





Wildfire

Burning Ruth: The Questions of August

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Editor's Note: Evergreen colleagues and wildfire experts, Roger Jaegel and James Montgomery have cowritten a thoughtful and penetrating essay in which they ask some long overdue questions concerning the wildfire pandemic the grips the 11 western states.

Although their essay focuses on Ruth, a small northern California town leveled by the 2020 August Complex fire, the scenario they describe could unfold anywhere in the West. In fact, the scenario repeated itself last summer when the 963,000 acre Dixie Fire destroyed Greenville, another small northern California community.

You can watch Mr. Jaegel in action in a very instructive video currently posted on Facebook

Roger Jaegel and James Montgomery

The burning of small towns has become a sort of New Age ritual. Like fair maidens chained as offerings to dragons, small towns of the forest wait in the path of gigantic wildfires, helpless. Like knights errant, valiant firefighters stand between them and the flames. But sometimes the defenders fail. Greenville, Paradise, Grizzly Flats, Concow, Keswick, Magalia, Pulga, Doyle, Detroit, Blue River, Vida, Phoenix, Talent, Elkhorn, Gates, Idanha, Mill City, Lyons, Malden, Canyon Dam, Bagdad, Los Alamos, Ruth. All burned.

This is the story of Ruth. It is a story filled with questions.

The August Complex was a group of fires resulting from 38 different lightning strikes in Glenn, Lake, Mendocino, Shasta, Tehama and Trinity Counties. Eventually, these fires merged together to become the biggest wildfire in the United States since 1910. This fire was monstrous, with many aspects. The aspect we are looking at concerns the South Fork Mountain and Ruth.

On September 26, 2020, the Forest Service Alaska Incident Team dropped incendiary devices, known as "dragon's eggs," from a helicopter to start fires on South Fork Mountain, in Trinity County. They started fires on Rattlesnake Ridge and other ridges above the small town of Forest Glen. They called this a "defensive burn."

The day after the Alaska Incident Team started their fires, a major "wind incident" occurred. Winds

of over 30 miles per hour came roaring in from the northeast and blew these fires up. They burned over South Fork Mountain, across Ruth Lake, and swept over the little community of Ruth.

Ruth is spread out along Ruth Lake. A lake is a pretty good fire break, but the fire jumped the lake, apparently in several places. Some houses were burned, and some, right next door, were spared in a mosaic of destruction.



The thing is, the Forest Service knew the winds were coming. They were predicted several days ahead of time, by the National Weather Service and other weather reports. The [USA RAWS Climate Archive for the Mad River Station](#) shows that winds of 33 mph were predicted for September 27, and 38 mph for September 28. So, then, did the decision-makers for the Alaska Incident Team not consult the weather reports? Or did they just not care? They *knew* a major windstorm was coming!

These are disturbing questions. Many more questions arise:

- Who was responsible for the decision to light these fires? An individual should be held accountable, if the decision was negligent. If it was intentional, they should be held legally responsible.
- Is this a pattern? A fire is stable, somewhat contained, the day before a predicted high-fire-danger day, and the Forest Service lights a fire that takes off the next day. Is there a group within the Forest Service that is working to expand the conflagrations? Is this agency policy?
- Is there an attitude of "let it burn" in the Forest Service? There is. They call it "managed fire." They think they will improve the forest by letting fire clear it out. This is almost a religion among many so-called "environmentalists." They think fire is good for the land, and believe in letting the burned timber stand, rather than logging it and replanting.
- Will the South Fork and Ruth Valley burn again in another decade or so? Are the dead trees being removed, and the area replanted? Or is the dead timber simply being allowed to stand and decay for the next fire?
- Experience has shown that leaving the dead timber standing leads to further fires, after the dead trees decay to the point that they drop their branches and fall to the ground. Experience

has shown that these areas will re-burn, usually in 8 to 15 years. The second burn is usually hotter than the first, and bakes the living organisms, sterilizing the soil. It will be many generations before these areas come back as forests, if ever.

- Has the Forest Service got a fuels management plan? If so, has the plan been stymied by the rich and powerful environmentalist agencies?
- Do these "environmentalists" refuse to face the fact that they are destroying the forests because they are set in their ways? Or are they ego-bound not to be proven wrong? Worse yet, do they have economic incentives to hide the truth, big salaries and lucrative investments? Perhaps all of these factors are in play.
- Does anybody in Sacramento or Washington, DC really care about the rural communities of the West? Why should they? There are not enough votes to carry any election, anywhere. Of course they express sympathy, but talk is cheap.
- Are people at high levels intentionally working toward increasing the amount of fire on the land? By now, there is an awful lot of money invested. There are people who make an awful lot of money off these giant fires. How would we know if decisions against the public interest are being made by people in high places?
- How much land burned? A million acres. That is 1% of all the land in California. A million is a very big number. If you counted very fast- one number a second- it would take you 11.5 days to count to a million.
- An acre of land is a pretty good-sized parcel, too. In the suburbs, you could fit about 16 million houses on the footprint of the August Complex. But of course, you could never burn that much suburbia. The resources to fight it would be found. Suburbia has a lot of votes.
- A million acres is 1562 square miles. San Francisco County is 46 square miles. Sacramento County is 994 square miles. What if you burned San Francisco County and Sacramento County? Imagine the legislation you could get passed then!
- Rhode Island is 1214 square miles. Imagine burning a whole state! But Rhode Island has 2 U.S. Senators. The people who got burned out in the August Complex don't have any senators. Not really. California senators come from Los Angeles and the San Francisco Bay Area.
- How much timber burned? Conservatively, we can figure 10,000 board feet per acre of timber. Much of the August Complex was timber land, but not all, so let us say 1/2 million acres of timber burned. That gives us 5 *billion* board feet of lumber. At 6.3 board feet per square foot of house, a 1600 square foot home requires about 10,000 board feet of lumber. The August Complex burned enough timber to build at least 500,000 houses.
- In 2020, California had about 160,000 homeless people. The August Complex burned enough timber to build three houses for each of them, if the timber were harvested. Is it being harvested, now, or is it being left on the ground to fuel future fires? Historically, less than 10% of the dead timber on public land has been salvaged.
- How much carbon was released into the atmosphere? In 2020, over 4 million acres of timber burned in California, emitting 60 million tons of carbon dioxide. By way of comparison, all of California's transportation sources- automobiles, trucks, trains and planes- put together produce about 200 million tons of CO₂, annually.
- Why do environmentalists who claim to care about climate change not care about this? Why is the public not informed of this? Who controls the media?
- Who gains from these fires? Some people are making enormous amounts of money. In 2020

alone, the Forest Service spent \$1.6 billion on firefighting. A lot of that money goes to contractors and providers, all of whom have a vested interest in keeping the fires burning. Fires make great material for the news media. When a town burns, even the city people pay attention to the news. Horrifying tales of people being burned alive en masse on asphalt highways keep people glued to the TV.



A Modest Proposal to Save Our Towns

We know how to protect buildings. Defensible space. Rural homeowners are required by law to keep 100 feet of area around their homes cleared of burnable debris. Why not extend this concept to the level of communities?

All areas within a 5 mile radius of specified rural communities should be designated as *defensible space*. Defensible space is defined as an area cleared of readily flammable materials, such as dry brush, dead and dying trees, too-closely-spaced trees (thickets) and woody debris above the diameter of 3 inches.

The purpose of defensible space is to slow or stop the spread of wildfire, and create an area which can be defended against wildfire. Communities deserve this protection. The goal is to create park-like areas of open fire-resistant timber, green grass, or other fire-resilient vegetation.

The way to achieve this is through thinning and removal of flammable brush, removal of coarse

woody debris by mechanical means, prescribed fire when conditions are entirely safe (winter), removal of dead and dying trees (which could be used for lumber), and thinning of closely spaced trees.

The biggest obstacle to achieving defensive space on a community level is interference by the rich and powerful environmental non-profits, whose lawyers use the Endangered Species Act to stop forest management. To protect our towns, we need legislation to amend the ESA to provide for enlightened forest management within the designated areas.

If lawsuits are filed, responsible forest management must be permitted to proceed, pending the outcome of the lawsuit. The stranglehold of the lawyers must be broken, if we intend to save our small towns. On the other hand, maybe we should just let them all burn, to feed the dragons. After all, dragons are an endangered species, too.

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AUTHOR



Jim Petersen

Jim Petersen is a co-founder of the non-profit Evergreen Foundation, and publisher of Evergreen, the Foundation's periodic journal.

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