

# Rain brings hope to fire-stricken states

by William Claiborne  
The Washington Post  
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BOISE, Idaho — A series of weather systems moving from the Pacific toward the Northwest Wednesday brought the promise of weekend rain and blessed relief to thousands of weary firefighters, but officials said it was too early to predict an end to the most costly fire season ever.

Fire directors from five federal agencies emerged from their daily strategy session at the National Interagency Fire Center here Wednesday morning to say they were more optimistic than at any time this year that they would see at least a brief slowdown in some of the 85 fast-spreading blazes that now engulf 1.64 million acres of woodlands in 16 western and southern states.

Since January, 6.4 million acres have been destroyed in 73,357 wildland fires, more than double the 10-year average for January through September. Fire suppression so far this year has cost a record \$626 million and currently

involves 25,000 firefighters in the field.

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said. "But these folks have been in this business 25 or 30 years, and they don't want a big adrenaline rush and then a big letdown."

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director of fire and aviation  
for the federal Bureau of  
Land Management (BLM)

the fire season and, at the very least, give us time to redeploy our resources and catch our breath," said Larry E. Hamilton, director of fire and aviation for the federal Bureau of Land Management (BLM).

"This morning people here were happier than I've seen them in weeks, because they see that perhaps the end is in sight," Hamilton

He said that in the past, weather systems brought relief, only to pass quickly. Then temperatures warmed up, and the tinder dried and became highly combustible again.

Hamilton said that there is still a danger of high winds whipping up forest fires in Montana, Wyoming and Utah. But he expected one to two inches of rain over the week-

end should slow down the spread of fires elsewhere in the Northwest enough to allow the repositioning of smoke jumpers, aircraft and other personnel, and equipment to new areas, depending on the changes in the fire pattern.

At high altitudes, the precipitation will be in the form of snow and could smother some small fires as they break out, Hamilton said.

Heavy rain fell Wednesday on Wyoming's biggest fire, a 14,750-acre blaze north of Kemmerer, and significantly slowed its spread, officials there said.

At the Northern Rockies Coordination Center in Missoula, Mont., spokesman Tom Valluzzi said: "Things are looking a little bit better. It's beginning to cool off."

Meteorologists said new rains — if they materialize — would mark the West's first real weather pattern change in three months. Though thunderstorms always present a danger of increased lightning, officials said the rains, moist air and cooler temperatures could have a significant effect.

Rick Ochea, the chief National Weather Service meteorologist

here, said one low-pressure system moving from Alaska to Idaho, Washington state and Oregon over the weekend is a "lock" to happen, and that another one expected to arrive on Tuesday or Wednesday is a "near lock." In addition, a third thunderstorm system developing over the Pacific could follow the first two systems.

"They aren't going to be a knockout punch, but the cumulative effect is that they'll help," Ochea said. "They should come close enough together so there won't be time enough to dry out in between."

Cooler air across the Northwest spread optimism to firefighters on the lines as well. Crews Wednesday battled nine new blazes, many of them in hard-hit Montana.

Jim Olson, 46, a BLM smoke jumper here who has made 420 jumps since 1978, greeted the weather reports with a great smile of relief and cautious hope for some rest.

"Maybe the door's open. We sure need it, because it's been a long season and everybody's ready for a break," said Olson, who also serves as parachute loft manager at the

sprawling national fire center adjacent to Boise's airport. "But three rainstorms won't kill the season. Only snow will put the fires out."

In Montana, the worst wildfires in half a century prompted Gov. Marc Racicot (R) earlier this week to ask the Clinton administration for federal assistance to offset the spiraling economic losses. Racicot said 31 large fires burning on 656,000 acres in Montana are costing state businesses \$3 million a day.

But fire managers in Montana said most of the state's fires made no significant advances after overnight temperatures dipped to the mid-40s in some areas. Crews were able to complete fire lines around a 20,800-acre fire south of Big Sky and started discussing mop-up and rehabilitation plans.

About 100 of the 150 families who were forced to leave their homes in Red Lodge, Mont., after a 2,500-acre fire advanced to within three miles of the town were allowed to return on Tuesday, as firefighters and equipment poured into the area.

## Fatal crash renews debate over elderly drivers

by Greg Risling  
and Solomon Moore  
Los Angeles Times  
August 30, 2000

LOS ANGELES — A 91-year-old driver who backed into a bank lobby and killed a 1-year-old boy said Wednesday that he won't drive again but disagreed with those who say some people are simply too old to drive.

"I don't want to drive anymore because of what happened at the bank," Val Conrad said the day after the fatal accident in the San Fernando Valley community of Sylmar. "I'm very shook up about it and would rather not be on the road anymore."

In the past, Conrad said, he has ignored those who told him he was too old to drive. He also touted his clean driving record and defended his legal right to drive. He passed a road test seven days ago, obtaining a valid, though heavily restricted license.

"If they pass the tests, why shouldn't they be allowed to drive?" Conrad said at his home in Sylmar.

The accident that killed 1-year-old Nathaniel Escudero, also of Sylmar, occurred on the same day the California Assembly passed the Senior Drivers Bill, which would require the Department of Motor Vehicles to review elderly drivers' abilities more closely at the request of a police officer, doctor or family member.

The case also highlights an issue of growing importance as America's population of seniors and their political clout increase: more older people are on the road than ever before.

The trend has led auto companies to target senior citizens with safer, more comfortable cars and has led to the creation of special driving courses for older people. Aging motorists also have sparked a debate about what additional driving restrictions, if any, should be applied to them.

According to the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety, people age 65 and older are involved in more fatal car accidents than any age group except people younger than 25. Still, legislators have been reluctant to impinge on senior citizens' driving privileges for fear of attracting the wrath of powerful and well-financed advocacy groups, such as the AARP, which lists 34

million members nationwide. "I ran into a wall," said California state Sen. Tom Hayden, who wrote the original Senior Drivers Bill that would have allowed the DMV to target elderly drivers for more frequent testing. The AARP opposed the version of the bill.

"Anybody who voted for that bill would be accused of taking seniors' licenses away," Hayden said. The AARP endorsed the final version, which did not mention any particular age group and passed the state Assembly by a vote of 68-7.

Pat Luby, an AARP lobbyist based in Sacramento, said one's driving ability should be evaluated on an individual basis.

"The easiest thing to do when you have a tragedy like yesterday is say he shouldn't be driving," he said. "But we don't know that . . . something might have happened to him right before the accident, a stroke or something."

Detective Tom Whetzel of the Los Angeles Police Department's Valley Traffic Division said police remain unclear about what caused the accident.

"I didn't hit the brake," Conrad said. "But I don't remember hitting the accelerator either. I really don't know what happened."

DMV spokesman Evan Nossoff said Conrad obtained his most recent license Aug. 24.

"We're obviously concerned about that," Nossoff said. "We're going to look into that, being that he just passed a drive test."

According to the DMV, Conrad was prohibited from driving at night, on the highway or without corrective lenses.

Nossoff said Conrad's license was up for renewal on a yearly basis instead of the standard five-year period. Conrad is due to renew his license Dec. 5 because he applied so late in the year.

"Generally, one-year licenses are issued when there is a physical or mental condition at issue," Nossoff said. Conrad's specific case is confidential, he added.

But Conrad said he takes daily medications, including insulin for his diabetes.

Elderly drivers typically experience slower reflexes and impaired vision, said Dr. Ed Schneider, dean of University of Southern California's Leonard Davis School of Gerontology. For example, senior citizens often lose some depth perception, particularly at night.

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