



Northern Rockies Ledger

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

Picking Our Battles

#2 - August 2, 2007. Over the past few years, a number of large, long-duration fires were managed with the conventional suppression objective of total perimeter control. These were the fires that we knew only a good snow would extinguish, but we kept at it anyway. Week after week, large numbers of people, aircraft and equipment were no longer available to smaller and emerging fires, and on those kinds of fire they were only minimally effective. Lesson Learned: Trying to overwhelm a fire that can only be put out with wet weather is ineffective and literally costs millions of our tax dollars.

Initial attack with quick perimeter control remains the highest priority strategy unless the initial fire assessment reveals no escape routes and no safety zones for the firefighters. On these fires we may have to wait and monitor the activity by air until it reaches a place where we can safely and effectively fight the fire.

When we can initial attack a fire safely, we still use our tried and true strategy of building fireline for perimeter control and we're about 98% successful. Unfortunately, the few fires that escape our initial best efforts turn into those large, dangerous fires likely to burn for weeks or until we get a change in fuels or weather.

In northern Idaho and Montana we are experiencing these kinds of large, long-duration incidents. The current unforgiving fire behavior and the rugged country where the fires occur are limiting what we can safely do. You may hear that fires this year are 'resistant to control'. That means they are burning intensely in any direction they want to, regardless of wind direction and

topography. They are active day and night and burn right through the water and retardant we use. We don't like to admit that more money and resources will not put these kinds of fires out without a break in the vegetation or the weather, but that's the current situation.

So armed with past lessons learned, we are changing the playbook with different strategies in the Northern Rockies.

We are keeping our most effective assets like aircraft and engines available for initial attack, and moving resources assigned to large fires so they can help on new fires or work on other large fires where they can be effective. We are being flexible as the conditions change.

To steer the fires away from infrastructure and communities, we may build fireline where we can and/or conduct a burn-out to rob the fire of burnable fuels. As some firefighters work to steer the fire, others help local fire and law enforcement personnel to protect specific areas such as power lines, historic structures or communities adjacent to or within the fire area.

We have long-term plans that identify specific actions we need to take during the life of these challenging fires and where those points are on the land. The plans identify the values to be protected, the tactics to be used to protect those values in a safe and cost effective manner, and the conditions and areas where we can again become aggressive with our suppression efforts.

Using these different approaches will get us through a very long 'fire season' while keeping people safe, fighting fire when we can actually make a difference, and spending money wisely.

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