



## Environment

### Urban interface conference examines rural wildfire protection issues

Big wildfires make their own weather, and the lessons of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita were not lost on University of Idaho Extension Forester Chris Schnepf and his audience at a November conference to consider issues facing Idaho's rural areas.

Schnepf was one of the main organizers of the Inland Northwest Wildland Urban Interface Conference at Worley that drew representatives of governments and private citizens.

Long an advocate of educating rural property owners about ways to make their forests and homes more resistant to wildfires, Schnepf said efforts to evacuate New Orleans and Houston could help forge better wildfire plans in Idaho.

The wildland urban interface—that fringe between Idaho cities and towns and its forests—represents a challenge for firefighters. A growing number of homes nestle among the trees, many times along narrow, winding roads. Many Idaho counties already have wildfire disaster plans in place, Schnepf noted. But homeowners and governments need to re-examine existing plans to spot weaknesses that might exist.

"The development pressure here in North Idaho is just off the charts," Schnepf told conference attendees. The push to buy the beautiful properties just outside of town also requires local governments to plan ahead.

Pat Durland, who retired recently from the National Interagency Fire Center, also outlined Australia's efforts to cope with its volatile wildfires. The attitude Down Under is the flip side of many Americans, who believe the government has a responsibility to save its citizenry. Australians figure able-bodied homeowners should prepare to save themselves.

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### Staying ahead of Idaho's noxious weeds

Early detection and control of two patches of leafy spurge along the Lochsa River cost a few hundred dollars but stemmed an infestation threatening thousands of acres along the scenic Lochsa River, said University of Idaho weed scientist Tim Prather.

In 2005, Prather partnered with USDA Forest Service and Idaho County to research a process allowing identification of sites most likely to contain newly invading weeds. If sites can be prioritized, then land managers will know which areas to

survey frequently.

So far, high elevation sites had fewer exotic species than lower sites, and areas within wilderness that had more human activity had greater numbers of exotic species compared to areas with less human presence. Highly trained botanists—those knowing native plants well enough to identify exotics—are needed for these surveys.

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## DID YOU KNOW?

**\$11.3** MILLION is Idaho's estimated bill for fighting wildfires that burned more than 11,000 acres in 2005.

\*Source: Idaho Department of Lands

### Options for re-planting Idaho mine tailings

A three-year study of ways to restore vegetation to waste rock dumps from the Silver Dollar Mine near Osburn in the Silver Valley showed various soil amendments ranging from biosolids to log yard waste and compost can support self-sustaining stands of grasses and legumes.

Chemist Steve McGeehan, of the University of Idaho Food Science and Toxicology Department, conducted the study. Biosolids, a material many municipal wastewater treatment plants now struggle to dispose of, proved valuable as a mine reclamation tool. So did compost and log yard waste, a wood debris-soil-gravel mix.

Each amendment has unique properties that translate into strengths and limitations. A main goal of the study, commissioned by the Idaho Department of Environmental Quality and conducted by UI with Moscow's TerraGraphics, was to provide effective options for economical and environmentally sound reclamation projects.

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