Friends of Hope Valley Newsletter

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For the preservation of the scenic, recreational, and historic use of Hope Valley and Alpine County’s eastern Sierra slope.

Wildland Fire in Alpine

By Jim Donald

By the time you read this in early December, the Washington Fire will have receded into distant memory, superseded by subsequent larger and more deadly fires in the Sierra and Coast Ranges. But, at 17,790 acres, it was big, it got our attention, and made news.

It was caused by a ‘smoker’ – a snag or deadfall hit by lightning – two weeks prior to the fire blowing up when winds and moisture levels reached optimum conditions on June 19, 2015. At 10,000 feet, on the east ridge of Silver Mountain at the top of Washington Canyon above the Lady Washington mine, the fire spread to surrounding fuels in a northeasterly direction.

By Saturday morning, the fire was estimated at 75 acres. Estimates then vary widely as the expected red flag warning – southwest winds 40, gusts 50 in wind prone areas – moved in. By dark Saturday, the fire had crossed the East Fork of the Carson River, the largest natural freeway in its path. By Sunday afternoon, driven by very strong winds, it had jumped Hwy 4 at Centerville and Hwy 89 at Monitor Junction and was now threatening Carson River Resort and Chalmers Mansion. It was also approaching the Indian Creek drainage off Poor Boy Road, three miles south of Markleeville.

Numerous hikes in various burn areas off Hwy’s 89, 4 and Wolf Creek Road show large variability in fire intensity ranging from complete burning of mineral soil to almost no damage at all. New, some four years later, burn areas are achieving good recovery with understory plants germinating and young saplings sending up new shoots. The areas of highest heat many stands of Jeffrey are dead and will not recover. Friends of Hope Valley recommends that the forest, as much as is safe and practical, be allowed to recover on its own.

The evacuation advisory for Markleeville came at about 5pm Sunday with a deputy advising to “be ready to go in 15 minutes if we come back again”. Apparently the reverse 911 system failed due to the interconnect between Alpine County Sheriff’s Office and Douglas dispatch. That has since been fixed according to county officials.

Monday night infra-red mapping showed the fire at 16,644 acres, a remarkable increase in size over two days of winds. On Tuesday the wind stopped. Markleeville was soaked in smoke, which cleared slowly as lighter winds returned. The air attack began with 11 helicopters and eight air tankers including the DC10 from Castle Air Base and a P-47 Neptune from Stead. It was impressive to watch the precision as the lead plane orbited over Markleeville to pick up each tanker and lead them into the drop zone.

Meanwhile ground crews, who had initially cut a line on the north side of the fire to protect the town, could now concentrate on accessible areas and work on containment. Within three days, aided by light winds and 1.7 inches of rain in some areas, the fire had been reduced to a smolder. The evacuation advisory was lifted, campgrounds re-opened and some sense of normal life returned. Ground crews were able to start pulling out, obliterating their tracks as they went, while hotshot crews and helicopter drops attacked hot-spots. Control, at 17,790 acres was declared on August 17. The final map can be viewed on Inciweb.nwcg.gov.

An Inter-agency BAER team (Burn Area Emergency Response) was sent in to assess hazards and recommend rehab strategy. Dozens of trees, rocks and debris flows (from the aforementioned rain) along the highways were cleared. It was noted during inspection that debris flows in the burn area were no greater than those in unburned areas so no widespread ground cover reseding is deemed necessary by the USFS. A final report is still pending and should include a comment period.

The burn areas opened up the forest and natural succession will establish ground cover first and then allow the forest to grow back, albeit slowly, over multiple decades. The snags and deadfalls will provide habitat for many birds and insects. The groundcover growth in the now open areas will likely enhance deer populations and, over time, many other species will benefit.

Friends of Hope Valley sincerely thanks all of the enthusiastic volunteers and encourages all to visit our website at friendsofhopevalley.org. There’s also a link to our page on the website and we encourage your posts and pictures.

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Photo courtesy of Philip Bellman
Fire, even intense wind driven crown fire, is a cleansing and renewal process that is a natural part of the ecosystem. There will be a greater need to learn to live with fire as drought and climate change continue. Radical changes in structure and function, and proper escape plans are necessary. Fuels reduction and other current techniques are helpful but are not a panacea. That beautiful wood house in the forest certainly seemed like a good idea then, but it's very much up to luck whether it survives with the prospects of increased fire danger.

Groundwater Management in Alpine County

In 1992, the California Legislature enacted the California Groundwater Management Act (AB 3030) to encourage local public agencies to adopt plans to manage groundwater resources within their jurisdiction. In 1994, the California Department of Water Resources (CWR) issued the California Water Code (CWC) with the intent to manage the "safe production, quality, and proper storage of groundwater." Ten years later, SB 1938 was signed into law, amending the CWC with required components of a Groundwater Management Plan (GWMP) for a public agency seeking state funds for groundwater projects administered through the Department of Water Resources. Included in the mandatory components of an AB 3030 GWMP:

- Monitoring and management of groundwater elevations, groundwater quality, metamorphic land surface subsidence, and changes in surface water flows and quality that directly affect groundwater levels or quality or are caused by pumping.
- Ecosystem protection, including the protection of wetlands, riparian areas, and migratory waterbird flyways.
- Protection of the mixing zone between groundwater and surface water.
- Management of surface water flows and quality that are sources of recharge to groundwater.

The Hope Valley Meadow Project is a collaboration between the Alpine County Board of Supervisors, the Alpine Alpine County Groundwater Agency (AWG), in cooperation with Friends of Hope Valley, to work to preserve the watersheds and natural environment of Alpine County. The overall goal of the Hope Valley Meadow Project is to restore the full range of aspen groves and sagebrush ecosystems to the Hope Valley meadow.

The Carson District of the Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest has produced a Scoping Document: Monitor Pass Habitat Restoration Project. The goal of the project is to conserve aspen groves and sagebrush habitat. I replied, "Recent research has shown a decrease in the aspen stands in our region due to drought, overgrazing, and especially fire. According to the Scoping Document, the project is also attempting to provide conditions that encourage recovery. During natural succession the aspen clones sprout well in direct sunlight, growing up toward the sun, and then shading the ground.

However, this benefits conifer’s shade tolerant seedlings, which then outgrow and shade out the aspens. The Project will assist the aspen in this competition for light by thinning the conifers within and without of the aspen stands. And secondly, the habitat of the sage grouse has been decreasing in this region, specifically in the Monitor Pass area, which is the heartland of the Sonoran/Sierra aspen and willow ecosystem. Grouse are an indicator species of the quality of these environments. "Are pinyons and junipers also conifer?" I asked, "I’m a bit confused."

The conifers involved in the successionary competition with the aspen are the mixed conifer community species of Jeffrey pine, white fir, and western juniper." I hopefully clarified. "They grow much taller than the aspens. The majority of these conifers within the aspen groves will be removed by methods that will cause the least disturbance to the natural environment. Legacy trees...mature, old-growth trees, will be left alone as these trees provide nesting sites for a large number of birds and aridual mammals. The confiers outside of the groves will be cut back; for a distance of approximately 1.5 times the existing aspen height. Cowhorns with a DBH (diameter at breast height) of up to 100 and within 100 to 150 feet of the edges of the aspen stand will also be culled. This thinning of the vegetation will be more pronounced on the south-facing sides of the groves, which are toward the sun and would therefore shade the aspen environment more than on the north sides.

"Build succession is the current course of things, shouldn’t they just let nature go its way?" Tigger asked while examining the bodies of different bugs attracted to the light. "The US Forest Service believes that: ‘Clean water will be the single most important commodity produced from national forest lands. It will totally eclipse timber.’" I remarked. Several of our county’s leaders have been asked this question. Their answers have been contradictory, to say the least.

In the context of national policy (Alpine County is 98% public land), the US Forest Service published field guides in 2012 to improve the awareness and management of groundwater-depen dent ecosystems for its 193 million acres of national forests and grasslands. They assume a connection between surface and groundwater sources, and emphasize sustaining groundwater-dependent ecosystems. Gordon Grant, a Research Hydrologist of the US Forest Service, believes that: “Clean water will be the single most important commodity produced from national forest lands. It will totally eclipse timber.”

The Alpine Aspen Festival is a celebration of the beauty and vital role of aspen groves in providing clean water to millions of Californians and Nevadans. The Aspen Festival is an important part of the groves’ migratory route between their summer and winter ranges. Furthermore, wildlife such as the conifer, in the aspen groves, legacy single-leaf pinyon and Utah juniper trees will be left alone, providing nesting sites for many of the pinyon/juniper dependent populations. “I answered as the bugle receded in the distance.

Habitat Restoration: A Conversation on a Cold Night

It was night, so getting cold as my brother from the City, Tigger, and I were sitting alone under the Alpine Aspen Festival tent, all the other people having gone home. I was reading by the light of a single Coleman lantern while the collection of chairs and tables in the tent. Outside of that light there was only the light of the stars.

“What are you reading?” Tigger asked, looking to conversation for calming company.

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