

Smoke Signals: A Story of Initiative, Responsibility, Community and Resilience

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Initiative

As smoke from Chelan County's 1994 wildfires drifted down into the valley, Ross Frank turned a critical eye to his 120-acre ranch. With approximately 180,000 acres burning all around him (comparable in size to the massive Rim fire currently burning near Yosemite National Park), Frank wondered what could be done to save his farm and his heritage. A horse-logger by trade, Frank made his living working in the 50,000-acre Chumstick Watershed, just north of Leavenworth, Washington. While the 1994 fires would spare Frank's property, they would fundamentally change his view of forest management, wildfires, and what it means to live in the West.

Talking with Frank now is like receiving a crash course in land stewardship. Annually, he removes small trees, prunes tree limbs, and clears dense brush from his property. The work has become a part of his routine. It isn't something special, it simply *is*. Moreover, according to Frank, this type of work should be a part of the lives of all who live in the woods. In 2003, when National Fire Plan funds became available to support fuel reduction in an adjacent neighborhood, Frank participated in the community funds allocation process with the intention of spreading the knowledge gained to the Chumstick. Frank's efforts, in part, led to the 2008 formation of the Chumstick Wildfire Stewardship Coalition—a grassroots collaborative dedicated to fire resilience and forest restoration.

Responsibility

Tim and Hannah Jones built their dream home at the forest's edge, selecting a piece of property located in the Eagle Creek drainage (a side canyon off the Chumstick Watershed). They moved into the woods for privacy (their names have been changed at their request for the same reason). When the Fisher Fire knocked on the door of the Chumstick Watershed in the summer of 2004, the Jones' evacuated their half-finished home and hoped for the best. Ultimately, the Fisher Fire did not reach their property.

The Jones' see fire as a part of life in eastern Washington. They thought about fire as they improved their property, constructing gravel paths against the house, installing a straight gravel driveway, and trying to break up the fuel adjacent to their home. The Jones' always thought fire would come to their neighborhood with a careless cigarette butt in the grass and so they prepared for the day that smoke would signal fire had returned to the Chumstick.

Community

Today, the Chumstick Wildfire Stewardship Coalition (CWSC) is, by and large, an independent and dedicated group. Their meetings are characterized by passionate people who aren't afraid to speak their minds and to make change. Comprised of residents, a County Commissioner, and representatives from the local Fire District, Conservation Northwest, the Wilderness Society, the Nature Conservancy, the US Forest Service, Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife, Washington Department of Natural Resources, and the South Central Washington Resource Conservation and Development Council, the CWSC has managed to harness their passion and direct it to make positive change in their community. The CWSC mission is simple: to protect lives, property, and infrastructure in the Chumstick Watershed from wildfire. They use collaborative partnership, including outreach and strategic planning, to encourage actions on public and private lands that benefit people, wildlife, forest health, and the community.

Led for a time by Frank, the CWSC developed a vision of forest restoration as a generational practice. The ultimate goal is fire resilient ecological and cultural landscapes throughout North Central Washington. The CWSC has actively pursued National Fire Plan funds, private grant dollars and donations to make this vision a reality. Currently one of eight pilot sites in the nation for the Fire Adapted Communities Learning Network (funded by the US Forest Service's Fire Adapted Communities program), the CWSC is busy sharing lessons learned and best practices with similar communities across the nation so they too can safely co-exist with fire. They actively engage the local population with public meetings, field days and brochures to promote best practices in fuel reduction and Firewise programs. The CWSC helps direct landowners to resources that will make their property more fire resilient so that when (not if) smoke comes again, the community is ready.

Resilience

On August 19th, 2013, the initial reports of a fire in the Chumstick made their way to Chelan County Fire District #3. Chief Kelly O'Brien knew that this fire had the potential to damage structures, infrastructure and resources. His Fire District, as well as personnel from adjacent fire districts, the US Forest Service and Washington State Department of Natural Resources began the initial attack on the fire. Fire personnel started to suppress the fire and protect the threatened structures as best as they could.

By the afternoon of August 20th, pushed by squirrely winds, the Eagle Fire had made its way to the Jones' home. As a Fire Commissioner, Ross Frank was on hand during the suppression effort. He snapped the photo (below) of firefighters protecting the Jones' home. According to Chief O'Brien, firefighters had to spend less time (and money) protecting the Jones' home (and the other prepared homes in the Chumstick) than they did on the homes that were not prepared. "It took half the time to defend the Jones' place and when the fire did get there we were able to engage it safely and effectively," noted O'Brien. This is a sentiment echoed by members of Washington State Incident

Management Team 2, later called in to manage the fire. Incident Commander Nathan Rabe stated that participation in fuel reduction activities “ultimately results in the reduction of risk to firefighters and allows us to fight the fire away from the structures.”



Hannah Jones is quick to say “we aren’t done yet!” with respect to their Firewise actions. They own the only structure lost in the Eagle Fire, a small unused chicken coop they told the initial attack personnel not to waste time, or put themselves at risk, defending. The Jones’ say they feel responsible for living in the woods and for the fire personnel who would come to defend their home. They are, in short, active participants in the fire suppression process because of the work they do before any fire reaches their land. Next time, Hannah says, they will remember to turn off the propane before they evacuate their home; it is just one more thing they can do to help. While the Jones’ did not receive any financial help preparing their home for wildfire, other landowners affected by the Eagle Creek fire did prepare with financial resources (such as National Fire Plan funds) facilitated by the CWSC.

The CWSC has helped complete fuel reduction work on almost 200 acres in the Chumstick Watershed with over 100 more acres scheduled. Approximately \$300,000 has been allocated for direct fuel reduction activities in the Chumstick. It is important to note that landowner assistance programs in the Chumstick are all cost-share. The landowners must participate financially or do a portion of the work themselves. Fuel reduction contractor costs on private land in the Chumstick Watershed average around \$1,600 per acre due to the steep terrain and high cost of transportation; assistance programs cover on average only half of the cost.

In comparison, fighting the Eagle Fire has cost over \$5,150,000 to date (over \$3,500 per acre). Had any structures been lost, the cost would have risen dramatically; conversely, had more homes been prepared, the cost could have been reduced. During the 1994 fires in Chelan County, costs resulting from structure loss and property damage soared into the millions (largely borne by homeowners and insurers). Firewise actions by landowners such as Frank and the Jones' save money by reducing the amount of suppression resources required and minimizing financial damages resulting from structure and property loss.

The CWSC's \$25,000 annual operating budget is scraped together through a combination of private donations and foundation and government grants. Much of those funds are directed at landowner education and collaboration. The aim is to get all landowners to be as prepared and resilient as the Jones'. The CWSC has been lauded by partners as a model for community engagement in fire and fuels management.

At the end of the day, Frank and the Jones' are in agreement: living in the West means taking responsibility for yourself and your property. Groups like the Chumstick Wildfire Stewardship Coalition exist to share the message of resilience and to encourage those who live in the woods to make the choice to adapt to wildfire.
