

NORTHERN ROCKIES INTERAGENCY INFORMATION CENTER

Aerial Fire Depot

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Visit our website at: www.fs.fed.us/r1/fire/2003fires/index.shtml

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How Dry? Dry Enough to Replace Fall Colors With Smoke and Fire

In September, Sheila Lowden looks forward to the reds and oranges of fall colors along the Clark Fork River at her home near Missoula, MT. This year, leaves on the shrubs turned brown and fell off in the middle of August.

That's how dry it has been in Montana and northern Idaho this summer. Billings, MT, went 62 days without any measurable moisture, breaking a record set during the Dust Bowl. During one thunderstorm in northern Idaho, lightning struck three times and started two fires, an unusually high percentage.

During late August and early September, firefighters controlled one fire after another in Montana and northern Idaho. After a few days of hot weather, some of the remaining fires are once again torching trees, throwing embers far ahead, and building the afternoon smoke columns that cause alarm.

One measure firefighters use to estimate how easily trees will burn is the Energy Release Component. Since July 1, the Energy Release Component values for western Montana and northern Idaho have consistently been as high or higher than ever recorded during the past 25 years. Only significant rainfall or snow will end the fire season.

Some Web sites with detailed information on the drought and its effects on forest fuels include:

National Weather Service's Fire Weather Page: <http://fire.boi.noaa.gov/>

Northern Rockies Coordination Center: <http://www.fs.fed.us/r1/fire/nrcc/>



Record-dry weather in Montana and northern Idaho has made fires easier to start and harder to fight this summer.