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Salmon River, Northern California Hog Fire History  
The Vicious Circle: Logging - Fires - More logging - More Fires

by Will Harling

Helicopter logging began in Salmon River Country in the mid 1970's. Along with it came reduced treatment of the "slash" left over after logging -- highly flammable accumulations of cut but un-used tree-tops, branches, smaller hardwoods, and brush. The following article tells a story of fire behavior made worse by human carelessness and greed -- a repetitive cycle of left-over slash causing hotter fires, leading to fire salvage by helicopters, with more left-over slash, leading to more hot fires, more logging, and more slash? How can we break this vicious circle?

Helicopter logging was favored by the Forest Service because of it's potential to reduce ground disturbance and the need for new road-building. In order to promote it, the agency offered timber logged by helicopter at a 95% discount. Helicopter companies such as Columbia went into logging and loggers like Croman Corp. bought helicopters. Whereas loggers using tractors or cables to pull out trees paid \$250 to \$300 per thousand board feet for their logs and were required to do extensive slash treatment, helicopter loggers paid \$1 to \$10 per thousand board feet for logs and were required to do only minimal slash treatment.

In 1975, the Henry Bell Gulch Sale was awarded to Columbia. Logging without stipulations for fuels treatment, this particular sale included units on the Eastern slope of the Negro Creek drainage, directly below the Southeast edge of Godfrey Ranch, where Godfrey residents Peter and Geba had nearly finished building their home. New to the area, they did not realize the hazard this leftover slash presented

The summer of 1977 was hot, like the two before it. The brush that had flourished when the canopy was removed was as dry as the slash it enveloped and much higher than conifers planted by the Forest Service. On August 11th, a tremendous dry lightning storm passed through striking the ground several hundred times, igniting several fires in the drainage. Blazes on Hotelling and Picayune Ridges were controlled, but fires on Poverty Gap, Fong Wah Ridge and Hog Ridge raged out of control. Separated from these fires by the two forks of the Salmon River, Godfrey seemed protected. There was no record of fires jumping these rivers, but much had changed on the Picayune since fire last threatened. The Fong Wah and Poverty Blazes burned together on the south side of the main stem and the South Fork of the Salmon, moving southward into the headwaters of McNeil and Nordheimer Creeks. Meanwhile, the Hog Ridge Fire had spread northeast along the north

banks of the main stem and North Fork of the Salmon River.

Though 5,000 firefighters had arrived to combat the blaze, suppression attempts were thwarted. Not only was Yellow Jacket Ridge virtually inaccessible, a smoke inversion layer set in and concealed the movement of the fire from the air. An attempt was made to stop the Hog Fire from crossing Yellow Jacket Ridge when Caterpillar tractors extended an old mine road up and over the ridge. However, a hot shot crew who hadn't been briefed on the fire's location backfired the wrong side of the line. The fire then burned hot into Murderer's Gulch and back up to the ridge. That night, the blaze began to creep back down to the river. As hundreds of firefighters waited on the North Fork road to ensure the fire didn't cross the river, a strong updraft hurled a chunk of burning wood across the canyon. Phil Shwartz, an old miner who lived across the road from where the throng of firefighters had gathered, was sitting on his front porch that early morning of the 15th and saw the ember land behind his house. Minutes later, a spot fire flared up where it had landed. Once a stand of old growth stretched from behind Phil's house up and over Picayune Ridge to the river on the other side, but this had been mostly clearcut as part of the Henry Bell Helicopter sale.

Spotting into the dry brush and abundant slash, the fire exploded, gathering speed and intensity as it devoured the sale residue. Firefighters watched on helplessly from the other side of the river. By the time the fire hit remaining uncut stands below the ridge, ignition of the canopy was inevitable. The crown fire that ensued roared up and over the ridge, consuming the ancient forest in its path. The fire's run from river to ridge took less than half an hour, covering nearly two miles.

Over the next few days the fire slowed as it spread down to the South Fork and upriver underneath Godfrey Ranch. Moving on the forest floor beneath the vaulted canopy, the burn resembled what was once the historically typical fire in this area. These fires, natural or set by indigenous peoples, typically were more frequent and less intense than recent fires. This change generally has been attributed to the effective fire suppression practiced by the Forest Service for the last 80 years, which had dramatically increased the amount of ground and ladder fuels.

The progress of the Hog Fire as it raced up the North facing slope and crept down the southern flank of the ridge elucidates how logging activities have affected fire behavior. Typically, north facing slopes are wetter and inhibit the spread of fire. South facing slopes get more sun, are drier, and burn hotter and faster. But once an area is cut, it doesn't matter which direction it faces. With less canopy it gets more sun, becoming much drier. Having overstory kept the ground fuels on the South facing slope of the Picayune shaded, thus slowing the fire.

When the fire finally did reach Godfrey Ranch, it was slow burning. It crept across the hillside from the west and the families of Godfrey Ranch and firefighters were able to repel short "runs" and prevent it from burning over the property. But as the fire crept eastward below the ranch it found its way into slash left from another unit of the Henry Bell Sale. Flaring up, it moved hot and fast, pushing firefighters back. It crowned into the stand surrounding Peter and Geba's nearly completed house. Everything was lost, including the garden with its late summer promise. As thousands of firefighters watched, the fire was put out by the late summer rains after burning 39,000 acres of the public forest.

After the Hog Fire, there was a huge increase in logging activities as the Forest Service and logging companies tried to salvage the burned timber. In the next five years, 300 million board feet were taken from the drainage. But not all of this was burned timber. Loggers and Forest Service personnel involved with those sales estimate that one-third to one-half of this was green. The helicopter logging companies maintained that without the green bonus, they couldn't profitably log the sales. Jim Villeponteaux, at the time Forest Service assistant sale administrator on the post Hog Fire Sting Helicopter salvage sale, recounted a story elucidating who truly wore the pants, "I had gone up there with an old Croman faller and remarked the [Sting] sale because I felt Croman had overstepped their contract. We both agreed that it was a fair mark, but Croman co-owner Duane Cross was furious. He brought up a senator for Sacramento and flew him over the sale...the Forest Service conceded to the earlier mark.

Not much was left on the Picayune after the salvage was done. It was an amazing transformation, a testament to the technological prowess of man. We could strip a whole mountain down to its skin in half a decade. Duane Cross and his partner became multi-millionaires and their company, Croman Corporation became an international giant among logging companies. Not bad for a couple of small time loggers. One must wonder how the Forest Service could be allowed to sell off our public resources for a pittance. The mess left behind couldn't be cleaned up with all of Croman's millions.

On August 11<sup>th</sup>, 1987, folks on the river were talking of a get-together to commemorate the tenth anniversary of the Hog Fire, maybe eat some good food and swap stories grown sweeter with age. No irony was lost when a couple of weeks later, the Hog Fire was reincarnated in the Siege of '87, also known as the Complex Fire. So named because it consisted of a group of large but separate fires, the Complex Fire began as the Hog Fire did from a dry lightning storm. Starting lightning fires in the Sierras as it moved northward, the storm appeared to be breaking up before it reached the Salmon drainage. But hitting with rekindled fury, the storm unleashing over

100 downstrikes in less than eight hours the afternoon of August 30th.

That summer had been extremely hot and dry, once again, like the two before it. Along with dozens of spot fires, five larger fires erupted, including the Yellow, Hotelling, Nielon and Glasgow Fires. On Blue Ridge, brush had grown up and around the seasoned slash left from the post-Hog Fire salvage effort, making a carbureted mixture of fine fuels.

Godfrey Ranch resident John Seeger worked as a faller for Croman and Columbia after the Hog Fire. Falling on the Negro Creek Salvage Sale directly below Godfrey, he recalls, "The problem wasn't the conifers" says John, "We took all of them, even the seven inch poles. The problem was the huge burned hardwoods that were left. Ten years later they fell into the brush, slash, and young peckers. We should have taken them too. Maybe then the '87 fire wouldn't have burned so hot."