

CURRERE

Fighting Forest Fires

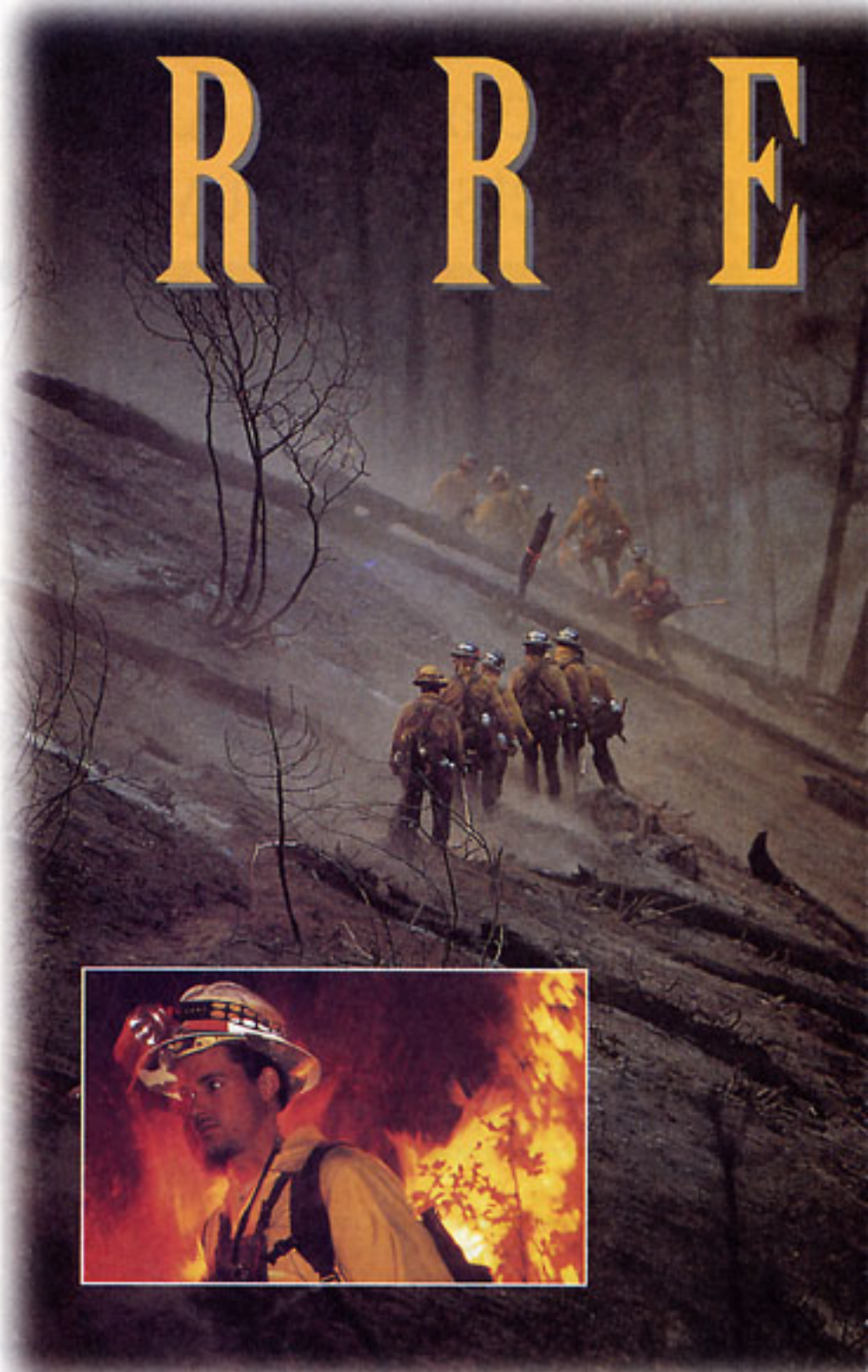
Burning Issues in the 'Urban-Rural Interface'

If your concept of Alaska is of the frozen north, then you're watching too many movies. A great deal of Alaska is forest, as the June 1996, Miller's Reach #2 fire near the Matanuska Valley town of Wasilla demonstrated. Fire in this Anchorage suburb caused more destruction than any other historical fire in the state. By month's end, this fire, in what's come to be known as the "Urban-Rural Interface," burned 37,400 forested acres and 440 buildings bordering the area. Over \$12 million was spent on fire suppression, excluding property damage and federally subsidized temporary housing and disaster relief. Fire officials say Miller's Reach #2 was no accident; they believe bottle rockets were used to set it at two separate points.

Overall, in 1996 the U.S. suffered its worst fire season since the mid-1950s. The awesome dollar value is still being tabulated, but more than six million acres burned.

The Urban-Rural Interface represents millions of undeveloped and forest acres on the fringes of cities and towns across America. Whether it be chaparral or pine forest in California, palmetto in Florida, pine barrens in New Jersey, or conifer forests throughout the Pacific Northwest and Rocky Mountain regions, the Interface is usually characterized by private property butting up against national parks, state and national forests, wildlife refuges or county wildlands. Such scenarios are on the rise, as Americans choose to move to rural areas and commute to jobs in the city.

The Alaska fire was no isolated case: Similar tragedies are occurring all over the United States as urbanites flee to the country. According to Mike Long, chairman of Florida's Southern Wild and Urban Interface Committee, "We get 900 people a day moving down here, many of them from the Northeast, where they don't have year-



These 1994 Interface fires in Idaho were particularly devastating.

round fire problems." During the Black Friday holocaust of 1985, Long says, "We lost 200 homes in one day, scattered over the state, with 100 to 125 fires a day."

What could be worse than living in a crime-ridden, polluted center of urban decay? How about fleeing to the Urban-Rural Interface and having your house, your neighbor's house, and the entire neighborhood burn to the ground in a wildfire? As we move toward the new millennium,

with rural populations growing by leaps and bounds, the potential for mass tragedy, mass loss of homes and lives, and massive habitat destruction is astounding.

Ironically, the prevailing Smokey the Bear "only you can prevent forest fires" ethic that dominates in the Interface may end up doing more harm than good, by suppressing the natural cycle of fire and rebirth. Unnatural blaze prevention, fire ecologists have shown, results in tinder-

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box conditions and far more catastrophic conflagrations when burning does occur.

According to Alston Chase, author of *In a Dark Wood: The Fight Over Forests*, "I think this fire year, much worse than others in the recent past, is only the beginning of a series of bad years because of a prodigious buildup of fuels."

Douglas Leisz spent over 45 years fighting and studying fires with the U.S. Forest Service. Retired now, Leisz retains a unique view of fire in the Interface that transcends current political and economic realities. Ironically, Leisz comments, "A lot of work has been done recently on issues we knew the answers to years ago, but couldn't get people to understand." That issue is the concept of "defensible space."

Defensible space means providing a non-combustible buffer to surround your home and reduce the chances of catastrophic fire. This includes using only Class-A roofs, managing vegetation, providing space for emergency vehicle ingress/egress, reducing woody debris and relocating firewood piles away from buildings. Up to 80 percent of wildfire home losses could have been prevented by these common sense precautions. Lack of defensible space was an issue with the devastating 1991 Oakland, California Interface conflagration. Narrow streets, explosively combustible vegetation growing over and around homes, and incredible fuel accumulations all contributed to a disaster that cost 25 lives, 3,400 homes and millions of dollars.

A 1991 California law has taken the lead in defensible space and required fire mitigation in Interface subdivisions. Water supplies, emergency access and fuel loads must be maintained and managed. Home sites have been eliminated in unsafe locations and roads relocated to assist emergency vehicles.

An added horror of the Miller's Reach fire involved people isolated from the road grid in homes with only private airplane or boat access. Firefighters simply could not get to these places and the residents were on their own. Some fire specialists in the lower 48 contend that Interface residents must be more self-reliant in dealing with wildland fire.

But as John See, a forester with Alaska's Department of Natural Resources, points

out, helping yourself doesn't guarantee you'll be able to save your house. Many Miller's Reach fire victims chose to ignore suggestions to evacuate and tried to protect their property. "Those without defensible space almost lost their lives and were unable to save their homes," he says. Defensible space is, after all, not a panacea.

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—Peter Stekel

Honk If You Love Canada Geese

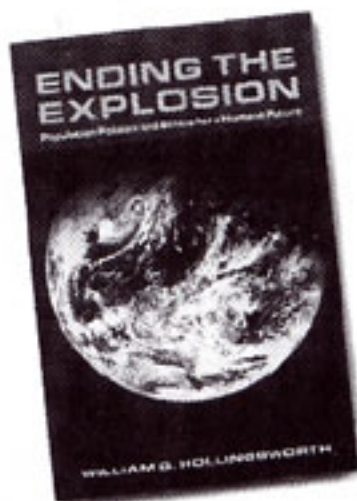
Is Over-Familiarity Turning These Birds, Once a Thrilling Sight, Into a Nuisance?

Shortly after six every morning, they show up at Debbie Glascock's back gate in rural Michigan, a gaggle of a dozen or so, honking noisily for their breakfasts. The neighbors call Glascock "Mother Goose," not just because she's fallen into the habit of feeding her resident giant Canada goose population, but also because she leads a small band of activists called Friends of the Ducks and Geese. Glascock is embroiled in the controversy that has erupted across North America over a stunning and unexpected recovery in populations of resident Canada geese. In some areas, state and wildlife officials are trying to reduce numbers by adding (shaking to prevent hatching) eggs, moving goslings to game preserves, or killing adult birds.

But Glascock's group believes human efforts to control the bird populations are actually contributing to the increases. "We've contended that the stress these birds are put under is causing them to have more babies," she says. "They're threatened every year by having their babies taken away, and they compensate by having more."

Geese hatch anywhere from five to eight young a year. They're overrunning many urban areas and parks in the U.S. and Canada. Wildlife biologists have taken to calling them "sky carp"—carp being "junk" fish nobody wants. The southeast Michigan population, where Debbie Glascock lives, is estimated at 194,000 birds. ▶

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