need for information to be passed, take away the potential for people to not talk, you’d expect instances of communicating poorly would be reduced.”

Incident commanders with tablets can transmit in real time the exact shape and direction of the fire, the weather, any information a firefighter or decision-maker miles away would need.

“My air attack sends me photos from the air, and I can look at it as he’s flying around. It’s unreal how valuable that kind of information is,” Robertson said. “It’s trying to be smarter, developing good strategy and tactics. Eventually, it’s less exposure to the firefighter.”

He said all his firefighters carry their own smart phones, as the government only issues them basic cell phones.

“It’s funny how administrators work, too. Guess who they gave the Blackberries to? To the (older) people who say, ‘The buttons are too small; I don’t know how to use it.’

“They don’t need the technology as much as the guy on the ground does. That’s my goal right now.”

Homes where they don’t belong

Another key advancement in fighting wildfires, however, rests with the people who build homes in wildlands.

“If you’re living in the middle of the woods, you need to take it upon yourself to make sure your house is defensible,” Hipke said. “Once the wind starts blowing, it’s Game Over. But if you cut stuff from around your home, you can wet it down, and it can survive.”

Fire records for Colorado show averages of 80 fires a year at 2,000 acres each into the 1950s, said semi-retired Winslow Robertson, who worked as the No. 2 fire official for the U.S. Bureau of Land Management in Grand Junction, Colo.

“Now we’re seeing (enormous fires) every year. A lot is due to the housing boom. In the late

'90s, people were building wealth and bought a second home in the mountains," Winslow Robertson said.

That's one of the factors contributing to dangerous fires, he said. "A lot of things are colliding fast. You're there to protect lives and property. That's the priority."

Blume also cites "the human part of it and development of the urban interface" as a key factor in fire danger.

"The insurance companies have never been particularly engaged in raising rates (on wildland homes)," Blume notes. "It's definitely on their radar now."

"As insurance rates start to climb, there's going to be more emphasis on city and county planning and zoning officials taking a role in building materials and design. It's been a free-for-all in the past. But governments are starting to say, 'You're going to have these roads, fire hydrants, these building materials.'"

Says McCall Smokejumper Base Manager Joe Brinkley:

"The wildland-urban interface starts steering, too, toward taking bigger risks simply because you want to protect life and property. There's no doubt we've improved (safety) radically since '94. But then when you see 19 folks killed on a mountain (in Yarnell, Ariz.) ..."

"The public has some ownership in how these things are fought," Hipke said.

He and Wade Ward, public information officer for the Prescott Fire Department, explained how wildfire firefighters "triage" properties.

A house with cedar shakes for a roof, surrounded by flammable foliage, probably won't command much attention from crews trying to save what they can. And even if a house is defensible, if the other houses on the block aren't, the fire crews likely will move on," Ward and Hipke both said.

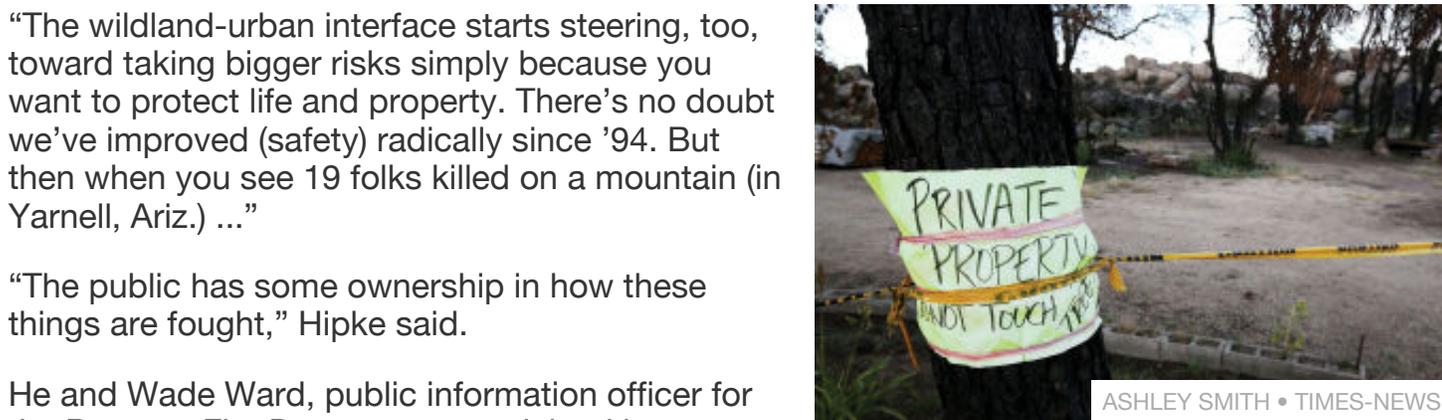
So homeowners in the wildlands might want to think twice, not only about saving firefighters who feel greater urgency when properties are at risk, but also about the state of their home and the homes of their neighbors.



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ASHLEY SMITH • TIMES-NEWS A view of a memorial for the 19 Granite Mountain Hotshots killed in the Yarnell Hill Fire on June 30, 2013. This photo was taken on Friday Oct. 18, 2013.

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ASHLEY SMITH • TIMES-NEWS A sign at a property where a home burned during the The Yarnell Hill Fire. This photo was taken in Yarnell, Ariz., on Friday Oct. 18, 2013.

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Making it Happen

All of these changes will require federal approval, which never comes swiftly or easily. Whether the U.S. Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management can let some fires burn without challenge, wage timely initial attacks on other wildfires, change fire crews' schedules to heighten safety and find a way to provide secure, topnotch technology to save lives among the "boots on the ground" is the question that remains unanswered.

Whether mountain and forest homeowners will create defensible spaces in conjunction with their neighbors also is questionable.

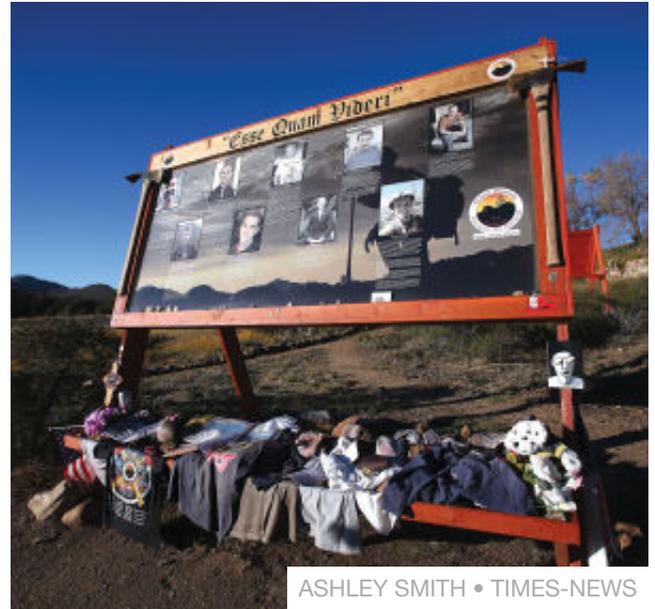
But one thing wildfire fighters can do for themselves is to step back when danger looms. Wildland firefighters — men and women — are gutsy, hardworking, determined professionals. And they are subject to public criticism whenever they do stand down.

On the South Canyon Fire, Hipke asked, "What if we'd heard about the wind, we'd all gone up and sat on that ridge? What if it had burned up Glenwood Springs?"

"People complain all the time," said Randy Skelton, deputy fire staff officer on the Payette National Forest. "They see us sitting there, and a lot of the public is second-guessing. They send letters to Congress, the forest supervisor or the chief of the Forest Service. In today's environment, there's a lot of pressure to do something."

As the Yarnell Hill hotshots' deaths clearly showed June 30, however, sometimes the best thing to do is nothing.

"How do you change 34 firefighter deaths?" asked Joe Brinkley, whose triplet brother Levi died in the South Canyon Fire. "Maybe this is really callous, especially from someone who lost a loved one ... but to a certain extent, it's a dynamic environment. It really comes down to human factors. When it's 112 degrees, 9 percent relative humidity — there's not a firefighter out there who's not going to know (the dangers)."



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