

## Back to square one on controlling wildfires

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It seems a silly question to ask in the middle of the hottest, driest Idaho summer in a generation, but do we really know how to fight wildfires? We certainly should, after 100 years of experience at keeping nature at bay in south-central Idaho. But the events of July 6 and July 16 raise hard questions.

On July 6, with just a couple of hours warning, telephone pole-high flames and gale-force winds seriously threatened Shoshone, destroying five buildings and coming within yards of the city.

And on July 16, the Murphy Complex Fire erupted near the Twin Falls-Owyhee county line, eventually burning more than 650,000 acres - an area about the size of Rhode Island.

Interior Secretary Dirk Kempthorne - who until May 2006 was governor of Idaho - defended his firefighters Wednesday against accusations they let the Murphy fire get out of hand.

Kempthorne is in charge of the Bureau of Land Management, which controls most of the land blackened in the Murphy and Shoshone blazes. He blamed extreme fire conditions.

Idaho's current governor, Butch Otter, and its two U.S. senators see it differently, arguing that in the case of the Murphy blaze, BLM grazing restrictions led to the accumulation of explosive fuels.

Two years ago, a federal judge ruled that half of the 1.7-million-acre Jarbidge resource area where the Murphy blaze burned was no longer open to livestock grazing because the BLM didn't adequately determine the impact to sage grouse habitat in 28 livestock grazing allotments used by 11 ranchers. The ruling came after a lawsuit from Hailey-based Western Watersheds Project, an environmental group.

Otter and Sens. Larry Craig and Mike Crapo also condemned BLM fire managers for not acting quickly enough to put out the Murphy fire while it was still small. They said ranchers told them that bulldozers were ready to start digging fire lines on July 16 - but that federal rules prevented the equipment from being deployed more quickly.

Such criticism puts Kempthorne on the spot, both because he was so recently on the other side of this issue - criticizing federal land management - and because earlier this year he appointed an Idahoan, James Caswell, to run the BLM (Caswell's nomination is currently stalled in the U.S. Senate).

The agency administers its Idaho lands through a hodgepodge of court-ordered and Bush and Clinton administration rules that make it difficult to develop a coherent public-lands management - much less a comprehensive fire containment - strategy. As a consequence, the BLM often finds itself in a position to having to react to emergencies instead of heading them off.

But could anything have prevented the Murphy Complex blow-up? Maybe not. The factors involved contributed to a "perfect storm" for wildfires: the hottest July in Idaho since 1870, spring rains in 2005 and 2006 that carried over large crops of dead grass, 2,600 recorded lightning strikes on July 16, the lowest relative humidity and moisture on record, winds that whipped grass fire flames 13 feet into the air at 8 mph.

Cattlemen have a point that grazing restrictions increased the amount of flammable fuels in the Murphy fire. But grazing foes are also correct that cheatgrass and non-native crested wheatgrass, which are widespread on BLM lands because of grazing, made a combustible situation more volatile.

Still, the fact remains that southern Idaho is in the midst of the mother of all droughts this summer. Any large wildfire will be severe.

Which means that it's time, perhaps, to go back to the drawing board in thinking about the way we manage wildfires - and the lands they burn.

**Our view:**

Everything we thought we knew about containing wildfires is in question after the big burns of the summer of 2007.

**What do you think?**

We welcome viewpoints from our readers on this and other issues.