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The Fires of 2007: A Potentially Premature Retrospective

The “August singularity” that often has announced the end of “hard summer” in Western Montana may have cooled off temperatures, moistened the ground with long absent rainfall, and boosted humidity enough to allow firefighters to get sufficient control over wild fires to contain or guide them in less destructive directions.

As heroic and skilled as our fire fighters are, it is almost always weather that determines how bad a fire season is going to be and when the fires will be successfully contained. A record series of 100 degree-plus days, near zero rain fall, lightning storms, and winds are what kicked off the fires of 2007 and allowed them to run. In those conditions, our fire fighters were largely able to protect structures, but not to stop the expansion of the fires. Nature controlled that. Many of the fires will not go out until the cold, rain, and snow of fall finally smother them.

The caustic and gagging smoke that settled over the valleys of Western Montana this last month with grimy layers of ash settling out on everything reminded me of the aftermath of the 1980 Mt. St. Helens eruption. The distressing difference is that a volcanic eruption is not expected every year, but there is the very real possibility that late summer in Western Montana may well be regularly smoky, as widespread wild fires become a summer fact of life.

From the 1930s to the 1980s our summers were cooler and wetter than the long-term weather history suggests was typical. Add in trends in global warming, and it is clear we face future summers that will be different from the summers most of us

remember. The lazy or vigorous enjoyment of our mountains, streams, and lakes under blue bird skies may become the exception rather than the expectation. We may find ourselves planning to flee to less flammable landscapes in the summer just as residents of our large urban centers regularly flee to cooler climates in the heat of summer.

There are some who still cling to the belief that all of this wildfire is avoidable if we would just let our timber industry back into our forests to remove a good number of the trees before they catch fire and burn. That, they argue, would reduce the fuels that are feeding the fires that threaten our homes and choke our valleys with suffocating smoke.

The foolishness of that position can be seen in some of the largest and most threatening fires in Western Montana. Consider the Jocko Lakes fire that periodically has threatened hundreds of homes in the Placid and Seeley Lakes areas. That fire has been ripping through some of the most heavily logged and roaded Plum Creek and US Forest Service lands in all of western Montana. The landscape has a scalped look and is honey combed with logging roads. That has not kept the fire from sweeping towards hundreds of homes and forcing repeated evacuations.

The largest of the Western Montana fires, at 100,000 acres, the Chippy Creek fire burning between the Thompson and Little Bitterroot Rivers north of Plains, is also burning through lands heavily logged and roaded by both Plum Creek and the US Forest Service. On Missoula's doorstep, the Black Cat fire burning between Evaro and Frenchtown has burned through roaded grasslands and forestlands that are entirely human dominated with scattered subdivisions and many logging roads and previous logged over areas. The lack of trees in the foot hills above the Clark Fork Valley did not

keep the fire from making a spectacular run through the new subdivisions that have sprouted in those grasslands.

Increasingly, we are not primarily fighting wildfires. What we are primarily doing is seeking to protect human lives and homes from wildfire. If the fire is located in a remote location and unlikely to spread toward human settlements and homes, the fires are allowed to burn. After all, our forests and grasslands evolved with fire and need periodic fire to keep them healthy, productive, and safe for a broad range of plants and wildlife. Wildfires are not just some rogue destructive force threatening our forests and grasslands.

If you look at where we have deployed the thousands of fire fighters and are making the most determined efforts to stop or divert the fires, it is areas of heavy human use and habitation. Firefighters put a tremendous amount of effort into trying to save people's homes. So far this year they have been amazingly successful despite the proximity of many of the fires to human settlements.

It is here, in the human dominated landscapes, where human effort can make a difference in reducing the property losses due to wildfire. Home lots and homes that have been designed to resist ignition from ground fire and wind-borne embers can survive the passage of wildfire. As the fire begins to threaten, homeowners and fire fighters can also treat the home and lot to increase its likelihood of survival. That was dramatically clear when the Black Cat fire outside of Frenchtown swept through several subdivisions. Only a few unoccupied or abandoned buildings were burned.

Focusing our efforts on protecting homes and communities makes sense. Doing most of the work before a fire is on our doorsteps is also critical if we are ever going to

contain the costs of managing wildfires. But as more and more people choose to live within fire-dominated landscapes, at some point the tax bill for that protection is going to have to shift to those citizens. Just as city dwellers have to pay for their own fire protection and have to put up with building codes aimed at guarding against home fires and their spread, ex-urban residents who choose to live in flammable grasslands and forestlands are going to have to pick up the tab for their own protection, both in the form of regulations governing where they live and what they build and in the form of higher taxes to pay for the hundreds of millions of dollars that are spent each year protecting them from the consequences of their own dangerous choice of residential location.