

TETON VALLEY NEWS



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101ST YEAR 39TH WEEK

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TVN Photo/Scott Anderson

Flames burn through fuel in the Hill Creek prescribed burn.

Cloaked in smoke: Valley clearing depends on weather

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TVN Staff

A prescribed fire in the Hill Creek area is fully contained, but the smoke isn't, and may not be for a while.

Expect to see continuing smoke rise from the Hill Creek prescribed burn until the weather becomes wetter and cooler, said Lynn Ballard, spokesman for the U.S. Forest Service's Caribou-Targhee National Forest office.

"Air quality is definitely a concern. The best scenario would be rain or humidity with some wind to clear the smoke out," he said.



TVN Photo/Ken Levy

Flames leap from conifer trees during the Hill Creek prescribed burn.

Down-canyon wind and cooling at night exacerbate the smoke settling over the valley, said Ballard, as does an inversion layer that keeps the smoke down

until heat and wind blow it out.

Jay Pence, district ranger for the Teton Basin Ranger District of the U.S. Forest Service, attributed the heavy smoke to the fuel being burned. Aspen and subalpine fir are "notoriously poor fuel sources," he said, and they put a lot of smoke in the air when they burn.

Crews lit the last acres Monday. A helitorch malfunction on Sunday set the fire timing back an extra day.

"We were trying to add as much fire as we could to the ground so we could get the fire to reduce the smoke," Pence said.

Residents, however, are feeling the effects of the cloud hanging in and over the Valley.

Ann Loyola, spokesperson for the

Fire continued on A16

Fire continued on from A1

Teton Valley Hospital, said the hospital has seen an increase in respiratory-related complaints in the past week.

"Our hospital and clinics have both seen an uptick in respiratory problems, particularly in the last two days," she said in an e-mail Tuesday. "We've seen patients with compromised cardio-pulmonary health in our ER, we've administered a relatively high number of breathing tests on otherwise healthy people, and we're hearing more complaints of runny noses, sore throats and stinging eyes."

No further ignitions are planned, but re-burning of dry wood could occur within the area, as green material dries out and kindles leaves and wood.

"We're not putting it out. We may work the edges and let it burn itself out. Until we get cooler, moister weather, we'll see smoke," said Ballard.

"We will have smoke, but not at the concentrations we have had," said Pence.

The roughly 1,600-acre burn, initially ignited late last week by hand and helicopter crews, is fully contained, Ballard said.

"The fire is exactly in the area we want it to be," said Pence.

As of Tuesday, about 1,400 acres were burned or burning. About 50 ground personnel were assisting with the fire.

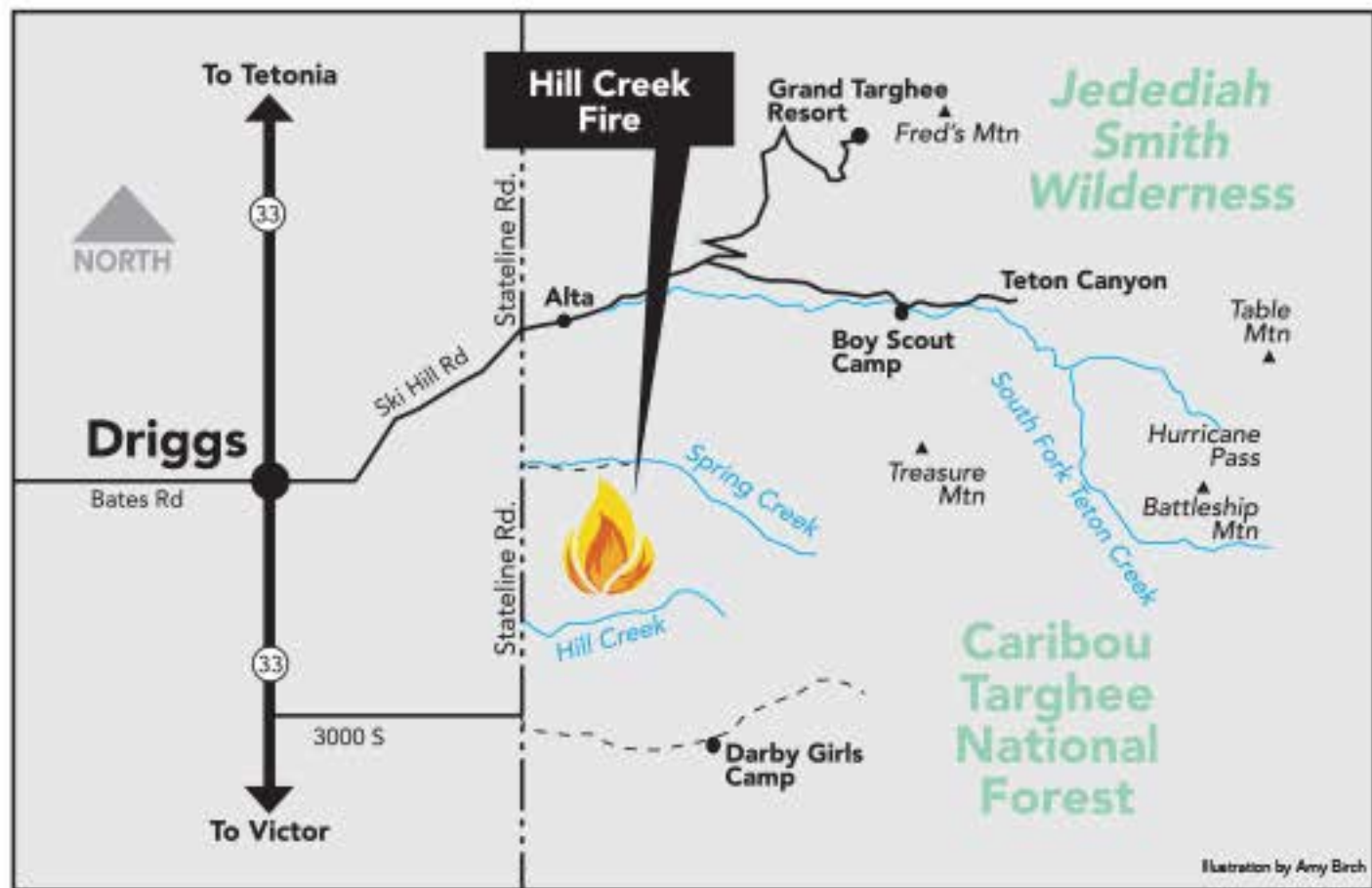
"We're going to take it right down to the aspen trail," said Ballard, "but we won't get as low as we'd planned. We'll still get some burning of lighter fuels down low."

Besides reducing fuel load, the burn was set to control subalpine fir and other competing species to provide more opportunities for aspen stands to regenerate. Older aspens, which don't reproduce, were also set to burn.

The burn will also help rejuvenate mountain brush, which will improve wildlife habitat.

The timing of the burn was good, he said, because late season rains and snow put moisture on the ground, helping create ideal conditions.

"That helps us with control, and keeps the fire from getting too hot



and causing soil damage," said Pence. "The whole object is to re-stimulate the vegetation of the aspen and the brush. We don't want to kill it, we just want to burn the above-ground stuff so it will resprout."

The majority of the trees in the area are very tall and out of the reach of the animals in the area, which include elk, deer and moose. Stimulating new growth gives the animals better nutritional value, he said, and the mosaic pattern of the burned and unburned area "creates excellent wildlife habitat," Pence said.

Ballard said the area hasn't had a major fire in at least 30 years. A natural fire there would tend to move more to the north and southeast. The burn, in containment lines, takes away the danger to property and provides a fuel break to reduce the potential of a catastrophic

fire. The area closure could be lifted during the weekend, depending on the progress of the fire during the week. However, Pence strongly advised against going into the fire area due to burning and falling trees and other dangers.

Costs of the burn were not available at press time, but Pence said the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation contributed funding for the effort.

Many people complained that the area should have been logged, but

"we almost have to pay them to take this stuff," said Pence. "It's a very undesirable log. The best use for it is a Christmas tree. Aspen smolders."

A timber sale would cost taxpayers "significantly more" than the burn because "we'd have to pay" for helicopter removal or to build an access road.

"Per acre, this is by far the cheapest method of treatment," he said.

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TVN Photo/Scott Anderson



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Clockwise from upper left: Bart Hogan (left) of Island Park and Forest Hall of Swan Valley help with the Hill Creek prescribed burn Tuesday.

Flames light the night sky over the Hill Creek prescribed burn Friday night.

Robert Baily, right, points out fire concerns during the Hill Creek prescribed burn to Shawn Stanford, left, and Jeff Cox, fuels specialist. All are with the U.S Forest Service.

Flames burn in fuel during the Hill Creek prescribed burn.