

Glenda Wiles

From: Jackie Kucera [bkpr@amerion.com]
Sent: Friday, November 15, 2013 7:36 AM
To: Ravalli County Commissioners
Subject: Website Email -
Attachments: Nov 2013 Letter to Rep Steve Daines.pdf

Commissioners,

Attached is a copy of a letter sent to Congressman Daines from the West Fork Volunteer Fire Dept. for your information.

Sincerely,

*Jackie Kucera
West Fork Volunteer Fire Dept*

Nov 10, 2013

Rep. Steve Daines
206 Cannon H013
Washington DC 20515

Having had some time to reflect on the events that members of this department have witnessed this summer related to the Gold Pan fire complex, we feel it incumbent upon us to respond with our thoughts, comments and recommendations.

The Selway- Bitterroot Wilderness Area is located in the central Idaho Mountains, bounded on the east by the Idaho-Montana border. The Magruder Corridor road passes through the wilderness area for a distance of approximately 100 miles beginning at Nez Perce Pass on the Idaho-Montana border and ending near the highway leading to Elk City, Idaho.

On July 19th of this year, several West Fork Fire Department members, traveling through the Magruder Corridor, witnessed smoke coming from a fire in the Selway- Bitterroot Wilderness Area. This smoke was seen from Kim Creek Saddle, the Magruder murder site over-look and the Salmon Mountain area. It was obvious from the observations that the fire causing this smoke was very small, probably less than 50 acres. This fire could have been contained and extinguished if prudent action had been taken at that time. However, a decision made by the Bitterroot National Forest, West Fork District Supervisor to allow the fire to burn resulted in the fire progressing to the point that it ultimately crossed the boundary between the Wilderness Area and the Bitterroot National Forest covering over 43,000 acres. A massive effort ensued which resulted in the expenditure of over \$15,000,000 of taxpayer funds, money which the Federal Government does not have, and will in fact have to borrow in order to pay the bills.

This Department questions the rationale of allowing this fire to burn from two basic premises. First, the "let it burn" policy of the U.S. Forest Service, especially regarding fires in Wilderness areas, fails to take into account the many and varied circumstances which can and do exist in most areas and instances. In this case, this fire occurred in a fuel rich area upwind of non-wilderness National Forest and highly valuable privately owned property, very early in the fire season. It should have been obvious to the District Supervisor that the risk for this fire to spread into areas outside of the Wilderness Area and ultimately to threaten private property was very great. Factors such as the location and likely direction of advance of this fire, coupled with the fact that this fire occurred at such an early date in the fire season, should have resulted in a decision to stop this fire while it was still small enough to insure success in that effort.

Second, the District Supervisor, apparently acting on his own, made a decision without consulting the West Fork Fire Department, the Painted Rocks Fire Department or other departments or agencies, which would ultimately be affected by that decision. This decision resulted in the mobilization of several Type 1 and Type 2 firefighting teams, and varied and vast mobilization of privately owned resources including expensive aviation assets and ultimately the expenditure of in excess of \$15,000,000. In addition to the above listed resources, considerable time, expense and effort was expended by volunteers of the West Fork and Painted Rocks Fire Departments, as well as the Ravalli County Sheriff Department personnel, the American Red Cross and other organizations.

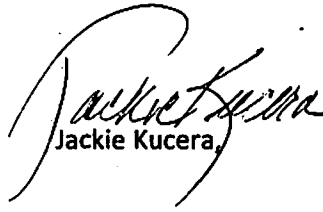
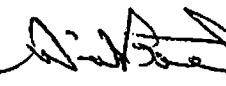
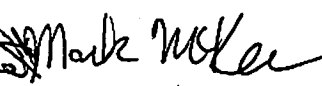


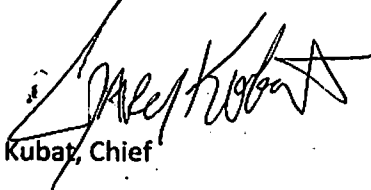
It seems unfathomable that one man, the West Fork District Supervisor, is able to make a decision which affects so many people and costs so much money, money that the Federal Government does not have. The very people who are burdened with paying for the costs resulting from the decision of one federal government employee are not consulted in making that decision. This situation is simply not acceptable to the majority of citizens.

The "let it burn" policy which has been enforced by the Forest Service for approximately 30 years is essentially a "one size fits all" policy which simply does not work in many cases. We urge you to work to change the current policies regarding wild land fires on public lands. Public lands are owned and financed by "the people", not the government agencies such as the Forest Service or Bureau of Land Management and the policies developed and administered by these agencies must address and include the input of the citizens who live and are most affected by these policies. For example, regarding wild land fires, the Forest Service must be required to formally adopt policies in which the Forest Service will be required to enlist and involve the input from local agencies including county officials, fire departments, law enforcement and other pertinent organizations. Wild land fire protection policies and guidelines can then be established which will take into account the situations which exist in the particular communities which are affected. The current "let it burn" policy is outdated as it does not take into account the poor health condition of much of the forest land in the northern rockies, nor does it factor in the economic realities of a Federal Government which has saddled its citizens with trillions of dollars of debt. This must change.

It is recommended that you spearhead the organization of an effort to change the policies of the Forest Service regarding wild land fire protection. We believe that such an effort would be met with enthusiasm from local departments and organizations involved in public safety. We ask that you consider these recommendations and respond with your comments.

Sincerely,

West Fork Rural Volunteer Fire District Board of Trustees and Fire Chief


Jackie Kucera,

Dick Bonnett,

Mark McGee,

Kent Niles,

Dean Lagerstrom,

Gary Kubat, Chief

cc: Ravalli County Commissioners, Ron Stoltz, Greg Chilcott, J.R. Iman, Jeff Burrows, Suzy Foss
Ravalli County Sheriff Chris Hoffman,
Ravalli County Fire Warden Brad Mohn