



Northern Rockies Ledger

*Considerations for the 2007 Fire Season
from the Northern Rockies Coordinating Group*

Risky Business

July 26, 2007....What we typically call 'fire season' in the northern Rockies came early this year to northern Idaho and western Montana. Fires burning across the west are exhibiting extreme, unforgiving fire behavior. We're calling it erratic, volatile, abnormal and any other adjective we can find to communicate to firefighters and local residents how bizarre the fires are acting.

On the Ahorn Fire in Montana, tall flames jumped from treetop to treetop burning *into* the wind. That's a sight that stops 20-year veterans in their tracks. On the ground these wildland fires are gobbling anything burnable in their path in steep, rocky, rugged country. The truth is that the fires are downright dangerous in many areas and maybe that's the most direct language we can offer.

Our highest priority is providing for firefighter and public safety. The extreme and dangerous nature of these fires and our priority on safety narrow the range of tactics we use to fight fire. There is no wisdom in ordering and assigning people and equipment to fight a flaming front that may turn on them quickly, creating a life-threatening situation.

Instead we are monitoring the winds, humidity, topography and vegetation types to project when and where we might safely influence the fire. We are working together at all levels to clear brush, install sprinkler systems to protect infrastructure, historic landmarks and ranches and subdivisions and make evacuation plans as needed.

The sustained high temperatures continue to elevate the fire danger in Idaho and western Montana, and now in eastern Montana and North Dakota as well, elevating their vulnerability to large fire growth. The unrelenting heat also poses added risk to our firefighters. Fighting fire in protective clothing, a hardhat and gloves is always a sweaty business, and the hot weather heightens the risk of heat-related illnesses, dehydration, and fatigue.

Our fire managers are aware of these risks and may not ask as much from firefighters when it comes to digging fireline. They will, however, ask firefighters to pay closer attention to their health and the condition of those working shoulder to shoulder with them on the fireline.

Another factor that challenges firefighter safety is smoke. While the smoke inversions may slow the fires, smoke can restrict visibility. Poor visibility creates very dangerous conditions for both ground and aerial forces so firefighting tactics are altered to reduce risk.

While these conditions, extreme fire behavior, heat, and smoke, may hamper our ability to aggressively suppress and contain fires, we continue to work with local firefighters to protect structures and meet with communities to keep them informed. If you don't see the level of direct attack firefighting activity you might expect on a fire, perhaps now you'll know it's because of these firefighter safety considerations.

Contact: Rose Davis, 406.329.3472