

Through thick and thin

By JANE RIDER of the Missoulian

Heeding the lessons of 2000, communities work to protect their homes from fire

SULA - In October 2000, when memories of flames flaring over a ridge just a half mile away were still fresh in his neighbors' minds, Red Hamilton sent a letter to all 160 leaseholders of Springer Memorial Park.

The one-page message reminded those living in the secluded enclave 15 miles up the East Fork how fortunate they were to have escaped serious harm just two months earlier.

A giant humidifier fire crews created using about 41,000 feet of hose to shower Springer and the adjacent Bonanza neighborhood with about 6,000 gallons of water per minute helped.

So did a lot of luck.

"Now that things are somewhat back to normal, the overall message seems to be that areas like ours are going to have to protect themselves in the future," wrote Hamilton, park administrator.

He and others who manage the park saw the fires of 2000 as a wake-up call.

The small community of military veterans tucked away from the rest of the world would soon embark on a large-scale thinning operation to protect its 70 or so homes.

Private contractor Craig Thomas and crews began work in spring 2001 and completed the job in June 2002. They removed about 1,400 tons of logs up to 4.5 inches in diameter, 116 tons of corral-sized poles, 121 tons of limbs for pulp making and about 1,285 tons of smaller material ground up for fuel.

Volunteers from the Bitterroot Interagency Community Recovery Team also trimmed trees, piled brush and burned about 1,100 slash piles.

In an area where residents valued their privacy so much that many streets weren't named nor addresses posted, Hamilton knew the plan might meet some resistance. Thinning trees means people's cabins will become more visible.

But he and the Hamilton VFW Post 1430, which owns the 159-acre park named after World War II veteran Billie Springer, felt it was too great of a risk to maintain the status quo. They had the authority to take action since residents lease the land that they built their cabins on.

"During the wildfires this area was a regular jungle," he said. It still has plenty of trees, he noted, casting a look across the neighborhood where many large ponderosa pines still stand tall and ample shade covers the park.

Out of 160 leaseholders, only one strongly disagreed with the project, Hamilton said.

"If God would have given us a guarantee that fires would never come again, we'd all like our trees back, but by and large, leaseholders realized it was something that needed to be done," he said.

As another wildfire season heats up in western Montana, residents who choose to live in the trees are once again hearing a lot about the need to create defensible space, thin trees and reduce brush.

The message isn't a new one.

In the Bitterroot Valley, where residents endured one of the worst wildfire seasons on record in 2000, many landowners have taken the advice and launched numerous thinning and fuel reduction projects. Businesses started up or retooled their operations to provide such services. Before 2000, less than a half-dozen contractors offered forest restoration services. In 2003, at least 17 were in the business.

The efforts are most apparent in neighborhoods that narrowly escaped approaching flames in 2000.

Foresters hear a variety of reasons why some landowners still haven't taken action.

They don't have the energy or financial resources to do the work.

They won't give up the privacy that an overgrown landscape affords them, regardless of the risks that may pose.

Or they aren't convinced that cutting and thinning the forest is appropriate or necessary.

But when wildfire approaches people's back yards as in Springer Memorial or the town of Pinesdale, they are a lot more motivated to do something.

The 600 or so residents of Pinesdale, a small community just four miles northwest of Hamilton at the base of the Bitterroot Mountains, had a front-row seat for the Blodgett fire of 2000. On the fateful day of Aug. 7, the blaze made a run toward their town, torching trees and spitting hot embers thousands of feet ahead of its path.

The blaze scorched hillsides and destroyed several structures downwind of the main fire.

But that wasn't all the damage done.

When raindrops finally fell, Tom Allsop, a Pinesdale resident and manager of the town's water system, got a good look at the stream water flowing out of the Mill and Cow creeks' drainages.

"Those few drops brought down all kinds of dirty water, just full of silt," he said. "Had we sustained that kind of fire in the Sheafman Creek drainage (just one drainage to the north), it would have been a very difficult situation for us to still have clean drinking water."

So to protect the town's water supply, its 95 homes and the forest that remained, Pinesdale approached the Forest Service about a tree thinning and forest fuel reduction project on nearby public and private lands.

"We wanted to have it cleaned up above us, too," Allsop said.

Residents hired a contractor to treat about 100 private acres using the state's standard for noncommercial thinning to reduce hazardous fuels which calls for maintaining at least 10 feet between tree crowns. Crews began work in Pinesdale in spring 2001 and completed the job by July 2002. State and federal grants helped the town defray some of the cost.

"It was necessary and we will do more," Allsop said. "If fire came through now, it wouldn't leave it all barren and wouldn't kill all of the trees."

Pinesdale is still a wooded community, he said, but the density of those woods isn't as great.

"If you look up from the road, you can't even tell where it's been done and where it hasn't," he said.

Allsop is still waiting for the Forest Service to finish work on the adjacent public lands, a project slowed by environmental study and a federal approval process interrupted by an appeal filed by an environmental group.

"They have a very cumbersome organization," he said.

Stevensville District Ranger Jeanne Higgins said the Forest Service will thin trees and apply a low-intensity burn to about 78 acres on its side of the boundary line. Crews began work in spring and will do more in fall.

"We'll follow up when burning conditions allow," Higgins said.

The Pinesdale project is one of many that the Forest Service has worked on with private landowners since the fires of 2000, she said. It left about 50 trees per acre, wider spacing between crowns than what some people might want, Higgins said.

"But it varies depending on what the landowner wants to see," she said. "The forester will try to convey to them that there is a tradeoff if they do it this way versus that way."

In a lot of cases, people thin their own property and then approach the national forest about treating public lands nearby to improve their ability to protect their homes, Higgins said.

"We've got several cross-boundary projects we're working on now," she said. "Our challenge is keeping up with their requests."

Nancy Schneider, a part-time resident up the East Fork east of Sula, lived in northern California 25 years ago where clearcut hillsides weren't unusual. So when she heard, and then saw, a crew of 15 workers with chain saws thinning the national forest just on the other side of her lot line, she panicked.

"That's what I envisioned - clearcuts," she said.

The crews were thinning a 300-foot-wide area around the Springer Memorial and Bonanza neighborhoods to provide greater protection against wildfire. When they finished, Schneider said she thought the final result looked good.

Schneider, who owns 18 acres west of Springer Memorial, has thinned, pruned and cleared brush on her property since 2000. She plans to do more. She said she tries to tread lightly on the land, but recognizes a need to do reduce fuels on the forest.

"There's a balance," she said. "You don't want clearcuts, but you also want some protection."

Schneider chose not to take grant money because she didn't want to thin her trees to the level that the state and federal grants required (the 10 feet between tree crowns). She and her husband, Dan, did the work on their own.

When a few neighbors get together to trim trees, haul brush and thin the forest, the final product can draw knocks on their doors from others in the neighborhood interested in learning more.

"Once they see what it looks like, a lot of people are more interested in doing it than they were before," said Higgins, of the Stevensville Ranger District. "Of course, there are always people who don't want to change their landscape."

Pam Gouse, of 792 Sheafman Creek Road, moved to Montana 15 years ago from a wetter climate where wood is more likely to rot than burn. She wanted trees and horse pasture, and found 33 acres that encompassed both.

The Totem Peak fire of 1988, which burned more than 7,000 acres northwest of Pinesdale, was her first lesson in Montana's wildfire season. The Blodgett fire of 2000 was a refresher course that changed the way she viewed managing her property.

"At first I was reluctant to take out the trees," she said. "I was one of those people who was more hands-off."

But seeing pictures of work done in other places changed her mind.

"Before 2000, I think people thought if they asked a fire expert to look at their property, we all imagined they'd tell you to cut everything down within a 200-foot radius of your house," she said.

That isn't the case.

"It looks natural afterwards," she said. "That's what I value. I don't like a manicured park look. That's not what I'm after ... but I am after a healthy forest."

The land Gouse bought was overgrazed many years ago. When the livestock left, dense patches of ponderosa pine grew back - trees just 3 to 4 inches apart.

"It was abnormal and unhealthy," she said.

Add decades of fire suppression and land managers cooked up a recipe for wildfire disaster.

"We did unnatural suppression for so many years, we've got ourselves in a pickle," she said. "Now we have to have a hand in restoring it."

Gouse knows firsthand that many people move to Montana for more privacy. Trees often provide a lot of that seclusion, she said. But oftentimes newcomers arrive from wetter climates and don't realize it isn't safe to completely surround yourself with trees in this part of the country.

In 2002, Gouse and three other adjacent residents launched a project on their private properties. Two neighbors across the street also joined them. Combined, the six residents own a total of 84 acres.

They applied for state and federal grants through Bitter Root Resource Conservation and Development Area Inc., a nonprofit organization made up of a network of community volunteers who encourage conservation and wise use of natural resources across ownership.

The program, coordinated by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, is based on the belief that local citizens can successfully develop and carry out an action-oriented plan to better their local societies, economies and environment.

Gouse said forest officials identified the Sheafman Creek drainage as a high-priority area after the fires of 2000 largely because of its close proximity to the populated town of Pinesdale.

"They came so close to losing a lot of homes up there," she said. "Luckily the drainage wasn't damaged. We didn't want to go that way and decided any work that could be done, should be done there."

The RC&D approved grant dollars for Gouse and her neighbors who are still clearing brush and thinning their properties. The residents must complete their work as prescribed by foresters or they forfeit the funds, which pay about 75 percent of their cost. (In other cases, grants often don't pick up as large of a share. Usually, landowners can expect to pay for at least half of treatment costs.)

While Gouse hasn't finished the work, she is already pleased with its results. Neighbors driving by have also stopped and asked her about the project.

"I think it's a win-win situation," she said. "The landowner gets something for doing the work and the area gets a healthy environment overall. It won't carry fire as easily. What I'm doing helps my neighbor as well as me."

Since 2000, the RC&D has paid out about \$366,000 in federal and state grants to about 60 different landowners to thin about 950 private acres in the Bitterroot Valley. The parcels range in size from under five acres to 160 acres.

"And there are many more under way right now," said Jim Freeman, RC&D president and a retired forester of 29 years. "Our first priority is to work with groups of landowners. You get a bigger bang for your buck that way."

"We try to stress to landowners that we don't pay our firefighters; they are volunteers," he said. "We need to provide them with the best chance of defending homes and saving lives, including their own."

Nan Christianson, the Bitterroot National Forest's acting public information officer, said private landowners are showing greater interest in thinning their forests. The interest peaked in 2001, she said, and waned a bit in 2002 when the fires of 2000 became more of a distant memory.

"But the positive side is the landowners who have taken action have become tremendous role models for people in their neighborhoods and are seeing greater interest from adjoining neighbors," she said.

Forest managers are also receiving greater community support for their efforts to reduce hazardous fuels on public lands.

"In the past we were largely met with reluctance," Christianson said. "None of us could comprehend the dangers until 2000 ... Now the public is supportive, friendly and in some cases almost demanding of us to take action."

"They expect us to treat lands in the interface so their efforts aren't for naught," she said.

"It's not like someone turned on a light switch, but the light is getting brighter," said Matt Arno, when asked if the public on a larger scale is becoming more interested in thinning the forest on public and private land.

"People are slowly saying, 'gee, this makes sense,' " he said. "I think private landowners are. Especially the ones who live in the woods and feel like the woods is part of their home and are concerned about their forest as well as their house."

"But I'm not sure if the public in general is," he said.

Arno, whose business Woodland Restoration Inc. serves western Montana, does restoration forestry. He's in the midst of a 3,000-acre restoration project in the Rock Creek area now that will likely take about six years to complete.

Arno hasn't seen a large enough flurry of interest in restoration forestry that would create a whole new industry, but he does think some landowners are changing their minds on the value of the work.

"For people who were right in the thick of it, who were seeing it, that was definitely a motivator," he said.

But more education and awareness is needed, especially as it relates to low-elevation forests on public lands, he said.

"We're losing old-growth replacement and big beautiful trees to beetles and fires and it is just a shame," he said.