

5 years after fire: Cooke City philosophic

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COOKE CITY (AP) - In some ways, things in this tiny mountain town are as hot as they've ever been.

Five years ago, fire swept through this scenic community at the northeast entrance to Yellowstone National Park. The blaze was a backfire, intentionally ignited by firefighters to rob fuel from the "let burn" wildfires sweeping out of the park.

But in the tinder-dry forest that surrounded this place, the backfire got out of control fast, raging through September, smoldering into October, and stretching miles and miles past Cooke City into the wilderness to the east.

To the southeast, the Clover Mist fire marched out of the park at the same time, and ate up public and private property in Wyoming.

Singed and smoked, Silvergate and Cooke City dodged the bullet but a lot of outlying homes burned to the ground. A couple dozen were reduced to ashes, including the deep-woods cabin of Tommy Garrison, an octagenarian hermit who died two years later in a stark motel room in Cooke City.

Other victims included deer, a bear, the moose that a Department of State Lands fire crew put in a stew, and the community's sense of isolation.

Ever since the fires of '88, when firefighters, policemen and media took over the town, Cooke City's permanent residents, numbering fewer than 100, have gotten more publicity per-capita than almost anywhere imaginable.

The source of all that news - and the continuing heat - is Noranda Minerals' controversial plan for a big gold mine here.

Residents are sharply divided over the mine, with mutterings and distrust aimed at each other and at the mining company or environmental groups that represent the two sides. In 1988, similars shouting and insults were aimed at the Park Service and Forest Service.

But, as many people like to point out, nobody moves to a place like Cooke City to exercise a gregarious nature and arguing has been part of the way of life here for a century.

Hays Kirby, the firebrand owner of a motel in Silvergate, still gets excited when he talks about the fires of '88.

"A large percentage of our guests just gasp," Kirby said, gesturing to the forest of blackened trees across the highway from his home and motel. "'How could it happen?' they ask."

Kirby, one of the most vocal critics of the Park Service in '88 (he put up a sign thanking Park Superintendant Bob Barbee for the "Barbeeque"), now admits he was wrong about some things. Elk populations are still high, for instance. "I was wrong about the elk," he said.

But he still grumbles that the Park Service didn't fight the fires when they were small, didn't call in military help when it would have been helpful and that the agency has done such a good job of marketing the fire to the public.

"The Park Service never acknowledged they had a problem until Washington took it out of their hands," Kirby said. "In the worst case scenario, it was a case of bureaucratic arson. In the best case, it was incompetence that's hard to put on a scale."

The post-fire increases in visitor interest and visitor numbers in the park is due to brilliant marketing by the Park Service and perhaps some fudged statistics, he claims. "The American public has a very short memory and that's what they were counting on," Kirby said. "This is a tragedy that didn't have to happen."

Others are more sanguine about the aftermath of the fires.

"I'd just as soon they hadn't lit the backfire, but a guy's got to make the best of it," said Mitch Menuey, 37, a builder and a lifelong resident of the Cooke City area.

Menuey's small sawmill a few miles east of town lost three buildings in the blaze and four of his neighbors lost homes. The government reimbursed him for his direct losses, although it took 3½ years to get the money.

"As far I'm concerned, they treated me pretty fair," he said, adding the government paid 100 percent of his claim. "But I was plumb honest about it. Some of the others got kind of greedy."

The Forest Service also spent about \$590,000 on reclamation work in the Cooke City region after the fires, Gallatin National Forest hydrologist Mark Story said.

That paid for clearing about 150 miles of wilderness trail, using helicopters to plant grass seed on about 3,200 acres, and building erosion barriers on about 400 acres above Cooke City.

Story said that, in retrospect, building the erosion bars probably wasn't necessary. They are all but invisible today in the tall grass beneath the burned snags, he said. But he also noted that hindsight is 20/20 and different weather would have created problems.

"If we'd have had a 1 or 2 inch-an-hour rain, it would have been a lot different," Story said.

The entire Cooke City area looks a lot different than it did five years ago, but recovery is well under way. Grass is waist high in many burn areas, the black bark is peeling off the snags and pine seedlings are growing fast.

"It took some getting used to but now I don't think it makes any difference," Menuey said, surveying the burned forest around his home. "Not much we can do about it anyway. Another 100 years and you won't be able to tell the difference."

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The Independent-Record (Helena, Montana), Oct 18, 1993, Page 3.
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