

Fire on the North Fork

(6/28-7/6/2015)

Jones Canyon Fire

-Graves Creek

-Mallory Creek

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On Sunday afternoon, June 28, 2015, a thunderstorm rolled through our area. Lightning ignited a fire. The following week as many as 360 firefighters aided by two dozers and dozens of engine crews caravanned down our road and held that fire to just over 1000 acres of BLM & Umatilla National Forest lands. Three separate trees within the fire showed significant lightning damage, suggesting a multi-armed lightning bolt or a cluster of strikes. Fire started and spread out on the bench top of Jones Canyon and traveled down into the creek bottoms of Graves Creek and Mallory Creek. Favorable, relatively calm winds aided the firefighters to contain the fire, preventing it from crossing the North Fork of the John Day River into Wrightman Canyon, our home area. A key role was played by three helicopters that attacked flames in steep terrains. The extreme heat, however, took its toll on firefighters – reaching 99F to 106F degrees every brutal day of the week. Paramedics were on hand to treat crew members for heat exhaustion.

The photo above reminds us of a similar happening in a previous bench-top fire across this river. In that incident a few years ago, we watched the fire at 10:00 P.M. travelling away from us along the ridge, and we commented that it looked like we could retire for the night without too much worry for ourselves. At that moment, a burning snag on the edge of the ridge fell, tumbling down the rim rock and continuing to cascade downwards lighting multiple fires as it passed through brush and junipers. In an instant, there was fire much too near us. Like in the past, the current fire was shocking in how quickly a whole new area, far removed from the bench top above, went up in flames. Nothing less than helicopter drops on flames in such steep terrain could hope to stop this kind of sudden, far reaching expansion of the fire. Thank God, there was very little wind to fan the flames. Today we remain safe in our canyon with gratitude to the firefighters who extinguished this latest threat to the wild lands, wildlife and homes of our region.

- Kay & Terry Steele

July 9, 2015

Jones Canyon Fire – 06/28-07/06/2015

2:40 p.m. Thunderstorm struck on the North Fork of John Day River and Wrightman Canyon area at approximately 2:40 PM. (No photo.) Later investigation showed three trees with lightning strike damage on west side of the river.

4:53 p.m. Fire along upper ridge above Graves Creek. It appeared that two points of origin were burning - above top right of image and left of this image. Cannot see further west into Jones Canyon where the fire agency gave as the origin of this incident.



Burning on the bench top above Graves Creek – 4:53 PM, 6/28/15.

5:24 p.m. Fire runs downhill against uphill draft as helicopters drops water on leading downhill run of flames. Ground fuels were drought dry, feeding the fire's edge.



6:48 p.m. Within an hour and a half later, the fire moved down hill into Graves Creek and into the adjacent hillside (right) towards the Mallory Creek drainage. The speed of this shocked us, especially because there was almost no wind, just uphill drafting.



7:53 p.m. Three hours into fire activity, flames spread in all directions including south towards the North Fork of JD River, becoming visible above the rim rock point. We were thinking, "If it jumps the river we're toast!"



8:26 p.m. Part of Mallory Creek drainage fully engulfed in flames from a lightning strike that hit on bench top (top-left) approximately seven hours earlier. During all this time, helicopters and crews were aggressively attacking the fire. This photo was taken from our yard with a telephoto lens. Just the same, it was very close to us.



Days 2 thru 8: Heavy helicopter activity occurred every day. Besides all the hundreds of people on the ground digging the fire line, helicopters were critical to douse burning snags and fingers of forest burning in the very steep terrain that drops off the bench tops in this country. Hitting the flames hard late in the day, three helicopters accessed the local swimming hole to fill their pumpkins (water bladders).





Terry waters the garden as we watch the fire looming in the background. The fate of our canyon is truly in the wind, and in the relentless attack by the Oregon Department of Forestry. In the end, both worked in our favor.



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Day Nine: Jones Canyon Fire viewed from Wrightman Canyon - 100% Contained and announced extinguished. (July 7, 2015.)



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After experiencing our fire early in the fire season, with bone dry, hot conditions and no wind, we were in constant fear of another dry lightning storm striking our area. We were so fortunate this first time – there were plenty of resources available to aggressively attack this event. That would not be the case later in the season.

When we saw the smoke boil up on our southern horizon that extremely windy day last August 13th, our stomachs went into knots. We knew it was catastrophic in scale. It was more than 60 miles away as the crow flies, but its enormous plume made it appear as though it was just over the next ridge. I worked 28 days on that fire. One assignment involved transporting a senior fire behavior scientist to Washington State. This gave us several hours of conversation about the conditions of fires across the west. He told me that, based on historic records, the Canyon Creek Complex Fire was a once in a thousand year event...hopefully not to become a new norm. If more people who were victimized by it had first experienced our windless drought driven fire on the North Fork, they would have no problem believing that everything humanly possible was done to suppress the flames that hellacious winds bellowed into a monster fire.

Today, it deeply saddens and disturbs me that there are people who exploit the painful emotions of loss experienced by victims of the Canyon Creek Complex Fire in order to further their political agenda – to blame all failures and tragedies on a federal agency, the US Forest Service. This is wrong. This is a time to look for opportunities to bring positive change - not toxic, self-defeating messaging. Repeatedly, I have heard the manager of the Malheur National Forest reach out, offer his attention, his willingness to listen and work with local residents. Our county sheriff, meanwhile, has not been willing to acknowledge the forest supervisor or reach out to help the community to heal. He has been entirely absent.

The tragedy of the Canyon Creek Complex Fire was not caused by negligence. It was caused by conditions that amounted to the perfect storm: drought conditions early in the season, excessive lightning throughout the region, limited resources available due to other fires in progress, and a dramatic weather event involving erratic, extreme winds. Even some areas of the forest that had been adequately thinned and cleared of slash burned into oblivion just like the untreated wilderness areas burned. It was a time like no other. For some people to assume they have the right answer and the only answer as to why the forest burned it has to be said, they are just plain wrong.