

Cattlemen Fed Up with Fires

Washington cattlemen blame state and federal agencies for their livelihoods being jeopardized by large wildfires.

By Dan Wheat, Capital Press, 11.20.15



Vic Stokes, Twisp, Wash., rancher, speaks on wildfire panel at the Washington Cattlemen's Association annual meeting near Cle Elum, Wash., Nov. 12. To his right is Okanogan County Commissioner Jim DeTro, Curlew rancher Doug Grumbach and Centerville rancher Neil Kayser.

CLE ELUM, Wash. — A panel of ranchers at the Washington Cattlemen's Association annual meeting unloaded frustration and anger at state and federal agencies, saying their land management practices and inept fire fighting are to blame for massive losses of rangeland, cattle and fencing in the last two years.

The losses threaten the cattle industry, particularly in Okanogan County where more than 1 million acres burned in the last two summers.

That totals one third of the entire acreage of the county which, at 5,315 square miles, is larger than some states. Millions of dollars of public and private timber have been lost. About 1,000 head of cattle died in the Carlton fire last year in Okanogan County while the tally so far this year is under 300. Hundreds of miles of fencing were lost both years but probably the biggest impact is loss of grazing on thousands of acres for several years causing ranchers to buy more hay and sell off cattle.

“There’s got to be some change or this will ruin our industry,” said Vic Stokes, a Twisp rancher, who lost 250 head of cattle and 90 percent of his grazing in the Carlton fire.

The convention panel, Nov. 12 at Suncadia Resort, faulted the U.S. Forest Service and state agencies for not thinning forests and not allowing grazing which would reduce fire fuel loads.

The ranchers said local firefighters do good work but are restrained when state and federal agencies take over. The panel cited multiple examples of state Department of Natural Resources and USFS-led interagency fire teams refusing to attack fires last summer, watching them burn and in two cases backburning private timber and pastures without permission of the landowner or in direct defiance of their pleas not to do it.

Contacted later, USFS and DNR spokespeople said those agencies are working to reduce fire loads by thinning and prescribed burns.

Cathy Dowd, a USFS Okanogan-Wenatchee National Forest spokeswoman, said when the USFS doesn’t attack a fire its because there is no safe place from which to do so.

“Folks may not think we are doing anything, but we are definitely managing and monitoring from the air and in other ways and looking for ways to engage and suppress it,” Dowd said. “All this year’s fires were suppression fires, meaning the goal was to put them out,” she said.

DNR Northeast Region Manager Loren Torgerson said it was the toughest fire season the state has experienced, that firefighters risk their lives daily and three died doing so. “We saved many people, homes and ranches and earned their heartfelt thanks,” he said.

He said DNR needs more resources for preventative thinning and fire fighting and urged the Cattlemen’s Association to support that request.

Traditional fire suppression slowly begins behind fires and fire lines are built along flanks, Jim DeTro, Okanogan County commissioner and a smoke jumper from 1967 to 1973, said at the meeting.

“Eventually, the beast wanes. They encircle it and claim victory but only when nature allows. But the dragon takes its toll. Firefighters earn overtime and hazardous duty pay and they accept failure and loss with no regard to how the loss could be prevented on the next event,” DeTro said.

In Pine Creek, Gerald Scholz and other ranchers built a fire line with bulldozers that held, but agencies wanted to backburn the area, including private ground, DeTro said. They did so even after they promised not to in response to Scholz’s pleas, he said.

The next day DeTro confronted the official who said he wouldn’t backburn and he “said I didn’t understand the difference between backburn and backfire,” DeTro said.

A backburn is suppose to be relatively small, but the area was not tied together by fire lines, he said. “We warned them about the wind, but they did it anyway and it got away from them,” he said.

“Guys are getting way to happy with their drip torches (for backburning). If these agencies have that kind of attitude they might as well backfire to the Pacific Ocean,” DeTro said.

One third of the 600,000 acres burned this year in the Okanogan, Tunk Block and North Star fires was caused by backburning, he said.

Craig Vejraska, an Omak rancher and former Okanogan County commissioner, said agencies burned his private timber, which is his bank account, without asking permission and just a week ago burned what grass he had left to complete a blackened area.

“It could have saved our bacon and now we have 700 cattle looking for a home,” he said.

“We should take the incident command away and give it and the money to the Riverside Fire Department. They put out a hell of a lot more fire than DNR,” he said.

He yelled at two USFS officials for being part of the problem. Earlier they talked about forest management and they responded that was their arena, not fire fighting.

Dowd, of the USFS, didn’t know anything about Scholz and Vejraska’s claims. DNR spokeswoman Sandra Kaiser said DNR staff contacted Scholz but he was unable to provide any names or details about his claims. Scholz could not be reached for comment, but his wife, Bobbi, said she’s not aware of DNR contacting him. The fire had been stopped, then DNR backburned in the wind despite their pleas not to, destroying their timber and shed full of hay, she said.

“We can blame USFS all we want. USFS is dysfunctional, but who makes it so?” asked state Rep. Joel Kretz, R-Wauconda, and a rancher. He said Congress has to change forest management.

“We are in a critical situation right now where virtually every rancher is burned out. We need every inch of WDFW land made available for grazing to maintain an industry,” Vejraska said.

While state agencies are asking for more money to fight fires, Kretz said they shouldn’t get any until they perform.

In the 2014 Carlton fire, “huge (public) resources sat in town,” Brewster, while Gebbers Farms bulldozers and 180 Gebbers orchard sprayers with water saved the town, Kretz said.

“If you look at a map of that fire, you see a big green donut hole in the middle. Part of it was private (Gebbers) and part of it was public that had been thinned. But the big difference was Gebbers crews got in there and actually fought fire,” Kretz said.

“I went up on the fire with Gebbers folks. We saw occasional state rigs looking at maps and smoke and when they did see any smoke they headed for town. Gebbers headed toward the fire,” he said.

“What you hear from the state is that it’s catastrophic. That they can’t fight them. They talk safety. You can’t go in when its crowning out (in tree tops) at 40 mph winds, but watching Gebbers they didn’t go into the teeth of the fire but got ahead of it and didn’t put in scratchy thin fire lines but two D-8s (Caterpillar dozers) side by side,” Kretz said.

“I saw a complete and utter inability (by fire officials) to make a decision. They would say you can put in a fire line but can you use a D-4, not a D-8? They’re worried about environmental impacts, but it’s a fire,” he said.

DNR officials have a “smug” attitude when questioned later, saying they’ve heard stories and will have to run them down to see if they are true, he said.

Local residents had a fire line around the Cougar Flat fire, which became part of the Carlton fire, but were waived off by the DNR which then let it get out of hand, Alex Thomason, a Brewster attorney has said.

The DNR is directed by state Public Lands Commissioner Peter Goldmark who is also an Okanogan rancher. There’s “a lot of sentiment against him” in Okanogan over politics, DeTro said.

“We have the crown jewel of initial attack in our backyard, the North Cascades Smoke Jumper base in Winthrop, but it’s under-utilized because of too much bureaucracy,” DeTro said.

He has audio tapes, he said, proving smoke jumpers on their way from the base to Oregon spotted the starts of the Carlton fire from the air but were told to keep going to Oregon by interagency dispatchers in Wenatchee.

Kretz said he passed a bill in the Legislature last year that allows people to fight fires on public lands.

“We have to get back to locals grabbing their tools and fighting fires. I had a bill to let counties opt out of (the state) fire suppression tax and use it for their own resources. We will run more bills this year,” he said.

Doug Grumbach, a Ferry County rancher near Curlew, said a decision was made to let large portions of the Colville National Forest burn, including 33 percent of his grazing allotment. He said he’s suspicious but doesn’t know if proposals to designate the area as wilderness had anything to do with letting it burn.

He said he lost 21 cows and miles of fencing.

“You do everything you can to save these animals and to lose them is devastating. There needs to be a change. I don’t ever want to go through this again. It ages you real fast,” Grumbach said.

Neil Kasyer, a Centerville rancher near Mt. Adams in southcentral Washington, said he was moving cattle out of the way of fire for four days before he saw anyone trying to put it out.

“DNR and tribal were bickering over who was in charge. Neither wanted to step up because they didn’t know if they would get reimbursed until it was big enough,” he said.

The fire burned some 55,000 acres around the base of the mountain for 20 days until rain put it out, he said.

He’s still looking for some of his 700 head of cattle, he said. A lot of riparian wildlife habitat has been destroyed for years by the wildfires, he said.

“More money (for fire suppression) won’t help. What will help is controlling the fuel load, changing forest practices and getting locals back on initial

attack,” Kasyer said. “Sitting there watching it for four days, deciding which way it will go and how big you want it to get is not the answer.”