

# FIRE . . .

## How co-ops cope

### *Busy Montana wildfire season an added co-op burden*

People pay a lot for their solitude. A remote home site carved out of the forest. Dirt roads, narrow and rough, the only access. Scenery, wildlife, silence, isolation.

Then, when wildfire strikes, it makes them pay again, many times over. Carving the home out of the landscape, practically vaporizing all but the roads. Smoke, fire, panic, destruction, the Four Horsemen of an apocalyptic Montana wildfire season.

The drive through a closed fire zone is ironically chilling, “a moonscape,” according to Bart Peterson, operations supervisor at Missoula Electric. He was out checking work crews restoring power and clearing dead trees from a high power transmission line.

He and his linemen point out the oddities they have seen. An incinerated residential service box that continued to deliver power, for one. And one cabin after another in the path of a run of fire

that firefighters stopped literally at the doorstep.

Lineman Andy Teague told of a dead deer with no injuries, apparently killed by smoke inhalation. A second fatality, apparently confused by the sudden rush of fire, bounded the wrong way. A third deer bedding down in a swamp perked up to watch the truck, then hunkered down in the cool wet.

“Eerie,” Teague said of his own experience of being evacuated from his home in Seeley Lake, as was MEC trustee Ray Cebulski.

“Twice,” Cebulski said. “We no more than got back home from the first one when they told us to get out again.”

Most often, co-op involvement in the fires is not so personal.

Obviously, the cooperatives go to work restoring power to members. But utilities are also called in to provide power to fire camps. The Jocko Lakes fire blew up so fast, the co-op had to cut power soon after and energize a new camp farther

away.

Co-ops maintain constant contact with fire headquarters in case power lines are threatened — fallen lines not only interrupt power but could become a lethal hazard for firefighters.

According to MEC manager Tony Sinclair, firefighters informed him that poles had caught fire on a high power line in the heart of a fire zone. The co-op cut power to the line using a remote transmission control system, isolated the burning segment and rerouted service to consumers over a secondary line.

Sometimes members believe that cutting power is a serious inconvenience to them, especially when they wish to keep their homes and yards wet by using electrically powered water wells.

Co-ops often have to adjust breakers during times of fire so that lines will not automatically re-energize after an interruption of power, according to Roy Nollkamper, member services manager of Glacier Electric,

based in Cut Bank. And, line crews have to visually inspect every inch of line to make sure it's safe to restore power.

Even co-op service territories not directly affected by fire are constrained by restrictions. Crews must take water into the field, work curtailed hours and leave a safety observer behind for two hours after work is done to be sure no fire breaks out. According to Jim Maunder of Ravalli Electric, those restrictions, usually called “Hoot Owl” rules, put construction and new service projects far behind schedule during fire season.



Andy Teague