

Public comments invited until April 21

Vast changes in wilderness fire policy on horizon

By Bob Gilley
The culmination of some five years of study was reached this week when Forest Service officials announced plans to adopt a new fire management policy for the vast Selway-Bitter Root wilderness area of Montana and Idaho.

The 12 million acre preserve is located on the western edge of the Bitter Root valley and in a large portion of northeastern Idaho. It is the largest single-wilderness confine in the continental United States.

Basically, according to Bitter Root National Forest supervisor Bob Morgan, the new plan is designed to allow fire to play a more natural role in shaping the wilderness. This concept, which saw a rebirth of interest among federal land managers in the late 1960s, represents a major change in Forest Service fire control methods of the past few generations.

In essence, Morgan commented, the

USFS' total fire suppression image will be changed considerably when the new plan takes effect. No longer will the Forest Service automatically charge into action with smokejumpers, helicopters, fire retardant and ground crews whenever a "smoke" is spotted in the wilderness.

Morgan qualified his description of the new method by pointing out, however, that control is geared only to wild areas, the backcountry areas that have relatively little human impact, where danger is minimal and where fire can readily shape the nature of things to come.

It does not imply, he stressed, that "smoke" fire is being pushed out of control with little regard to impact on the environment of humans.

Morgan acknowledged that local foresters gained a good deal of experience in dealing with wilderness fires when two major blazes broke out in or near the

largest burns were the 1200-acre Frito Creek fire and the 300-acre Snake Creek blaze that erupted outside the study area but adjacent to Frito Creek. BHSN officials decided the Snake Creek fire must be fought in the traditional manner, a week-long project that cost about \$600,000 to suppress.

The Snake Creek burn started as a casual, a wind-blown spark from inside the Frito Creek study area. Morgan commented that a good deal of criticism was leveled — both by professional people in the Forest Service and by private citizens — against the concept of allowing fires to burn naturally.

This was the real test of what we are planning to incorporate as policy — and some people reacted strongly against it, the supervisor pointed out.

But research and study continued and additional observations took place. The Whipple Creek area has had only one small fire involving the past few

seasons and another study area, Bear Creek on the Nez Perce Forest, had four blazes totaling less than two acres in 1974. Morgan said that, if the new fire management plan is approved, separate policies will be drawn up for drainages or units within the Selway-Bitter Root wilderness. They will be subject to review by the Northern Region office and approval by the Chief of the Forest Service in Washington, D.C.

Specific plans for each area of the wilderness will be implemented directly by the Northern Region office, BHSN staffman Jerry Allen said. The local forest hopes to fund a fire plan in two drainages adjacent to the Selway-Bitter Root fire zone.

Analysis of existing systems, current fuel conditions, climatology, fire potential, human use patterns, property and improvements, management and other factors will go into the making of each policy.

Several options will remain open for handling fires in each unit. One option is to simply observe natural fires without any suppression activity, where possible. Another would be to actively battle fires when required. A third option would be a combination of the two, observe it initially and then combat it when necessary. The eventual prescription will probably be a combination of these three options, plus others, in each unit.

Morgan listed favorable environmental impacts of the new policy as follows:
1. A natural regime will be re-established in at least portions of the wilderness.

2. Plant and animal species adapted to the local environment will be maintained in some cases.
3. The control of major ecosystem processes of nutrient cycling and energy flow will be returned to a random natural force of fire.

The public will have a better

understanding of the wilderness concept.
5. Implementation of the Selway-Bitter Root plan should have a favorable impact on fire control policies in other wilderness areas.

6. Possible detrimental aspects include:
1. Smoke pollution that increases the wilderness and in adjacent areas.

2. Some fires, outflows and other wilderness activities may be discontinued as a result of natural fires being allowed to burn.

3. There will be short-term disturbances in some parts of wilderness.
4. The possibility of human error will exist and some fire situations may get out of hand before they can be controlled.

Copies of the 96-page report are available from the Bitter Root, Clearwater, Lolo and Nez Perce National Forest offices. Citizens have until April 21 to submit comments, suggestions.



VICTOR GETS THE SPOILS — It was a great day for Bitter Root basketball squads Thursday as Hamilton Stevensville and Victor all scored sparkling victories in the Western Class A and Western Class C divisional tournaments. Most of the local attention was focused on Victor's come-from-behind triumph over Twin Bridges Thursday afternoon, a 69-68 thriller that

wasn't decided until the final nine seconds of action. Frate star Rich Lawrence (44), who fired in 26 points last, the way he recovered his rebound from Frate cheerleader Patrice Scott when it was all over. Complete reports on the two tournaments are carried on Page 8 of today's edition.

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Proposed sewer site "won't hold water," says petition

By Cheryl Young
The Victor sewer system is bogged down for years in a maze of various suits — may be about to see the light of day. At least, this is what Victor lawyer Gary White and others are hoping.

But opposition to the proposed site is rising like vapor from a hot spring and may put the brakes on the plan. A petition bearing signatures of 41 people who dislike the proposed sewer layout location, northwest of the Shamblee Inn in Victor was sent Feb. 19 to the Environmental Protection Agency, the state Department of Health and Environmental Safety, county planner Luke Boland and the county commissioners.

Performer Hal M. Marshall, a civil engineer who owns a home near the proposed site, explained his position in a telephone interview on Thursday. The good site chosen by the Victor sewer district board he stated, lies next to a subdivision containing 100 new homes, with 100 more to be built in the near future. Although the state officials examined the site and made preliminary tests, they could not guarantee that drinking water would not be polluted beyond a safe degree.

that the degree of pollution would not make the water undrinkable. If pollution is worse than expected, however, residents might be forced to dig deeper wells, an expense Marshall considers "staggering."

Tests questioned
Ground water level an important factor in selection of a sewer plant site, he determined by percolation tests, and Marshall fears that the state tests might not be reliable. They were made in November, when ground water was low, and the Victor main levels that results obtained at a different time of year would show higher ground water with subsequent greater danger of pollution.

For this reason, he noted, Scott County's other sewer, OCN's, testing has shown the area unsuitable for ponding of any water, meaning that an operation lagged probably would not "hold water." Skip Lenth of the local SCS office verified this information but said the soil problems could be dealt with by proper design of the laggon. A plastic liner or clay lining could be used to slow seepage, he said.

We can't afford to have our property values devalued," he stated.

Marshall and others who signed the petition requested that EPA and other government agencies look the proposed site over carefully before approving it for a sewer disposal laggon. He is in the process of attempting to find an alternate site himself.

The deadline for finding such a location where property is available for sale is effectively March 11, since the "preliminary" period allowed by the EPA ends on that date. If a suitable alternative has not been found as of the EPA date, no further complaints sufficient to warrant a delay of the site near the Shamblee Inn site probably be approved.

However, if the suit does receive a go-ahead from the EPA, Marshall warns that the decision will be fought in court.

The state in making its recommendation, ruled out a site by Victor because officials thought contamination of the land could take as long as two years. But Marshall said that the sewer board could just as well take the time to consider other alternatives, because a court battle over the proposed site could take just as long.

Background
The sewer district board began its work two years ago, but with changes in the law, difficulty in locating a suitable place for property and similar frustrations, the project never quite got off the ground.

Meanwhile, some claimed that community growth was stifled by lack of a property disposal system and the school began having problems with its sewage into the basement. Some people said they would not support a school bond issue unless the sewer problem was solved.

Several people got a sewer easement on the town site in 1964 and 1965. White was one of them. Since December of 1965 he has been spearheading an effort to push through the state-authorized program.

With help from Thornton Mann and Lt. Gov. Bill Christensen's office, White contacted state health department officials and argued that they act on Victor's problem swiftly. He submitted letters from the Bitter Root Chamber of Commerce and local bank providers, alleging that lack of a sewer disposal plant was holding up the economic growth of the community.

A petition asking for action was signed by 24 Victor area residents. Mark Rhea of Hamilton was the principal. White is applying pressure on the EPA.

Victor was the last of 10 in the state to have a sewer disposal plant in the state.

With this pressure, according to White, the state's administrative work, weeks of consideration time for the project was cut down to two days.

After receiving word of state approval, the EPA began considering the case. They have allowed the period of Feb. 21 through March 11 for public comment on the proposed site.

Ford accuses Congress of dragging its feet on important energy bills

WASHINGTON, AP — President Ford is again accusing Congress of dragging its feet on energy bills, but congressional leaders insist they are not dragging their feet.

In a special energy message Thursday, Ford complained that the failure of Congress to act on a series of legislative proposals is "holding up" the nation's ability to face its energy emergency.

Although many energy bills were introduced in a message passed in December, Ford said the nation's energy problem will be solved only if the additional legislation is passed.

But Rep. Albert J. Isaacs, D-Mich., said, "Remember, the President signed all last year's energy legislation. It's Congress we are acting on energy matters, but we did not."

Isaacs' chairman of the House energy and power subcommittee added, "And our proposals, which he enthusiastically signed — was far more comprehensive than the original approach."

The message passed in December was the "Energy 1976" energy program, which included 12 bills to reduce use of oil and gas, conserve energy, and provide for energy-related loans before the committee and were acting on them as fast as possible. We have been working hard in the energy cabinet of energy.

In energy matters on pending bills, Ford submitted his own proposals.

The energy committee is working to bring legislation to the President's desk. Ford said the President's energy program is a comprehensive energy program that will be implemented immediately, which does not require the legislative process.

Senate leaders of a bill to speed completion of a gas pipeline said "the

approach, mandating approval of a pipeline route as well as a date when passage would get the job done, leaves that bill's progress."

The bill is now before a Senate subcommittee. The prime sponsor, Sen. Walter Mondale, D-Minn., said he would support the bill if he saw Ford's specific proposal.

The message signed in December is part of a bill to speed up energy legislation.

Four bills passed in the House in 1975, but the Senate has not yet passed any.

The four bills are: Conservation, Energy, and Power; Energy, Conservation, and Power; Energy, Conservation, and Power; and Energy, Conservation, and Power.

The conservation committee approved the bill in December, but the Senate has not yet passed any.

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PUSHING FOR APPROVAL—Gary White of Victor, above, is one of those trying to speed up approval of a site for the town's sewage disposal laggon. The state has given its go-ahead for a location near the Shamblee Inn, but some residents fear contamination of their drinking water if the site is used. See details in story on this page.

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