

**North Central Idaho  
Wildfire Restoration Group  
2015 Wildfire  
Inventory and Assessment Report**

**Volume I  
October 7, 2016**



# North Central Idaho Wildfire Restoration Group 2015 Wildfire Inventory and Assessment Report

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Volume I  
October 7, 2016

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## Introduction

### Fire Season 2015 – An Historic Event

Fire season 2015 in North Central Idaho will be remembered and referenced as an historic event for many reasons: the long, hot summer; the number of destructive fires in the roaded front country; the loss of property; the generous human response; and the unprecedented interagency cooperation. This assessment is a product of the cooperative effort and offers insight into what happened, why it happened, and what needs to and can be done in response.

### Background

After one of the hottest and driest early summers on record, it is no surprise that fire season began early. On June 27, the Blue Fire was detected and grew rapidly, threatening the communities of Dixie and Comstock. That set the stage for the rest of the season.

July was relatively quiet and that provided time for fire managers to prepare for August, the beginning of fire season for the area. The Nez Perce-Clearwater National Forests pre-positioned firefighting resources in Kamiah for initial attack the first week in August, anticipating the high probability for fire starts in the Clearwater Valley. Following a series of storms from August 9-11, 2015, the Grangeville Interagency Dispatch Center detected over 250 fires, more than 70% on the Forest. Although there were many fires in the back country, the most critical fires were in the front country, where many threatened communities. It is easier to list communities that were not under some level of evacuation notice than those that were. Those fortunate communities included Grangeville, Harpster, Stites, Kooskia, Clearwater, Cottonwood, and Winchester.

Wildfire activity across the west was extreme, and firefighting resources were scarce. Those resources were allocated primarily on the basis of threat to public safety and the values at risk. Initially, the staged firefighting resources and Forest firefighting resources were rapidly deployed to the Idaho Department of Lands Protection areas in Kamiah, Craigmont and Orofino. Many of the fires on the Forest remained unstaffed and grew in size and intensity and only received resources when they became threats to communities.

This was also a season noted by many first-time events. In order to efficiently and effectively manage the numerous fires, the blazes were grouped into multiple geographic complexes of fires (Municipal, Clearwater, Motorway, Selway, Red River, Elk City, Lochsa South, and Wilderness Complexes) which were overseen by an Area Command organization. This was the first time that the BLM closed a busy section of the Salmon River from French Creek to Riggins, and the first time that the majority of the Nez Perce-Clearwater National Forests were closed to public access due to wildland fire safety concerns.

By seasons end, the fires had burned across more than 280,000 acres in the area. Approximately 60 homes and 74 outbuildings had been lost and others damaged.

#### Notable dates:

08/14/2015 – Wind event pushes the Clearwater Complex through the Kamiah area burning numerous homes and outbuildings.

08/21/2015 – Wind event causes the Fisher fire, having previously threatened the community of Reubens, to threaten the communities of Craigmont and Nezperce. Three structures lost.

08/29/2015 – Another wind event moves through the area. Public and firefighter safety prompt, Forest Supervisor Cheryl Probert, to close all National Forest System Lands on the Nez Perce-Clearwater National Forests except the Palouse Ranger District.

## Regional Geographic Context

The eight focal fires assessed in this document are located within the Clearwater and Salmon River drainages in North Central Idaho and contain all or portions of private land ownership. (Figure 1)

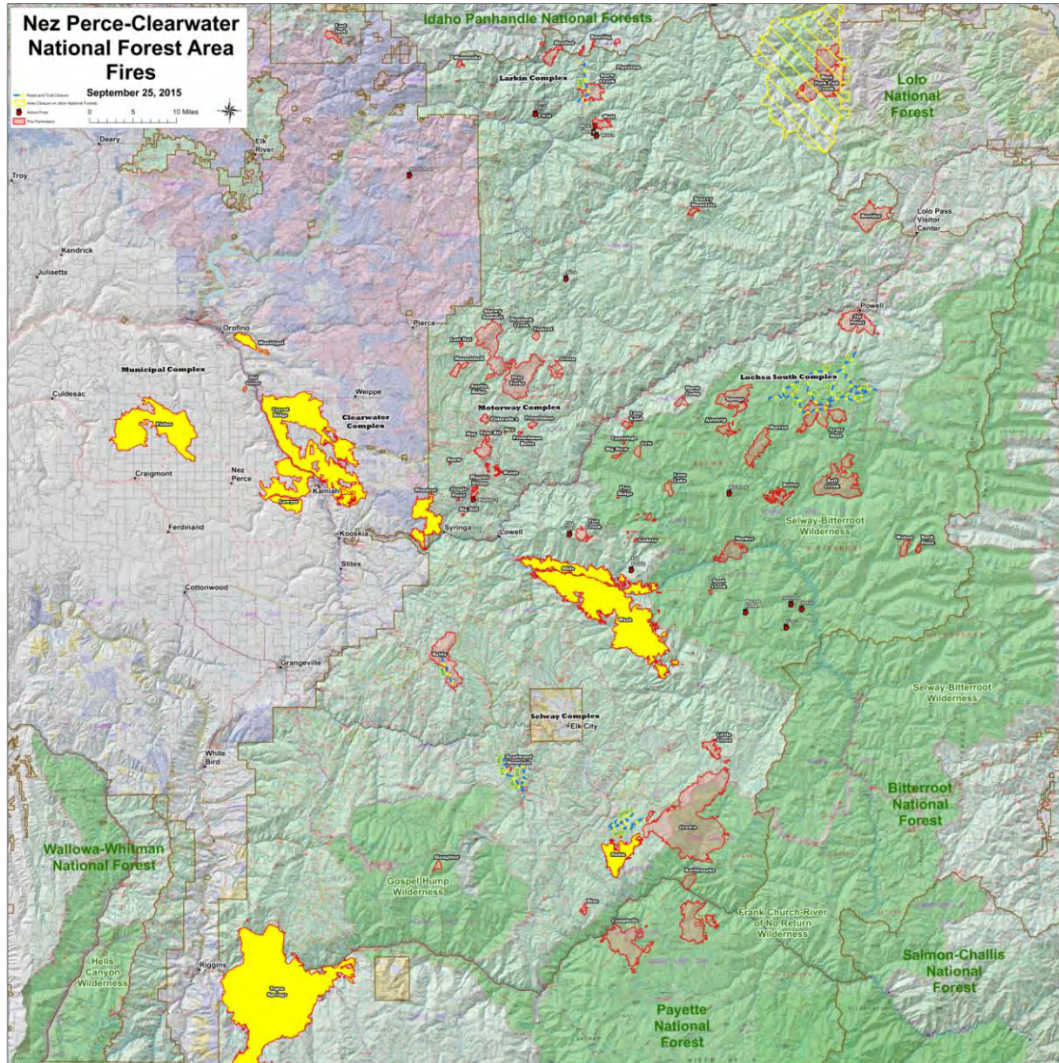


Figure 1. Focus fire boundaries highlighted in yellow

## Communities in Crisis

Fire season 2015 was a chaotic time for local communities. Fire teams inundated the region, establishing multiple camps of firefighting personnel, in essence firefighting communities within local communities. Two of these camps were initially located within schools, relocating as fire season overlapped into the start of the school year. One fire camp occupied a local airstrip for more than a month.

Residents endured weeks of thick smoke, obscuring visibility and making breathing difficult and nearly impossible for those with asthma and breathing disorders.

Hundreds of people were forced to leave their homes quickly necessitating the need for multiple emergency shelters and pet-friendly sites. One individual lost her life in a fall when trying to evacuate her house ahead of the advancing fire.

As the extent of the loss became apparent, communities and citizens rallied to provide assistance: opening their homes to those displaced by fires; generously donating food, money, and household goods; and forming The Wildfire Unmet Needs Committee to help those who had lost their homes and didn't have insurance or other ways of replacing their property.

Ecologically, some property owners have described the post-fire landscape as looking like a “war zone,” void of vegetation, and prone to erosion. Others have described weeds and “stuff I’ve never seen here before” as replacing native vegetation.

It has been difficult for some landowners to enlist the assistance of local loggers in removing dead and dying trees as so many are involved in large-scale salvage efforts. Others who want to reforest their land have found nursery stock in short supply.

These needs presented opportunities for local agencies who decided a united, coordinated response would serve citizens better than individual responses.

## The North Central Idaho Wildfire Restoration Group

To meet the needs of those affected by the fires, the North-Central Idaho Wildfire Restoration Group (NCIWRG) was formed October 8, 2015. The NCIWRG has focused its efforts on over 225,000 acres of fire-affected lands, with a collaborative emphasis on 60,000 acres of private lands affected by the 2015 wildfires. This is an **unprecedented** partnership that has yielded many benefits for citizens of this region.

### Purpose

The NCIWFG is an open and voluntary coalition of governmental agency decision-makers within the five county region (Idaho, Clearwater, Lewis, Latah, Nez Perce) whose purpose is to enhance the effectiveness and efficiency of individual efforts to address post fire recovery needs and other natural resources affecting the area.

The group consists of the following participating agencies:

- Division 2 Idaho Association of Soil Conservation Districts (lead agency)
- County Commissioners from all five counties (Clearwater, Idaho, Latah, Lewis, and Nez Perce)
- Elected officials from five soil and water conservation districts (Clearwater, Idaho, Latah, Lewis and Nez Perce)
- Clearwater Basin Collaborative
- Idaho Department of Lands
- Idaho Department of Fish and Game
- Idaho legislative and Congressional staff
- Idaho Soil and Water Conservation Commission
- Nez Perce-Clearwater National Forests
- Nez Perce Tribe
- University of Idaho Extension
- US Army Corps of Engineers
- USDOJ Bureau of Land Management
- USDA Farm Service Agency
- USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service

Employees from the participating agencies make up four committees within the NCIWRG: Leadership, Administrative, Outreach, and Technical.



**The Leadership Committee** is chaired by Steve Becker, Director of Division II/Idaho Association of Soil Conservation Districts. Other members include elected officials from each of the five counties and soil and water conservation districts and local managers from USDA Forest Service, USDOI Bureau of Land Management, USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service, Idaho Department of Lands, Idaho Department of Fish and Game, University of Idaho Extension, Idaho Soil and Water Conservation Commission and the Nez Perce Tribe. The leadership committee is designed to encompass the decision-makers for each of the participating public entities that have authority to commit staff and resources to the regional process. Other active participants include: Idaho Legislators, Idaho congressional staff and members of the Clearwater Basin Collaborative.

**The Technical Committee** is an interdisciplinary team with a mix of skills vital to development of a post-fire inventory and assessment. The technical committee coordinator reports to the leadership committee on the progress and needs of the technical committee. The technical committee's role is to create an inventory and assessment of post-fire restoration needs with an emphasis on private lands. The technical committee is comprised of subject matter experts in soils, range, weeds, hydrology, vegetation, roads, forestry, fire processes, and emergency management. Participants include scientists from local, state, tribal, and federal land management agencies. The committee coordinator is Lynn Rasmussen, Nez Perce SWCD.

**The Administrative Committee** is in the formation stage as the inventory and assessment process produces information that can be used to develop county-level and regional strategies to address the natural resource issues associated with the 2015 fire season. The committee coordinator is Ken Stinson, Latah SWCD.

**The Outreach Committee** is in the formation stage as the inventory and assessment process produces information that can be used to inform the public and land managers about the fire restoration needs. The outreach committee facilitates communication regarding the work that is completed by the WRG. The committee coordinator is Elayne Murphy, Clearwater Basin Collaborative.

## A Coordinated Fire Recovery Response

- 16 Extension-sponsored workshops with multi-agency participation
- Burned Area Response (BAER) assessment and implementation
- Multi-agency sharing of resources including people, time, technology, and materials
- Trees donated by USFS to IDL then on to general public
- A multi-agency Fire conference to report initial assessment findings to the public
- Grant proposals (requested over \$2 million in grant funds) Appendix U
- Continued interagency coordination meetings
- Collaborative effort to disburse \$100,000 appropriation for fire recovery
- Multi-agency assessment
- Committed over \$784,000 in post fire response, assessment, and recovery (Appendix U)
- Landowner site visits on 8 fires

## Multi-Agency Fire Recovery Effort

The inventory and assessment was completed using resources from private, local, state, tribal and federal agencies as well as volunteers, private contractors, and non-governmental entities.

This report is an estimate of the situation, and contains the professional opinions and insight of the WRG technical and leadership members. Professional opinions and insight are based on physical on-the-ground assessments and the modeling and/or analysis performed as part of this report. This report contains information relating possible impacts in the burn areas due to burn severity characteristics, physical site conditions, runoff potentials, and debris flow risks. The focus is on the

impacts to life and improved property, including public infrastructure, as well as critical environmental concerns.

This report is intended to assist governments and land managers to identify potential post-fire risks, plan for the impacts of the wildfires on their communities, infrastructure and environment and to assist in prioritizing restoration efforts. In addition, the report helps to identify where supplemental assistance is needed to address identified concerns.

Several products are developed as part of the post fire inventory and assessment effort. These products include:

[Inventory and Assessment Report](#) – Download this report from <http://www.nezperceswcd.org/WildfireRestoration/2015PostFireInventoryandAssessment.aspx>.

[Spatial Products](#) – GIS shapefiles, google earth compatible spatial files are available on Inside Idaho website at <https://insideidaho.org/>

[Analysis Reports](#) – These reports are specific to one type of analysis and are either summarized or referenced in this report. The reports can be found in Volume 2 – Appendices.

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## Key Findings

Critical values in, or in close proximity to the burned areas were identified. The primary values at risk resulting from the 2015 fires are public safety (public water systems, debris flows, flooding), transportation infrastructure (roads, trails, culverts), and environmental (ESA listed fish habitat, water quality). Each assessment was evaluated for its risk to the critical values. Table 1 summarizes the evaluation. Public safety is denoted as “S”, public infrastructure is denoted as “I” and environmental risks are identified as “E”.

Public safety risks were identified by the emergency operation center coordinators in the respective county where the safety risk was identified. The EOC coordinators were presented with the analysis of the technical group and asked to identify those concerns that were considered a public safety threat. Any finding that was considered a public safety threat was identified with an “S” in Table 1.

Transportation infrastructure risks were identified by the emergency operation center (EOC) coordinators in the respective county where the safety risk was identified. The EOC coordinators reviewed the data compiled by the technical team and consulted with their road departments and local subject matter experts to identify those concerns that are considered a threat to public infrastructure. Any finding considered a threat to public infrastructure was identified with an “I” in Table 1.

Environmental risks include threats to ESA listed habitat, water quality, and other sensitive areas as identified by the responsible federal action agency, state agency, or local governmental agency. The two agencies responsible for ESA listed habitats are the US Fish and Wildlife Service and the NOAA National Marine Fisheries Service. The Idaho Department of Environmental Quality is responsible for identifying water quality concerns within the state. The Idaho Department of Fish

and Game, Nez Perce Tribe, local soil and water conservation districts and Idaho Department of Lands identify local sensitive environmental areas. Any item considered a threat to ESA listed species, water quality or a local sensitive area was identified with an “E” in Table 1.

Details for each identified concern are contained in the discussion for the respective fire. In summary, there were 15 assessments identified as public safety concerns, six assessment areas identified as threats to public infrastructure and 34 assessment areas identified as environmental risks.

The elected officials for the local jurisdictions for each fire met and prioritized actions for each fire. Included in the prioritization meetings were the relevant subject matter experts (scientists) who could explain the analysis findings for the fires. The elected officials included the appropriate conservation district board of elected officials and the county commissioners. The prioritized actions are included in the discussion for each fire.

**Table 1. Critical Value Identification by fire.**

Analysis Category	Clearwater				Tepee			
	Complex	Fisher	Municipal	Noble	Slide	Springs	Wash	Woodrat
Burn Scar Flash Flooding Analysis	-	S, E	S	-	-	S	-	S
Culverts/Bridges at Risk	I	S, I	I	-	-	-	-	I
Debris Flow Hazard by Basin	S, E	E	S, E	-	E	S, I, E	E	E
Debris Flow Hazard by Stream Segment	E	E	S, E	-	E	E	E	E
Erosion Hazard	E	E	E	E	E	E	E	E
Farm Infrastructure Damages	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Fire Suppression Restoration Needs	E	E	-	-	-	-	-	-
Fish Habitat at Risk	E	E	-	-	E	E	E	-
Flooding Hazard	S, I	S	S	-	-	S	-	-
FS BAER Analysis	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Hazard Trees	-	S	-	-	-	-	-	-
NRCS EWP Analysis	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Reforestation Needs	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Road Erosion Hazards	I	E	-	-	-	I	-	-
Structures at Risk	-	S	S	S	-	-	-	S
Water Systems At Risk	-	S	-	-	-	I	-	S
Weed Invasion Analysis	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Wildlife Habitat at Risk	E	E	-	-	-	E	-	-

## Document Structure and Organization

The NCIWRG assembled and compiled this document. The document is organized into chapters and appendices.

### Chapters

Chapter 1 provides the overview of the 2015 restoration efforts, includes background on WRG formation and purpose.

Chapter 2 describes the assessment areas selected to evaluate the focal fires. This section provides the assessment description, relationship to wildfires, methods and a brief summary of the results. Information is presented in alphabetical order by assessment category name. Details for each fire are provided in subsequent chapters. Each focal fire was evaluated for 24 assessment or inventory areas.

Chapters 3 to 10 discuss each of the fires in detail and provide results of the various assessments. Data is organized by a fire overview description, summary of key findings, followed by any spatial maps for the specific assessment area.