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Rebuilding a trail system, through the ashes

By Tony Buhr

World staff writer Jun 14, 2019



Natania Hernandez, Northwest Youth Corps work leader, in her green hat and her crew members work to widen the lower Mad River Trail on June 5 and remove debris from the 2018 Cougar Creek Fire.

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ENTIAT — A U.S. Forest Service truck winds its way up Tyee Ridge in the Entiat Ranger District.

The hillside is sparsely covered in thin patches of trees. Grass grows between the tree stands like a well-carpeted lawn and yellow balsamroot dots the landscape. The forest looks healthy and well maintained. It almost appears intentional.

This is a result of a series of fires burning through the Entiat Valley, said Jon Meier, an Entiat Ranger District recreation staff member. The area burned in the 1970s, the 1990s and again in 2015.



“It is sort of resetting itself to a more natural pattern,” Meier said. “You can see most of these hillside here burned recently. That’s what they’re supposed to do. This landscape is a fire-prone landscape.”

The Entiat Ranger District is working with five crew members to maintain 200 miles of trail systems affected by the series of fires, he said. The work includes logging trees, fixing erosion damage and removing ash and other debris from trails.

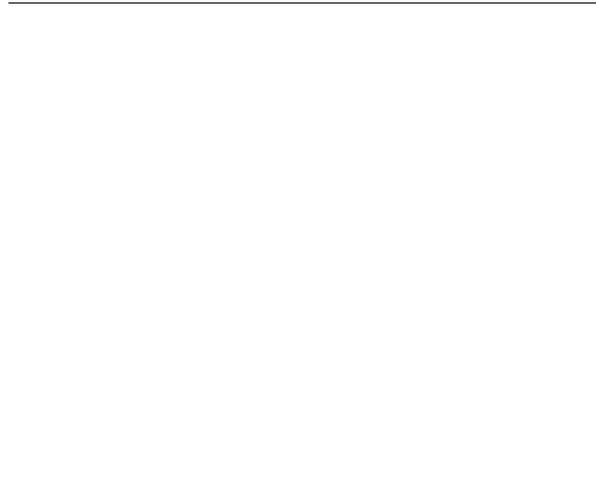
Despite its limited resources the district manages to log out 90 percent of its trails each year. All of its trails right now are open to all with the exception of the lower Mad River Trail, which has restrictions for horses and dirt bikes. Crews are working to reopen the trail this summer.

The Forest Service relies on groups, such as the Washington Trail Association, Access Entiat and Northwest Youth Corps, to help it keep up with the backlog, he said.

Concerns about access

Meier took a Wenatchee World Reporter on a hike up the lower Mad River Trail. He pointed out the large sediment flows coming down canyons, burned out husks of trees and huge log jams damming the river. It all resulted from the Cougar Creek Fire last year.

The first couple years after a fire a lot of trees come down and then it seems to take a little break, he said. After the five- to seven-year mark, the trees start coming down in droves again.



“The challenge is the sheer number of trees that can fall post-fire and the time it takes to get those out based on the limited crews we have,” Meier said.

In 2015 the Forest Service closed the main trailhead to the Glacier Peak Wilderness due to hazardous conditions, including potential mudslides after the Duncan Fire. The closure drew public outcry from locals concerned about access. It also led to the creation of the Access Entiat organization.

Things have improved a lot since 2015, said Traci Eisenhard, Access Entiat coordination facilitator. The Forest Service and Access Entiat are working together to train volunteers to clear trails and identify systems that Forest Service crews might not be able to get to. “Through time and numerous meetings we’ve been able to develop a dialogue and working relationship,” Eisenhard said.

Bruce Wick co-owner with his wife of Icicle Outfitters and Guides in Leavenworth, said Forest Service personnel have good intentions and are working hard to keep open the trails, but a lack of access to the trail system does impact his business after fires.

The wilderness area in particular within the Entiat Ranger District has struggled with access in the past, said Wick, whose company does horseback riding trips into the Glacier Peak Wilderness where the Entiat Ranger District maintains about 70 miles of trails.

“The wilderness trails are difficult for them,” Wick said, because the Forest Service is not allowed to use power tools in wilderness areas and must remove logs using crosscut saws. Some years after fires, crews can’t access the wilderness at all, which creates a backlog of work.

High-intensity fires



Mixed in between healthy tree stands on the Entiat Ranger District, are patches of orange and even black where the fire burned at higher intensities, Meier said. These areas will take longer to return to normal and could impact the environment.

The black areas are where high-intensity fires burned, said Molly Hanson, Okanogan-Wenatchee National Forest watershed program manager. Those areas could take decades to recover depending on how hot and how deep the soil was burned.

“With looking at post-fire flooding what is our biggest risks is going to be those larger areas that have the canopy cover removed and the ground cover removed and hydrophobic soils,” Hanson said.

In those areas, rains could cause the top layers of the soil to sluff off the hillside, she said. The Entiat Ranger District’s forests have a layer of volcanic ash in their soil from the Glacier Peak and Mount Mazama eruptions. Volcanic ash acts as great fertilizer.

"A lot of our soils they are unique because they are not from a differentiating weathering process," like sands and clay, Hanson said. "They are a volcanic deposit. So we like to keep those on the hill."

After a high-intensity fire rainstorms and thunderstorms can cause soils to be washed off the hillsides, which also causes flooding, she said.

This year things look pretty healthy for the Entiat Ranger District, Hanson said. A healthy snowfall and gentle rains have allowed the grasses to grow and stabilize the hillsides.

The future of trails

Meier and The Wenatchee World reporter met up with a Northwest Youth Corp crew working on the trail about two miles along the lower Mad River Trail.

The crew was removing ash and debris and widening the trail, said Natania Hernandez, Northwest Youth Corps crew leader. It's the Forest Service's relationship with organizations like this which may be the future for the agency, Meier said. More and more funding is going toward fighting wildfires and Forest Service work crews can only do so much.

"It's the public's land," he said. "Let's hope that it remains public land first of all and that people see the value of that for the long road and we reflect society's needs and wants as it changes through time."

Fires in the Entiat Ranger District

Some significant fires in the Entiat Ranger District, according to the U.S. Forest Service.

- 2018 Cougar Creek, 41,404 acres
- 2015 Wolverine, 65,512 acres
- 2014 Mills Canyon, 21,720 acres
- 2014 Duncan, 2,014 acres
- 2012 Byrd, 9,198 acres
- 2004 Pot Peak, 17,180 acres
- 1994 Tyee, 140,173 acres
- 1990 Dick Mesa, 1,189 acres
- 1988 Dinkelman, 51,439 acres
- 1970 Gold Ridge, 17,534 acres

MORE INFORMATION

Sustainable recreation plan

Tony Buhr

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Tony Buhr has been a professional reporter for almost seven years. He worked for the Walla Walla Union-Bulletin as a cops and courts reporter. The Ellensburg Daily Records as a cops and courts, breaking news, agriculture and water reporter.