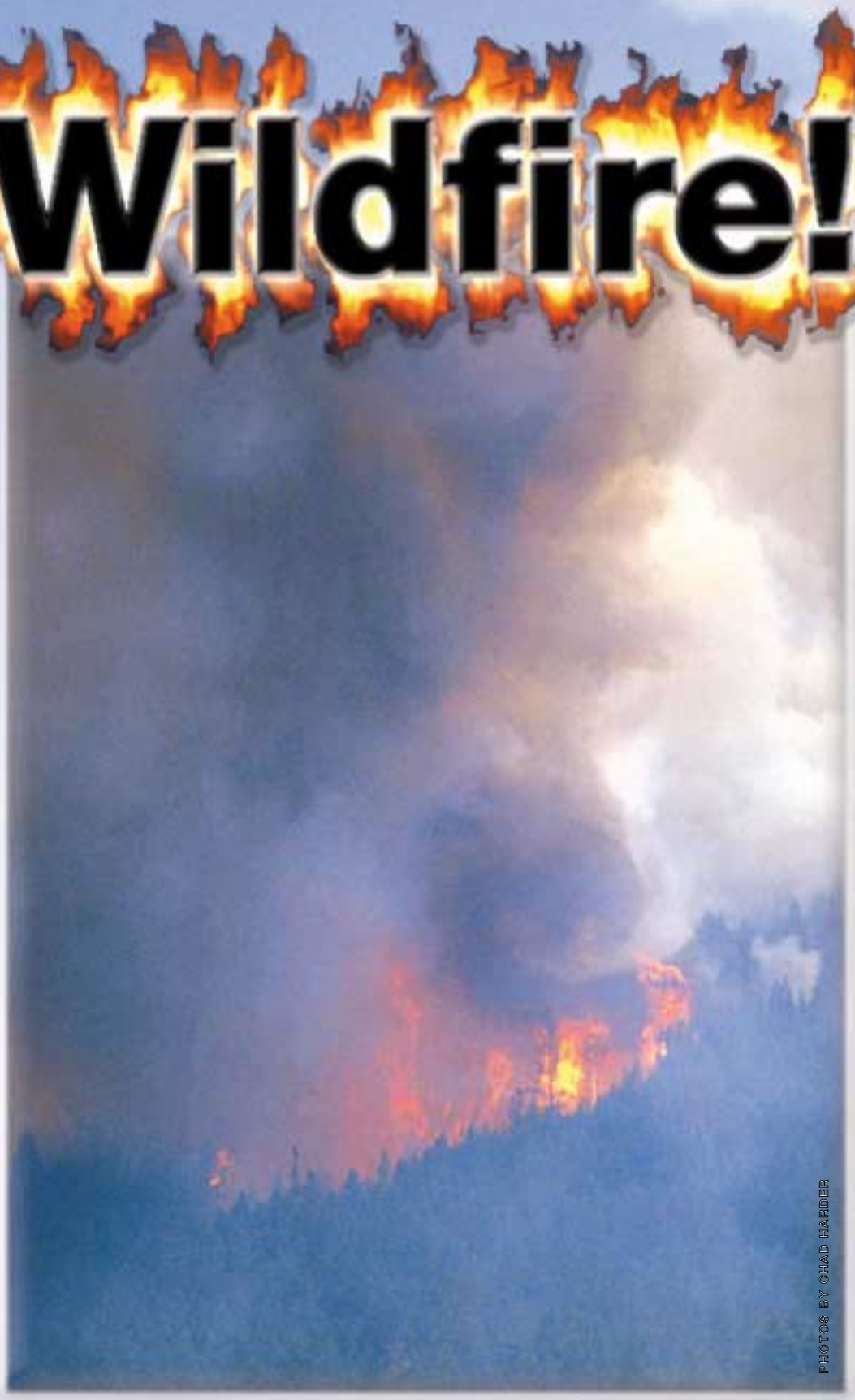
Wildfire!



PHOTOS BY CHAD HARDER

Nearly 7 million acres burn, and Angus breeders find themselves in the middle of it.

BY ERIC GRANT

It all began so innocently. It always does. A lightning strike. A clap of thunder. A smoldering blaze among the sagebrush. A wisp of white smoke trailing into the air.

Then a breeze began to blow — so lightly that no one noticed — and the flames began to spread. And in just a few short hours, Hubert Shaw, who had raised cattle on this sagebrush range his entire life, would understand the ruthless power of nature on the rampage.

Until that moment, Shaw was pretty much like every other Idaho cattleman. He was 50 years of age and had spent his adult life owning and operating Shaw Land and Livestock, a commercial Angus operation based near Dietrich. His cattle were the pride of his professional endeavor, the source of his livelihood, a personal achievement that only another stockman would understand.

But then the phone rang. It was 6:30 p.m. on Aug. 10. The voice on the other end was a representative of the Bureau of Land Management (BLM). There was a fire, a small fire, burning on his grazing allotment. "Nothing to worry about. Just thought you'd better know there's a chance we may want you to move your cattle if it gets worse. No need to do anything yet …"

Then, 20 minutes later, the phone rang again. It was the same person from the BLM. This time there was urgency and desperation in the voice.

There had been a microburst — an intense, localized wind — that had swept across the allotment, and the fire, which covered just 50 acres a few moments earlier, had become a firestorm, sweeping with all its raw power across the desert. There was a chance Shaw's cows were in its wake, but it was too dangerous to go out and see.

By then it was already too late. Within 90 minutes — about the time it would have taken Shaw and his cowhand to wrangle their horses, load up and get out

CONTINUED ON PAGE 32

there — the fire already had burned everything in its path.

It had moved with such ferocity and speed (about 60 mph) that local fire authorities were helpless to do anything to hold it back. "It was a freak fire," Shaw says.

Some of his neighbors attempted to cut the barbed-wire fences so their cows could move to safety. But they, too, found themselves in mortal danger. "They hopped on their four-wheelers and drove as fast as they could," Shaw recalls. "But the fire was gaining on them."

All Shaw could do was wait impatiently along a stretch of road where firefighters had decided to make a stand. The fire swept toward them but stopped inexplicably at the road. That was the end of it.

The worst, however, lay ahead. When daylight broke the following day and it was safe for Shaw to survey the allotment, he found a land littered with the carcasses of his cattle.

"It was the most horrible thing I'd ever seen," Shaw says. "The fire simply overtook them and burned them where they were standing. There were dead cows everywhere. The farther we went, the more dead cows there were."

All told, Shaw lost about 700 head of cattle; 200 he had to shoot because of their severe burns or blindness. It was a terrible task, mercifully destroying the cows he loved so much. It was also a terrible financial loss. He estimates his loss exceeds a half-million dollars. A neighbor suffered a similar catastrophe, losing nearly 100 head.

Michael Dutil, a firefighter from Maine, works with the Victor, Mont., Volunteer Fire Department on the Blodgett Canyon Fire in the Bitterroot National Forest.

As fires rage through the lower 48 states' second-largest roadless area, the Selway/Bitterroot Wilderness Area, life continues almost normally for residents living minutes away in the Bitterroot Valley.

Why?

How could such a thing have happened? Why here? Why now? What could he have done differently? How could he ever recover from such a catastrophe? These questions rolled over and over in his mind.

Shaw is not alone in the devastation. The year 2000 will go down in history as one of the worst in a century for fires. During a 45-day period last summer, it appeared the entire West had gone up in flames. Forests, sagebrush range, pastures, cropland, national parks — nothing was spared.

The flames raged from Oregon timber country to the Black Hills of South Dakota, from the mountains of Montana to the plains of Texas. By the end of September, a total of 79,962 fires had burned nearly 7 million acres, twice as many acres as the previous 10-year average, according to the National Fire Interagency Center.

Clearly, it was an unprecedented, dangerous year that overtaxed available financial resources for fire prevention and nearly exceeded the physical limitations of the people who actually fought the fires.

Like the flames, blame has spread in abundance, too. Environmentalists blame too much grazing, too much logging and too little emphasis on ecosystem health.

Ranchers and others blame too much "stored fuels" — too much grass on rangeland that had gone ungrazed, too much timber in woods that had gone unmanaged, neglected and unharvested for too many years because of too much regulatory and public pressure against natural-resource use.

Everybody blames the government for adhering to an archaic fire-suppression policy that had left so much dead timber, such unprecedented density of trees and brush, on the lands under its control.

In any case, the dry weather didn't help much either. Parts of western Colorado, New Mexico and Utah hadn't received rain for 45 days. Much of Montana hadn't seen notable precipitation in four years. "The dead grass is like walking on cornflakes," remarked Colorado

rancher Tom Maneotis last July.

No doubt, the drought had made the West a tinderbox waiting to explode.

There were signs, too, several years ago of the coming disaster. Wally Covington, director of the Ecological Restoration Institute at Northern Arizona University, predicted in 1994 that the West could anticipate "exponential increases in the severity and extent of catastrophic fire."

His prediction proved dead-on, so much so that Congress asked him to provide testimony before the House Subcommittee on Forests and Forest Health.

Choppers work the Blodgett Canyon Fire in the Bitterroot National Forest.

Forewarning

Covington told congressional leaders that "we have been extremely lucky that no lives have been lost so far this season. … Given such a rate of spread in heavy forest fuels, there is no way that we will be able to evacuate vulnerable mountain communities in time to prevent the loss of lives. Clearly, if we do not do something quickly, we can expect civilian and firefighter fatalities that are today unimaginable."

Two of the lucky ones were Larry and Peggy Trexler, Angus breeders who ranch southeast of Hamilton, Mont. They're still counting their blessings that the fire that roared through their valley didn't destroy more than it did.

It began last August, caused by a lightning strike about 20 miles south of the Trexlers' home. It soon became a firestorm as winds increased and pushed it north directly toward their ranch. Firefighters predicted it would be near their ranch within a week, so the Trexlers loaded their cattle and shipped them to safety.

They still held out hope that the fire would not reach their ground. Its pace slowed when it moved into a nearby watershed, and it appeared firefighters might have a chance of containing it. But then the wind kicked up again, and the flames burst through the forests like a bomb.

It was 1:30 a.m. when the Trexlers got word to evacuate. The fire had just crested the ridge to their south, and an unusual east wind brought its flames crawling down the canyon walls.

"There were 100- to 200-foot flames coming right at us," Larry recalls. "It was so loud — it sounded like a locomotive — that we had to holler at each other to hear. We just got out. The whole sky was glowing, and there were sparks flying in the air. It was unbelievable. The canyon is about three-quarters of a mile across, and sparks were blowing clear across it."

Luckily, their house and many of their buildings were spared, protected by a creek and 50 acres of irrigated meadows. "We lost one end of a building that had a haystack inside it," Trexler says. "We were lucky."

Fred Hathaway, an Angus breeder from Toston, Mont., was lucky, too. Ironically, had it not been for the drought, which forced him to gather his cows a couple of weeks earlier, he would have lost many of his cattle to the flames.

A wildfire, sparked by a combine in a wheat field, began burning about 7 miles to the south of Hathaway's home. He breathed a sigh of relief because the flames headed away from his ranch, first south, then east.

On the night of Aug. 8, the winds shifted ominously, and the fire turned toward the north — back in his direction.

It took the fire about two days to reach the ground where his cattle had been. Hathaway was short a cow and calf, so he went back there to see if he could rescue them from the fire.

Unfortunately, even though most of Hathaway's cows were gathered a safe distance from the fire, his neighbors' cattle were not. His neighbors arrived at the pasture about the same time he did, late in the evening, with four-wheelers, motorcycles and a truck loaded with hay to coax the cattle from the pasture.

Hathaway did what he could to help his neighbors gather and ship their cattle. It was 1:30 in the morning when they finally got them loaded onto gooseneck trailers and shipped to safety.

It was none too soon. The fire jumped a 100-yard fire line and traveled nearly 4 miles in less than an hour. It missed the gathering corrals where Hathaway and his neighbors had loaded the cattle by about a half-mile.

All told, the Toston-Maudlow Fire, as it came to be known, burned more than 80,000 acres of rangeland, pasture and farmland before it was contained.

"I'm looking through my window right now at part of the country that was burned," Hathaway says. "Much of it was grassland with cedar and fir trees. If I would have had my cows there, and if the fire would have gone north instead of south at the beginning, I would have lost 70 pairs. It would have happened just that quick. A fire like that can just about put you out of the cattle business in just a few seconds."

Turn up the heat

Now that most of the flames

CONTINUED ON PAGE 34

have been contained, the what-ifs continue to haunt those responsible for land management in the West.

What if it happens again?

What if the land and forests had been managed differently?

What if an entire community, not just forests, range and agricultural lands, had gone up in flames?

What can be done to prevent it from happening again?

In response to a report submitted to the U.S. departments of Agriculture (USDA) and the Interior (DOI), which cited the government's decades-old practice of direct fire suppression as the major factor in this year's expansive wildfires, the National Cattlemen's Beef Association (NCBA) wrote a letter to President Clinton in hopes of shedding light on other contributing factors.

"Unfortunately, the report does not suggest any modification to grazing plans to address the harvest of additional forage in heavier-than-normal rainfall years," said Jason Campbell, NCBA director of federal lands. "Grazing is widely accepted as an economical and ecologically sound method of reducing fire fuels."

NCBA's letter stated that the fire "problem is not [about] having enough firefighters and equipment. It is about preparing a better fuel- and fire-management policy. It is about including local stakeholders and utilizing existing fuel-management techniques, such as harvesting timber and grazing. Heavy-handed environmental restrictions and a lack of proper forest and range management lead to overgrown rangeland conditions resulting in costly fires. Relaxing or infusing more flexibility into current environmental regulations will drastically reduce the enormous cost suffered from forest and range fires. …

"The administration and federal land-management agencies have ignored one of the most pragmatic, efficient and cost-effective mechanisms for fuels and fire management. … Grazing can serve as a precision-like tool for managing fuel loads. When coupled with controlled burns, grazing can reduce the occurrence and impact of catastrophic wildfires. …

"The combination of controlled fires, proper forest and range management, enhanced local input, and more-flexible environmental regulations is the only possible long-term solution to fire control in the West. This type of management will lead to burned areas coming back more quickly, healthier and even more scenic. A commonsense approach is the best approach. Adhering to a blanket policy of fire suppression has proven not to be a sound practice," the letter concluded.

NCBA also asked lawmakers for additional relief for those who had suffered severe financial burden because of the fires.

At press time, legislators neared an agreement that would add $1.8 billion for fire relief to the Interior appropriations bill. Included in the package is $337.5 million for fire preparedness, $227 million for rehabilitation and restoration, and $277.8 million for hazardous-fuels reduction.

In any event, there is little doubt the issue of fires — and how to prevent or to control them — will become an even hotter issue in the future. After 20 years of increasing regulatory pressure on ranchers on federal lands, it will be difficult to convince government agencies and the mainstream public that grazing and logging actually can be beneficial, effective and preventive practices.

Firefighters head to the Canyon Creek Fire in Bitterroot National Forest.

"There's a lot of blame out here right now, especially being pointed at the Forest Service," Trexler says. "You've got to have some harvest to help. I do foresee a future policy change, but the environmentalists are waiting to jump down their throats when that happens.

"This valley used to have four or five sawmills," Trexler continues. "Now we don't have any. To me it's pretty sad that we have a renewable resource that we're not managing. These fires could have been prevented or stopped, had we just managed our lands instead of letting them just go."

For Shaw, who lost so much so swiftly, it will be a long time before he'll move beyond the events of last August. Even now, nearly two months after the fire, he admits he hasn't come to grips with his economic and emotional losses.

"This is 30 years of building, and it's gone," he says. "I've been working on this for a long time."

Shaw's insurance will cover about 20% of the loss. He hopes to get some financial relief from federal disaster assistance, but so far he has had no luck. Most disaster-relief agencies, like the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), are established to assist homeowners, not agricultural producers, from natural disasters, he says.

"It's hard for me to plan," he adds. "I don't know what's going to happen. It's awful having this happen during a time when all of ag is in such tough times."

Then, pausing for a moment, he grasps for perspective.

"I guess you could say we were lucky that we weren't out there when the fire got going," he says. "I guess that's what matters most. Had we gone out to push our cows out of the way, we would have been lost, too."

Editor's note: *An account to benefit Shaw and other affected ranchers has been created. Donations can be sent to First Security Bank, PO Box 388, Gooding, ID 83330. The Magic Valley Cattlemen's Association (MVCA) was finalizing plans for a donation cattle drive later. For additional details about this effort, contact MVCA President Bill Lickley at (208) 324-7975 or Idaho Cattle Association Board Member Dan Danos at (208) 934-5911.*