

Snapshots

Successful BLM hazardous fuels projects ...

Upper Snake River District

Fire Danger Signs Provide Service on Many Levels

Fire danger signs have long been a fixture at the entrances to the nation's public lands and national forests, warning vacationers if the fire danger gets too high. In Eastern Idaho, the system has been expanded into cities and towns, too. And this public service reaches many different levels.

"We started this program after the Point Fire," said Fred Judd, Fire Mitigation and Education Specialist for the Eastern Idaho Interagency Fire Center (EIIFC). The Point Fire (1995) resulted in the tragic deaths of two Kuna, Idaho city firefighters and prompted many fire organizations to examine how critical information is relayed to all firefighters, in and out of the federal system.

Among the questions was whether local communities had access to the day's fire danger readings. Many federal weather stations are now accessible on the web, and dispatch centers help interpret weather and fuel moisture data to find a local area's fire danger.

A key to the success of the Fire Danger signs is the development of EIIFC's website. The website has been in development for the past four seasons, and is updated daily using data from Remote Access Weather Stations. From the main page, the user can glance at weather information for the Idaho Falls and Pocatello areas, a general summary of conditions in mountain locations, and link to information from specific weather stations throughout Eastern Idaho. For the convenience of the local user, an animated graphic for each station shows the same reading that should appear on fire danger signs at their local fire station.

Fire stations also use the information from the EIIFC website to adjust their signs accordingly. In this way, the website and the signs become integrated into an overall fire prevention campaign.

Distributing that information to a mass audience is a challenge for far-flung cities and towns. Fire fighters seem to have found one answer to the problem of educating the public by posting local fire danger signs for their community. The signs are placed in front of fire



The Ammon Fire Department with a fire danger rating sign completed by Boy Scouts.

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stations and in other prominent locations in town, and the danger ratings are changed as the fire danger changes – daily, if need be.

Lava Hot Springs, Idaho is one of the communities that is putting the signs to good use. Already the town has four signs placed at the fire station and other locations around town, and two more signs are on order for locations near neighborhoods. “I’ve had quite a few people comment on them and ask questions about them. I’ve been surprised,” said Joel Price, Chief of the Lava Hot Springs Fire Department.

The fire danger signs also provide a public service in other ways, too. For years, the BLM has partnered with local Boy Scouts to build the signs. Boys that are finishing the requirements for their Eagle Scout award are required to plan and implement a service project that benefits the community.

The costs of the project are relatively cheap, thanks to the volunteer labor. BLM supplies funds for materials – about \$140 for two signs. This includes wood posts, plywood, paint, Plexiglas, and plastic decals and arrows.

Once the signs are completed by scout volunteers they are given to EIIFC. The fire prevention staff attaches a small plaque on each sign recognizing the Eagle Scout for his contribution. About 55 signs have been built so far, and new signs are placed in communities about as fast as the scouts can build them.

Judd believes that the high-profile signs may be helping to reduce certain human-caused fires in the local area. “Escaped agricultural burns used to be one of our biggest headaches, and one of the leading causes of large fires locally,” he said. The signs, plus



An Eagle Scout candidate showing the fire danger sign he completed as a part of his project.

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a heavy emphasis over the past four years on properly preparing fields before burning stubble, help the farm work know quickly whether it's safe to burn.

Fire prevention staff members also encourage the public to get the reading off a sign before burning debris and ditches, firing up charcoal for a Dutch oven, or other common human causes of wildfires.

“So every one wins: the scout can complete his service project, EIIFC advances its prevention message, and the community gets another tool to find out whether burning is safe today,” said Judd.

July 10, 2002

