

Questions Linger in Aftermath of Pagami Creek Fire

By Elanne Palcich

Both the public and the U.S. Forest Service need to understand how a lightning strike in a bog near Pagami Creek on August 18 turned into a full-scale conflagration on September 12, burning approximately 1/10 of the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness.

What decisions were made by the Forest Service during the 26 day interval?

According to early reports by the USFS, the Pagami Creek Fire started off as a 2 acre (believed) lightning strike. The Forest Service watched the fire until it reached 130 acres on August 26. "Then the Forest Service decided to use several hundred gallons of a napalm-like material to really get it going." When the fire reached 1,750 acres, several Forest Service representatives noted "we were putting quite a plume up in the air." (Ely Echo editorial, "A simple lesson to be learned from Pagami: Don't play with fire," September 17, 2011.)

The Forest Service later claimed that firefighters tried to keep the fire under control from the day it

started. According to the Star Tribune ("Nature, not fire management, caused BWCA's run, officials say" September 22, 2011), Superior National Forest Supervisor Jim Sanders, lead decision-maker, said "early suppression efforts included a 'firing' operation in which helicopter crews dumped 1,900 gallons of 'jelly gasoline' on the fire over Labor Day weekend to create a buffer that would keep the fire from traveling northward to a populated area [Fernberg Road]...Sanders acknowledged that the gasoline drops, some from a machine that injected the thickened fuel into ping pong balls and dropped them from low altitude, expanded the nucleus of the original fire."

In the same article, Mark Van Every, the Ely district ranger involved in the fire management decisions, said "he believes the fire's sudden race east and south would have happened even without the gasoline-aided burn."

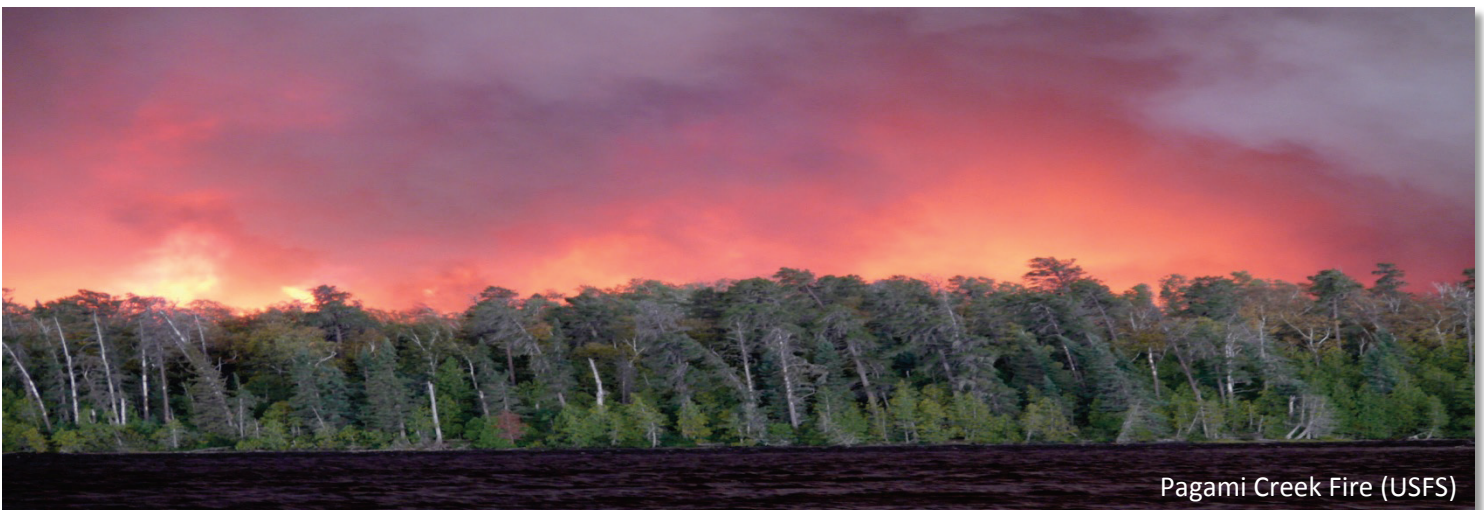
In a later article on September 22, (Star Tribune, "Officials douse BWCA 'burnout' rumor"), Cook forest ranger Tim Sexton says, "Thirty-one barrels of the accelerant, each 55 gallons, was either fired from a suspended torch or spit out of a helicopter via ping pong balls."

Exactly how much accelerant was used in the fire, for how long, and what part did it play in the ultimate conflagration? Considering the number of canoeists in the BWCAW, the proximity of private land, drought conditions, and general prevailing wind patterns, how is it that no one within the Forest Service questioned allowing the fire to spread, in part by using napalm, when the original fire could have been easily doused with water?

Why did the USFS rely on computer models rather than common sense?

According to district ranger Mark Van Every, on August 18 "A computer model showed less than a 1 percent chance of the fire ever growing beyond 2,000 acres, based on the weather forecast and the fire's behavior so far." (Duluth News Tribune, "Forest Service defends BWCAW fire effort," September 22, 2011)

The Ely Echo editorial stated, "We don't want to hear about computer models or what the weatherman said. We want to know if this person or these people live here. Because if they do, they must not go outside to observe conditions. ...It's dry in the Ely area. It's a mini-drought. Our last significant rainfall came on August 6 and that was one-half an inch."



Pagami Creek Fire (USFS)

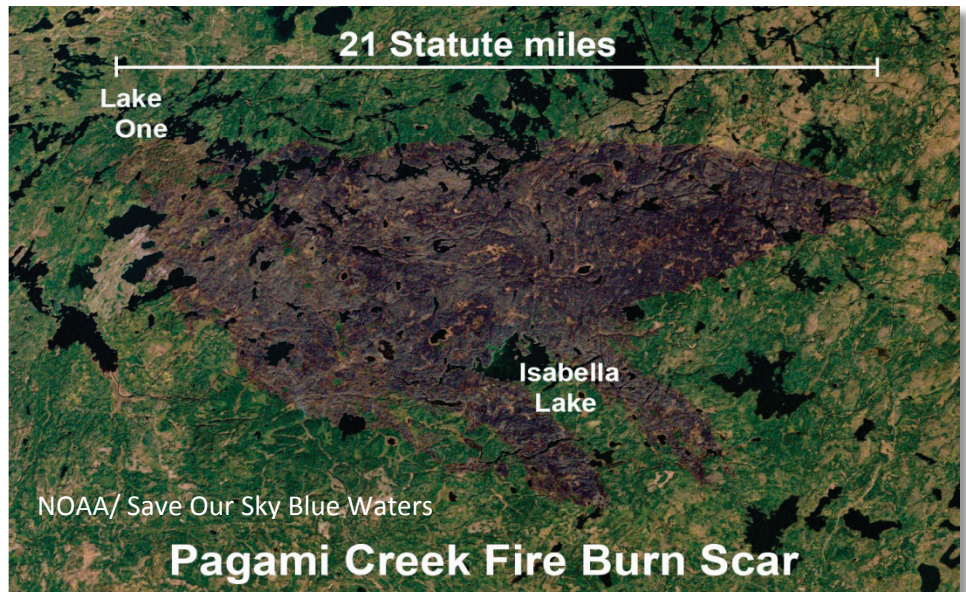
On September 12, a change in wind directions, with wind gusts up to 40 miles an hour, produced a firestorm that swept the fire 16 miles over a five hour period, expanding beyond wilderness boundaries, and burning so hot that in some areas it vaporized trees. No mention was made of wildlife kill.

While local people were aware of drought conditions in the Boundary Waters and the National Weather Service showed the area to be abnormally dry, why were Forest Service personnel relying on computer models rather than readily observable local conditions?

Why is the use of napalm a part of the USFS fire policy?

According to Document AD 5097246, "Forest Fire as a Military Weapon," June 1970, the USFS participated in research using napalm as an incendiary to destroy the vegetation of Vietnam.

At the same time that the Pagami Creek Fire was burning in Minnesota, the USFS was involved in a similar scenario in Oregon. As reported on SOS Forests, Western



Institute for Study of the Environment commentary, "...when the Shadow Lake Fire started (August 27, 2011), the fire could have been put out by five firefighters in two days... But in order to ensure "safety," the fire was expanded by napalming to 10,000 acres with 600 personnel "fighting" it for three weeks..."

Why is the Forest Service using military tactics on our own forests and wildlife? What is the cost of these tactics to the American taxpayer and to the environment? To what extent does the use of napalm (jellied gasoline) contribute to wildlife kill?

Is fire acceleration appropriate when district offices in critical areas have been closed?

USFS policy over the past decade has closed many of the smaller district ranger stations, instead constructing new headquarters outside the Superior National Forest. If the Kawishiwi and Isabella Ranger Stations had been retained, their staffs could have pointed out the very low water levels present at the time and prevailing wind patterns set to blow the fire in their direction. They could have questioned the wisdom of letting the fire burn, as well as using a fire accelerator.

With reduced staff and outposts, why wasn't USFS fire policy one of using extreme caution?

Why were there reports of a chemical smell?

When smoke from the Pagami Creek fire reached Chicago, there were reports of a chemical smell coming from the fire. Some described it as an electrical or plastic smell. (Daily Herald, "Smoke from Minnesota wildfires blankets suburbs," Sept. 13, 2011)

The Forest Service response was that the smell came from rotting wood as the fire reached part of the wind storm of 1999 blow-down area. Yet on September 10, "Fire officials quickly decided on a strategy of full-perimeter containment that included 34 initial aerial drops of foam retardant seldom used in the BWCA." (Star Tribune, "Forest Service way off on BWCA fire projections," October 30, 2011)

Why did the Forest Service neglect to mention the use of napalm and fire retardants? By September 16, the Pagami Fire smoke plume reached as far as Poland, Ukraine, and western Russia. Were toxins drifting with the plume? How is the use of those chemicals affecting aquatic and wildlife within the BWCAW?



To what extent is the Forest Service fulfilling its mandate to protect the BWCAW and public lands?

Lake One is the second most popular entry point in the BWCAW. The Pagami Creek Fire burned through approximately 92,000 acres of some of the most used and most cherished canoe routes of the wilderness.

The cost of fighting the Pagami Creek fire reached \$22 million dollars before restoration activities. Since the Wilderness Act of 1976, only non-motorized low-impact camping has been allowed within the Lake One area. But control of the Pagami Creek fire required the use of chemicals, helicopters, planes, the blasting of fire control lines within the BWCAW, and bulldozing of lines outside the boundaries. More than 700 hotshot firefighters put their lives at risk to save the remaining wilderness, as well as private property in the Isabella area.

Considering the effects of climate change, the ecosystem will be totally altered. Some ecologists are predicting that the spruce bogs and red pines will be unable to re-establish themselves. In areas where

the soil was burned down to the bedrock, nothing can begin to grow until plant matter is transported in by wind or water. Wildlife experts are giving conflicting information about the length of time it will take to re-establish moose habitat. With the current sharp decline of the moose population in northeast Minnesota, why is no account being given of estimated moose kill in the fire?

Also substantially damaged in the Pagami fire was the entire length of the historical 30 mile Pow Wow Hiking Trail, located within the BWCAW. The Forest Service has currently closed entry to the Pow Wow Trail, and questions remain as to whether the trail will be reopened. Hiking trails are an alternative way for visitors to experience and identify with the wilderness. Why is the Forest Service considering reducing public access to public lands?

In its scoping document "BWCAW Non-native Invasive Plant Management Project", the Forest Service has plans to use herbicides within the wilderness starting in 2012, even though herbicides impact aquatic species. This new policy would replace manual removal of



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invasive species. What plant species will be considered invasive after the fire?

The Forest Service is granting all mineral exploration requests as Categorical Exclusion (CE), eliminating further environmental review. As a result, Superior National Forest is being opened to roadways, drilling operations, contaminants seeping into the watershed, and 24 hour a day noise, impacting wildlife, migratory bird breeding, and habitat.

It's ironic that once the Pagami Creek fire began to spread, the Forest Service opted to save the Fernberg Road while the fire swept to the southeast, bordering the very area where mineral exploration is taking place. In fact, many of the Isabella residents whose property was threatened as the fire spread are the same people who are opposing exploratory mineral leasing on private lands. As reported in the Star Tribune, "Forest Service way off on BWCA fire projections," October 30, 2011, "The fire plan was to continue suppression of any unwanted fire, but not contain the fire's southern edge." Did Forest Service decisions turn the Kawishiwi and Isabella area into a sacrifice zone ahead of proposed mining along the periphery of the BWCAW?



Pagami Creek Fire (USFS)



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How can the Forest Service offer restitution for the damage caused?

The Pagami Creek Fire has affected the environment and wildlife, taxpayers, and the economic future of local tourism businesses. As stated in the Ely Echo editorial, "If the fire had been set by a camper, even accidentally, that person would be hunted down, fined and held up for public ridicule."

The Pagami Creek fire requires restitution. Those responsible for

the decisions leading to the conflagration have an opportunity to establish a buffer zone alongside the wilderness fire line, banning all commercial logging, mineral exploration, and moose hunting during the course of years that it takes for habitat in the BWCAW to recover.

When Superior National Forest Supervisor Jim Sanders retires at the end of this December, what legacy will he be leaving behind? Will retirement provide him the

"...we found mile after mile of blackened skeletons of the middle-aged jack pine, birch, aspen, and balsam fir that had once dominated the second-growth forests in this stretch of the Boundary Waters. This forest...is now a dark, almost surreal, place to see." –Timberjay, "Pagami Creek Fire A stark aftermath," by Marshall Helmberger, November 4, 2011)

opportunity to speak for the wilderness beyond the confines of bureaucracy?

Conclusion

The only real benefit of the Pagami Creek Fire is the attention it brings to USFS policy that is failing to protect our forests. In one month's time, between August 18 and September 12, 2011, a handful of USFS employees made decisions based upon written policy, computer models, and misinterpretation of weather reports that wiped out what generations of canoeists have held in awe. Lack of practical knowledge, along with military type strategies and faulty modeling, undid in 16 hours what conservationists since the time of Theodore Roosevelt have spent their lifetimes protecting.

The Pagami Creek Fire is being left to burn itself out over the winter but its effects on the landscape will linger for generations to come.

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In 1996, Bud Heinselman, retired Forest Service employee and author of the *Boundary Waters Wilderness Ecosystem*, wrote (pp. 262-3), "What unique aspects of the Boundary Waters ecosystem will our descendants know and appreciate 25, 50, or 100 years from now? If we meet our responsibilities by preventing catastrophic global change and caring for the Boundary Waters reserves as we should, our legacy to future generations will be of inestimable value...The Boundary Waters reserves together will be valued more and more as a last remnant of the old north woods. ...Think of the gene-pool, biodiversity, scientific, and educational values of the reserves. These kinds of values will be important whether or not we succeed in curbing global warming, trans-boundary air pollution, or the spread of introduced organisms."