



Upper Iron Creek, born long, long ago,
died June 10, 2012.

Death by natural causes and political
correctness.

RIP

WHITEWATER FIRE, A LASTING LEGACY

(COVER PHOTO)

**PRE-FIRE PHOTO
TAKEN IN AUGUST,
2011.**

**A SPRING AREA HIGH
ON IRON CREEK, IN
THE “HIGH INTENSITY
BURN” AREA OF
WHITEWATER FIRE.**



**ALLEN AND RENNY ON
SAPPER. AUGUST, 2011.
IRON CREEK (HEAD OF THE
MIDDLE FORK OF THE GILA
RIVER)**

My name is Allen Campbell, and I have lived at Gila Hotsprings, for 68 years, surrounded by the Gila Wilderness. My early years were spent guiding clients, but now all my trips are for pleasure. We still depend on the draw of this great and unique Wilderness for our livelihood, its water for our farm, and its deer and elk for our food. Up until the 1990s we had a Special Use Permit to graze the Gila Hotsprings Ranch horses and mules on about 75,000 acres of the Gila Wilderness. Now we grow irrigated pastures for the ranch livestock, watered by the West and Middle forks of the Gila River. Enough about the Campbell family but you can see we are joined at the hip to the Gila Wilderness, for better or worse. I think we are looking at some hard times in the future.

It has been six months since the end of the Whitewater-Baldy Complex Fire, and a year and six months after the Miller Fire. I have had a chance to visit many of the burned areas, and see the changes that are starting to evolve. Only now can I begin to understand the long-term social and economic impacts that will affect all the surrounding communities.

The greatest issue is the magnitude of the combined burned area, 385,000 acres. This is almost the size of the entire Gila Wilderness. About 80,000 acres were denuded or nearly denuded. (These figures are not exact, as the Forest Service hasn't released the Burn Severity on 53,000 acres). This is uncharted territory when it comes to historical references.

The Miller Fire

We are starting to understand how negatively we will be impacted.

In late April of 2011, there was an unattended campfire near Miller Springs that developed into a forest fire. At this time, Southwestern New Mexico was under a near-record drought with record low river flows.

It was monitored, but no effort was made to man it due to “safety concerns”, even though it was burning through areas that had several overlapping recent burns. The Miller Fire moved slowly for about a week, only making runs where previous burns left pockets of downed timber and brush regrowth. About ten days after ignition the fire threatened the Gila Cliff Dwellings and Gila Hotsprings. At this time a significant wind event was forecasted, and crews were brought in to protect private and government structures. This strong wind event caused all the serious scorched acreage as the fire crossed Little Creek and the West Fork at the Gila Cliff Dwellings. One of the containment problems from the very start of the Miller fire is that was so early in



**EE CANYON. THE ENTIRE DRAINAGE HAS FEW
SURVIVING TREES. (INTENSE HEAT) THE PHOTO WAS
TAKEN IN JUNE 30, 2011.**

the fire season that few fire crews were available to the Gila National Forest.

Dwellings. (EE canyon photo) This run completely denuded the Pinon-Juniper forest between the drainages. Even the perennial grass roots were killed in areas, something I have never seen before.

The wind settled down after three days, and fire then stayed on the ground for the most part. Fire crews were able to stop the run towards Black Mountain, and hold lines along the upper West Fork and across McKenna Park. This part of the Miller Fire was mostly beneficial, with very few areas of crown fires

McKenna Park is relatively flat with numerous shallow canyons, and one of the finest examples of an open, grassy Ponderosa forest. Numerous fires have burned across it in the past 60 years, and never once was there a strong wind event. The first time I rode across it was in 1959, and it looks about the same this fall as it did back in the 1959.

On May 25th, 2011, the Forest Service released a very self-serving news release stating how successfully the Gila had been burned with low intensity fires, which they solely attributed to previous burns. This was not true. The perfect example is the West Fork above the Cliff Dwellings and EE Canyon which burned severely in the late 1980s. This area was again severely scorched by the Miller Fire.

If the wind had not dropped before the Miller Fire reached the heavy fuels of the Diablo Range and McKenna Park, the fire could have been more like the Whitewater Baldy Complex Fire.

I can honestly say that all the severe burns occurred only under high wind conditions which lasted about three days during the Miller Fire. It made no difference whether areas were previously burned or not.



PHOTO: MILLER FIRE, DIABLO PARK, (PART OF MCKENNA PARK) JUNE 30, 2011. THE FIRE WAS SIMPLY FOLLOWING THE FINE FUELS, NOT WIND DRIVEN.



PHOTO TAKEN IN MCKENNA PARK. JUNE 30, 2011. The foreground was a small area, severely burned 30 years ago. Each following fire, consuming the downed logs, killed remaining trees. The Miller fire consumed the last logs as evident by the traces on the ground.

This evidence shows, that in even moderately burned areas, it takes repeated burns to remove all the fuel created by a previous fire that caused high mortality in a dense stand of timber.

The only requirement is enough fine fuel to carry the flames from tree to tree, and the wind will cause the intensity.

Often, the subsequent fires further expand the open areas, creating an unending cycle. Seed trees nearby, often turn such openings into “dog hair stands” of seedlings. The stand of pines in the background is the remnant of a dog-hair stand that was impossible to ride through 50 years ago.

The Whitewater Baldy Complex fire.

A very fine synopsis of the Whitewater fire was recently written by Doug Boykin, Socorro District Ranger, NM EMNRD, Socorro District. It is titled:

NARRATIVE OF WHITEWATER BALDY COMPLEX FIRE MAY 23, 2012 TO JUNE 19, 2012 OBSERVATION AND ACTIONS

Unlike the Gila National Forest’s Supervisor and the Wilderness District Ranger, Doug Boykin has spent his life in New Mexico forests and has a very close connection to our unique Spruce and Fir forests that cap the Mogollon Mountain Range. Doug’s Narrative is very complete, and should be read by everyone who wants to understand the full implications of this destructive fire. I will let his narrative speak for itself.

I have only a couple of points I feel need to be made related to Doug’s Narrative:

The crest trail, which extends from Sandy Point to the head of Langstroth Creek has served as a durable fire line on many fires in the past. The first was the 1948 Lookout Ridge Fire, 1974 Langstroth Fire, 1977 (about) Mogollon Creek Fire (Gila Center Fire crew lead by Hank Dominguez), and another very intense fire in 1996 that burned out most of the West Fork of Mogollon Creek. All of these fires were contained by “Boots on the Ground” and other resources available in their respective eras without firefighter mortalities. None of these fires penetrated far onto the northern slopes that the Whitewater Fire so devastated. They also left the west slope of Mogollon Baldy very “well burned” and scantily timbered where the 2012 Baldy fire started, “on an open grassy slope”. This begs the question; Why wasn’t the Baldy Fire suppressed immediately?

In 1966 I spent considerable time on Whitewater Baldy examining the ecosystem of that Spruce/Fir forest with Dr. Roy Johnson, a plant ecologist at Western New Mexico University. The view from Whitewater Baldy to the South had no aspens visible, an indication of a complete absence of historical fire history on all the northern slopes of the highest parts of the Mogollons. A view North, from Mogollon Baldy, shows wide areas of aspens, indications of past burns. In our exploration, we found no sign of fire history on these north slopes, and only shallow, damp needle litter.

The rainfall data on the crest from Mogollon Baldy to Willow Mountain and their northwest slopes, have the highest annual precipitation of any area in the Southwest United States. (except Mount Humphrey (AZ) and the Wheeler/ Truchas Peak areas in New Mexico) The annual precipitation is in excess of 45 inches for these areas.

For the above reasons, I believe the Mogollon Crest is a “Relic Forest” that has survived since the last Ice Age, and has survived due to its unbroken Spruce/Fir canopy which shields the forest floor from sunlight and allows snow to linger into late spring. This canopy also prevents the growth of grass that would supply the fine fuels necessary for a ground fire to spread. In essence, the north slopes were a self-perpetuating ecosystem that the Whitewater Complex Fire upset by the chance alignment of several conditions. The extended drought, the chance location of two fire starts, an unusually strong wind event, and following the “safety issue” that prevented control of the fire when it was very small. As Doug Boykin said, “the perfect storm.”

The Lasting Legacy, The Forest

It is generally accepted that the severely burned areas of the Whitewater Complex Fire will take centuries to return to their former spruce and fir dominated ecosystem. Where seed trees are available or aspen roots survived the fire, much of the severely burned area will become aspen groves. There will now be an earlier snow melt-out under the young aspens and denuded areas, resulting in longer burn windows.

Much of the severe burned areas have been seeded with barley and some native grasses to prevent extensive erosion. In the future, the native grasses will increase to a point that grassland will probably cover thousands of acres.

Grass will allow snow to melt off earlier, opening a window for fires to spread into remaining spruce and fir areas. I see no way back to the Relic Spruce/Fir forest without centuries of fire-free conditions where again the dense forest canopy protects the trees within the microclimate it provides.

Before recovery can even begin, several more burns will be necessary to remove the fuel that exist as charred standing tree trunks. Prescribed burns are the logical tool to speed up a recovery, but an option not available to Wilderness Areas even if money was not an issue. It is possible for future fires to remove the Spruce species from the Mogollons as it has for the Black Range.

Grasslands and meadows have been small and infrequent in the higher elevations of the Gila. Their increase could be an advantage to the deer and elk populations. In fairness, tree canopy removal is very positive for grazing animals. A virtual boom for them. (and maybe hunters on two and four legs)

The Lasting Legacy, Economic

There is the general opinion that clearing a forest of trees and replacing it with grasslands will increase the flow of water from that watershed. 94% of the flow from the Gila and San Francisco Rivers belong to Arizona; New Mexico residents will see none of the benefits. Until the watershed is repaired, there could be serious flow deficits during the dry season. We can also expect a much shorter spring runoff and higher flood stages from the early snow melt-out.

This summer we experienced a very erratic flow on the West Fork of the Gila. Our irrigation ditch washed out 6 times due to small floods, despite a lower than average summer rains. Each of the small rises arrived at our ditch head gate 18 to 20 hours after a rain event over burned areas. (Four precipitation sensors were established by the USGS to give early warning of potential flooding.)

Ash from the fire has built up over two feet deep in much of our ditches, and I expect ditch cleaning costs will be over \$200 per irrigated acre over the next three years.

For the above reasons, I expect future hardships for irrigators on the New Mexico side of the border.

At this point, the economic loss to the community of Gila Hotsprings is about \$40,000 due to reduced tourism during the fire and Forest closures that are still in effect due to trail closures. This trend will continue because of poor trail conditions and people simply preferring green forests.

Fishing is non-existent on all tributaries of the Gila River except the East Fork, and the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish is not planning to restock sports fish in any of the Gila waters due to Endangered Species mandates. To be fair, I understand there are some catfish on the lower Gila, but I don't think that will excite many trout fishermen. I will point out that most of the Gila headwaters used to be popular trout waters before the "Manage-Burn" philosophy became politically correct. This philosophy has also set back the Gila Trout recovery plans, as well as dried up a source of income for outfitters and guides. The Whitewater complex fire is just the last nail in the coffin for the trout fisheries in the Gila.

The Wilderness District has requested \$600,000 for trail repair, which they admit is way less than optimum for the trails that need repaired. Almost every mile of trails on the Western two thirds of the Gila Wilderness is now closed. As a result of the Miller Fire, numerous trails in the Wilderness District are still impassable. All trails in the Whitewater burn are closed indefinitely (October 2012). *A year later, some are still closed.*

The loss of 12 homes in Willow Creek Subdivision subsequent flooding and the general loss of quality due to a blackened forest has caused several millions of dollars loss to it's residents.

Finally, there are the costs of suppressing the two fires of 384,000 acres and the BAER Team restoration projects. I do not have a cost on that, but \$50,000,000 + is a good estimate.

The Lasting Legacy, Floods

Future flooding is hard to project, because such a large amount of the West and Middle Fork' headwater are burned out, there is no historical perspective for such conditions. I don't think 5 and 10 year flood events will do serious damage to the Gila Hotsprings. This is because the river has over-flow capacity and is in good shape through the private land. Other communities, such as Glenwood and Willow Creek are in a very vulnerable position due to their crowded flood plain.

We can expect that smaller floods will be more common, and the water will carry much more silt, sand and gravel. This series of floods will raise the riverbed level due to siltation, increasing potential damage by big floods when they happen. This final legacy is dependent on rain amounts and frequency, as well as how soon the burns regenerate. At this time it seems prudent to limit natural fires throughout the Gila Wilderness until ground cover has been established in the severely burned areas. It is correctly said, "The only difference between a medicine and poison is the size of the dose."

The Lasting Legacy, Policy Changes

Before this discussion, I would like to suggest those with an interest in history and Forest Service fire fighting roots read the book, *The Big Burn: Teddy Roosevelt & the Fire that Saved America*, by Timothy Egan. It is about a forest fire that burned 3.5 million acres in the Northern Rockies, destroying several towns, but creating a number of heroes. A good book about 1910 values. The Whitewater Complex fire, albeit smaller, has many parallels, multiple small fires and an unusual strong wind event the most stark example. Even today, 100+ years later, there are still many denuded areas, and badly eroded water sheds in those millions of acres.

The U.S. Forest Service fire control policy has changed drastically in the past. After the Big Burn, the "10:00 policy" became the norm. All fires were to be contained by 10:00 in the morning, and if not that morning, the following morning. This was a rigid, one size fits all, national policy. That policy didn't always work well, as in many ecosystems, particularly the Ponderosa Pine forests of the Southwest. Total fire suppression resulted in such large fuel loads and the Ponderosa Pine forests became so choked up the "savanna" conditions disappeared and the fires behaved the same as the Mixed Conifer forests, severe burns with total canopy destruction.

A new policy evolved into "Let it burn, fire is Natural" another one size fits all, national policy. "Managed Fires" is the correct policy name, i.e., the Whitewater - Baldy complex Fire was *managed*.

Somewhere in the middle is the correct policy, because of the extreme variation in forest ecosystem. The Forest Service must also consider the needs of the citizens for which it is ultimately responsible. The Wilderness Ranger, Ray Torres, made a passionate statement in reference as to why he chose not to man the Baldy Fire when it was very small. Safety of the crew was the sole concern. To scorn his concern is a slippery slope, but I think it needs to be put into perspective: Is it safer to put a small, well trained Hot Shot crew on a small ground fire or a 1500-person crew on a raging firestorm? As Neal Armstrong said "*When you embark on a dangerous journey, safety concerns will help you reach the goal, and if safety is your goal, then stay home, as you have reached that goal.*"

I grant that Ray Torres had no crystal ball, but the Forest Service had archives of information on the past histories of fires on that very slope. Terrell Shelly had no crystal ball either. He is a rancher with life long history in the Gila area. Terrell reported the fire and stated it needed to be contained or it would get ugly. It turns out he was right.

Personally, I think the safety issue is bogus. It is an adequate excuse for a bad policy that only exists because it is politically correct. The USFS failed to recognize the dangerous burn potential of our Spruce/Fir forest. They also did not consider the dry winter and high wind potential. The Gila National Forest has had success in control burns, but always at lower elevations with lower fuel loading. They were fixated on their successes in the past, and failed to factor in the potential serious weather conditions which could and did come about.

None of the persons that made these decisions have to live with the Legacy of the Miller and Whitewater Complex Fires. They did not personally suffer the costs and losses of the those who live within the Forest. We have never heard an apology, just a rather lame excuse, probably on advise of attorney.

The first policy change needs to be Prescribed Burns, even in the Wilderness where it abuts private land holdings. These buffer zones could make it much easier to protect homes and businesses. Prescribed Burns could also protect high-value Old Growth areas because they could be carried out in seasons without high-wind potential.

Next, the fire fighters need the funds for aerial fire suppression equipment. 2012 was a very bad year to fight fires all across the West because of a shortage of fire retardant bombers. This was the result of aging, retrofitted fixed wing aircraft which were not originally designed to fight fire. Today, there are only 11 heavy retardant bombers in the United States, instead of about 40. The use of these aircraft has been very effective in protecting resources (and firefighters) on large fires, and often the quickest and safest method of preventing small fires from becoming fully developed. A retardant drop can buy time for Smoke Jumpers or other trained crews to arrive on-site.

Fire crews deserve technologically advanced rotary air frames for their special needs. This would cost a lot, but is imperative to reach and extinguish (safely) small fires before they become unmanageable.

The Natural Fire Monitor policy needs be suspended on all the burned watersheds of the Miller and Whitewater Baldy Complex Fires until ground cover has been well established on those areas. This change won't mitigate our existing catastrophic flood potential, but at least not prolong or increase this potential.

The objections to Prescribed Burns smoke should not prevent ignition of these fires in the fall and early winter seasons. This prevents the Gila National Forest from using their best tool to prevent large damaging fires. Case in point is the October 2012 burn on Sheep Corral, when there were numerous complaints about the smoke. The public needs to understand if they want to live inside of, or close to the forest, seasonal smoke is the price they must pay to protect that forest and their homes.

Summation

This summation was written in February 2013, after a meeting with the Supervisor, Fire Maintenance Officer and the Wilderness District Ranger. Some items were changed to more closely portray true conditions and actions taken.

The following is my opinions, based on the above facts and history.

The Whitewater-Baldy Complex Fire was the most destructive fire in the recorded history of the Gila, in size as well as intensity. The fact it was a "natural cause" fire makes not a whit of difference in its legacy. It did not "destroy" any ecosystems, it simply altered them in several drastic ways. Given enough time, progression in biotic and edaphic conditions will bring back some sort of forest and/or grasslands. Many centuries will be required for this evolution.

Meanwhile, economic, resources and recreational values will be drastically reduced for all people. Continuing management, and costs, will be necessary to first clean up the enormous load of dead timber, the silted rivers, and damaged infrastructure, so that the burned area can again be beneficial for human use.

I do not believe the Forest Service is up to the task. This is evident in the fact that livestock grazing is consistently reduced even though it is a cost effective way to remove fine fuels. Also, the logging industry has been so reduced, except for salvage, it is no longer an economic identity in the Gila. Trail closures for safety reasons are still in effect. It is political correctness rather than scientific and economic reasons that so hobble the Forest Service.

Unfortunately, I can see no improvement under the current administration. Be prepared for the upcoming fire season, and for your safety and that of your property, please clean up around your houses. Citizens need to be proactive in their own interest.



WHITEWATER COMPLEX FIRE SMOKE PLUME, as viewed from Gila Hotsprings, May 23, 2012

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The idea to write this paper took seed when the ash fell on the green pasture pictured above. I was heart broken. To lash out at those responsible was not going to be productive at that point. I had to see muddy rivers, the dead fish, the denuded forest landscape, and many, many developing legacies. I had to talk to Forest Service people, and others with first hand knowledge of what happened and what went wrong. The bottom line is, it took 5 months to get this far. This is my story, and is as fair and accurate as I can make it. The Whitewater Legacy is just starting to reveal itself. If next year is as dry as this year across the West, we will see Act II. All the same players, conditions and policies, will still be there.

If there are any questions or comments, you can reach me at the addresses below.

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