

November 9, 2007

## Swan Valley / Battle to weaken future forest fires is a group effort

By JOHN CRAMER of the Missoulian



*A Pyramid Mountain Lumber Co. forwarder picks up and stacks logs Tuesday as part of a thinning project in the Swan Lake Ranger District of the Flathead National Forest.*

*Photo by JOHN CRAMER/Missoulian*

CONDON - Throughout the forest here - from the sunny fringe to the dark interior, where homes and wildfires meet - America's new approach to managing fire and land development is playing out.

Leading the way Tuesday was John Ingebretson, who's been plying Western forests for more than three decades.

Ingebretson bounced along in a U.S. Forest Service pickup, leading a caravan of 20 federal, state and local agency officials, timber cutters, conservationists and landowners who came to learn more about an ongoing project to reduce fuels on 10,000

acres in the Swan Valley in the Flathead National Forest.

It's a picturesque place of snowy mountains and lush wetlands, one of the most biologically diverse in the West.

It's also a tinderbox where wildfires threaten overcrowded forests and timber company lands that are increasingly being carved up into homesites for the wealthy.

On the seat next to him, Ingebretson carries a laminated slice of a 329-year-old ponderosa pine.

The slice's blackened scars show that wildfires once swept through the forest every 14 years on average, clearing away brush, dead trees and an overabundance of saplings.

But the last significant fire scar was in 1883, presaging the Forest Service's 20th-century policy of suppressing all fires, even lightning-sparked ones that are part of the natural ecosystem.

As a fuels specialist, Ingebretson uses the laminated pine slice as one of the tools of his trade, teaching the public about the consequences of Smokey Bear's now-antiquated admonition to stamp out all forest fires.

The laminated tree slice is also one of the things that helps agency administrators and scientists formulate fire protection plans based on historical fire patterns, including where to reduce fuels, when to let wildfires burn themselves out and how to re-establish nature's cycle of low-intensity fires that burn mosaically - rather than firestorms that destroy even healthy, mature trees.

“Fire's a good thing,” Ingebretson said. “We've learned that the hard way. We don't want to eliminate it. We want to learn to live with it.”

In the Flathead forest, a partnership between the Forest Service, timber companies, homeowners and the nonprofit Swan Ecosystem Center is tackling the buildup of fuels in the Swan Lake Ranger District.

Land ownership in the Swan Valley is a checkerboard pattern. Plum Creek Timber Co. and the Flathead National Forest manage most of the land, about 80 percent. Smaller portions are managed by the Swan River State Forest and residential landowners.

The valley itself is home to about 900 people, although that number is growing as Plum Creek sells off its timberland for residential development.

After the 2000 wildfire fire season, the worst in Western history, the United States adopted a national fire plan that pushed for more fuel reduction.

The Swan hadn't had a large fire in 30 years, but agency officials and homeowners knew they had to do something when the Crazy Horse fire in 2003 and Holland Peak fire in 2006 each burned 12,000 acres.

Since 2003, the valley's fuel-reduction partnership has resulted in nearly 4,400 acres being thinned. Plans call for up to 6,300 more acres to be thinned by 2009. Proceeds from the timber sales go back into the Forest Service's stewardship program to further reduce local fuels. The Swan Ecosystem Center also is giving out federal grants to homeowners to thin their private woodlands.

It's a small part of the 265,000-acre ranger district, but it's a start, said Steve Brady, Swan Lake district ranger.

“Human plans and Mother Nature's plans, it's hard to make them dovetail, but that's what we're trying to do,” he said.

Betsey Ellis, who owns 14 acres along the Swan River with her husband, said her land has already been thinned. She attended Tuesday's field tour because her family's fate is tied to fellow landowners in the valley.

“If you live in the woods, you have to expect fire,” she said. “We're all connected in this.”

The group of 20 people walked through thinned areas, where Pyramid Mountain Lumber Co. was taking down lodgepole pines. The aftermath created a forest of yesteryear, where sunlight returned to the forest floor and trees of varying ages swayed in the wind.

Wally Bennett, a fire prevention manager with the Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation, expressed a common sentiment among wildland firefighters.

“My bread and butter is fighting fires, but I'm getting tired of seeing 300- to 400-foot flame lengths come off severe wildfires,” he said. “Unless we do more fuel reduction, the costs of fighting fires are going to astronomical.”

Ingebretson, 53, a lean gray-haired man, can trace his ancestors back six generations to Norway's woodlands.

His grandfather was a logger in the Pacific Northwest, where his job was to top off

giant trees as he clung to their swaying trunks hundreds of feet in the air.

Ingebretson keeps his feet on the ground in the Swan Valley, whether it's reducing fuels by thinning, slashing and prescribed burns for a few hundred dollars an acre or by going out as a wildland firefighter on fire lines, which costs taxpayers thousands of dollars an acre.

“We can pay a little now,” he said, “or a lot later.”

Reporter John Cramer can be reached at 523-5259 or at [johncramer@missoulian.com](mailto:johncramer@missoulian.com)