

Colville Reservation residents still displaced as wildfires burn

Becky Kramer/SR

The Dutch Anderson “hot shot” crew: Tony Boyd, Duane Hall, Loren Marchand, Ryan Moore, Byron Sam, Virgil Tonasket and Chez, whose last name wasn’t available.

OMAK, Wash. – Their wives and children had evacuated earlier, packing in haste and driving down dirt roads obscured by smoke from the advancing fire.

“Don’t worry about the flat-screen TV,” Tony Boyd had told his 16-year-old daughter. “Take the things that matter.”

He packed the beaded buckskin jacket his mother had worn to powwows, a chest of family memorabilia and the softball from a championship game.

Then Boyd, a member of the Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservation, waited for the Tunk Block fire to come. Six other men – friends, neighbors and relatives – waited with him on a parched hillside east of Omak. They hoped to defend their homes against one of Washington’s largest wildfires.

It’s been a summer of fire on the Colville Indian Reservation. The North Star and Tunk Block fires have blackened about 20 percent of the sprawling, 1.4 million-acre reservation in Okanogan and Ferry counties since mid-August. The fires are the largest in tribal memory.

Though no lives have been lost, families’ homes have burned down and others are without electricity and water. Valuable timberlands and traditional hunting grounds are charred. And fire season isn’t over yet.

About 3,000 households remain under evacuation notices. Firefighters are working to contain the two fires, which have scorched nearly 400,000 acres. But some areas are expected to burn until it snows.

The fires are a harsh blow to the Confederated Colville Tribes, many of whose members live in poverty. Jim Boyd, the tribe’s chairman, is headed to Washington, D.C., this week to lobby for additional firefighting funds and federal assistance.

“It will take a concerted effort from the state and federal government to pull us out of this disaster,” said Boyd, a cousin of Tony Boyd.

Tribal officials still don’t know the extent of the damage, including how many homes are gone. The fate of the tribe’s 660,000 acres of commercial timberlands is a concern, too. Timber revenues make up 25 percent of the tribe’s budget.

Cooler weather has helped firefighters make progress over the past week. But Ed Lewis, incident commander for the North Star and Tunk Block fires, anticipates that weeks of firefighting could remain.

“The enormity of this is so huge, and we’re stretched so thin,” said Lewis, who works for Spokane County’s Emergency Management Services when he’s not on fire duty.

About 1,800 firefighters have been assigned to the two fires – about half the personnel Lewis would expect to see on a complex that size. But Washington is competing for resources during a fire season where about 9 million acres have burned across the West.

Flames came fast

Wind gusts buffeted the trees at Tony Boyd’s house the night of Aug. 20. Police knocked at his door around 6 the next morning, warning him to leave. Boyd left, but only to drive to his friend Ryan Moore’s house on Dutch Anderson Road, where others were also gathering.

No fire crews were available to defend the isolated residences tucked among stands of pine trees and horse pastures on the reservation.

So, the seven men made a pact: They would stick together; they would survive. They would save homes, if possible.

One hitched a plow up to his truck to create a firebreak around Moore’s house. The others worked with shovels. They also had a tractor with a water tank. By 7:30 a.m., the Tunk Block Fire surrounded them.

“The flames came through here so fast,” Moore said. He captured the sound of the fire on his phone – the snapping, popping and crackling of a campfire amplified millions of times.

“We could hear propane tanks exploding like cannons,” Boyd said.

The fire burned through Moore’s pasture but stopped at the fence. His house, about 100 feet away, was safe. After the initial euphoria passed, the men grabbed their shovels, hopped in a truck and headed to the next house.

The rest of the day is a blur, but the group helped save seven houses on Dutch Anderson Road and rescued two dogs. They called themselves the “Dutch Anderson hot shot crew.”

By late afternoon, a firetruck and two pumper crews arrived to finish dousing the blaze. They brought bad news: The house that Boyd and his wife were renting was gone.

‘I know what it’s like’

Steve Moen, 66, also lost his home in the Tunk Block fire. Last week, he stopped by an Omak donation center where families affected by the fires can stock up on supplies. He needed sleeping bags and a cot.

After Moen's home burned, both he and his wife were hospitalized. He was recently released after being treated for blood clots in his lungs. His wife will be discharged shortly, but they're homeless.

"I've got to find a place where there is a bed for her," Moen said. "I've never been in this situation before."

Moen, who is white, is one of the 700 families who've come to the tribal-run center looking for help.

Jade Sargent, 21, is one of the donation center's volunteers. "I know what it's like, so I wanted to help others in the same situation," said Sargent, a tribal member who'll be a senior this fall at Eastern Washington University.

Her family was evacuated three times this summer. The last time they left, their home burned down.

"It was surreal," she said. "I got the call and had to tell my parents. That was the hardest part."

Sargent and her family have been staying with her aunt while her parents make plans.

'I want to go home'

Bill Zacherle, 70, is living in an RV park at the Omak Stampede grounds with his daughter, Vanessa, and two grandchildren. Their house is still standing, but they've been evacuated until further notice.

The Vietnam-era veteran packed three shirts, three pairs of pants, and three sets of socks and underwear. He expected to return within a few days, but the waiting has stretched into three weeks.

Zacherle wipes away tears when he talks about neighbors who lost their home in Disautel, a former logging town on the Colville Reservation about 15 miles east of Omak. "I've lived there since I was a little boy," he said. "I want to go home."

Each evening, about 30 people drop by the family's campsite for dinner. Vanessa Zacherle, who likes to cook for crowds, turns donated supplies into comfort food for other evacuees and tribal firefighters stationed nearby. Deer meat and gravy simmered in her slow cooker on a recent afternoon. Eating together offers solace, she said.

"Some of these guys had not had a home-cooked meal for weeks," Vanessa Zacherle said. "Being able to do this is awesome."

But the strain of the situation is taking a toll on her family. Zacherle's teenage daughter asked her father to pack up her bed in Disautel and bring it to the RV park. She was afraid it would burn up.

Culture interrupted

At night, embers from the wildfires still glow red through blackened trees along Highway 155. The highway crosses the western part of the Colville Indian Reservation, connecting Omak to Nespelem, where the tribal government is based.

The North Star fire burned here, coming within 5 miles of Nespelem. Though the flames didn't reach town, the smoke was so thick that visibility was reduced to a few hundred feet. Inside buildings, smoke hung in the air like fog.

Generators, air purifiers and pallets of water remain in demand on the reservation. Many homes were severely smoke-damaged. Others lost the use of their wells.

The burned acreage also hurts tribal members in other ways. Many families hunt for deer, elk and moose and gather huckleberries and medicinal plants.

"The ability to gather and hunt is a significant part of the tribe's culture," said Francis Somday, the Colville Tribes' executive director.

Facebook is buzzing with posts about the fall hunting season, with some hunters saying they won't take an animal this year. Whether the tribe should provide feed for struggling deer and elk herds this winter is also a subject of discussion.

'Not out of the red'

After the long day of firefighting, Tony Boyd napped in his car. But the Tunk Block fire had one more surprise for the Dutch Anderson hot shot crew. An ember landed in Ryan Moore's wood pile. Boyd was parked nearby.

His barking dog awoke him. Smoke was pouring over the hood of the car. Boyd moved three vehicles out of the fire's path and threw water from the dog's bowl on the blaze. When his friends drove back to the house, they found him beating out flames with a snow shovel.

He and Moore tell the story with laughter. It's a welcome bit of levity, and a story the two men expect to tell their grandchildren someday.

Boyd, his wife and their daughter are staying at a friend's rental in Omak while they regroup. He's an artist. The fire burned illustrations for an upcoming project and most of his paintings.

At the RV park, Bill Zacherle blinked and cleared his throat. He's grateful his family is together.

"That's the main thing," he said. "We're strong, we're survivors."

Plumes of smoke rose from the ridgelines north and east of Omak, a reminder that fire season isn't over yet.

“In 70 years, I’ve seen nothing like this,” Zacherle said. “We’re not out of the red.”