

Rivers and Wildfire: Boating in the Burn

The *Elbow Creek Fire* started on July 15, 2021 and burned 22,960 acres on both sides of the Grande Ronde River, **between Bear Creek (River Mile 66.5) and Wildcat Creek (river mile 53.5)**. Please take note of the following important information when planning your river trip.

In keeping with the **Wild & Scenic Rivers Act**, the burned area of the Grande Ronde Wild and Scenic River is managed in a “primitive, natural condition,” in which fire plays an important role and natural processes are allowed to take their course. Public land managers continue to assess and monitor post-fire conditions and need your help in reducing impacts and risks.

AVOID ENTERING BURNED AREAS.

Soils, plants, wildlife, and other natural resources need time to recover after a wildfire event. Visitors can easily stress both animal and plant life whose landscape has already been disrupted. If you have the option of cancelling or rescheduling your trip, please consider doing so. Fewer people on the river will reduce overcrowding and take pressure off the fragile resources trying to recover.

NATURAL HAZARDS EXIST IN BURNED AREAS LONG AFTER THE FIRE IS OUT. Visitors ALWAYS assume risks when entering wild, natural areas, but in burned areas those risks are even greater. Your safety is in your hands! Here are some tips for minimizing your exposure to natural hazards:

Falling Trees and Limbs

Even if the tree looks robust, it might be at risk of falling because of damaged root systems and fire-loosened soils. As the years pass, dead root systems rot and the likelihood of the tree falling increases. Watch for falling branches as well. Look up often. Take note of fire-weakened trees, snags, and overhead dangling branches. Do not stop or camp under a fire-weakened or dead tree.

River Obstructions and Strainers

Expect to find more trees, logs, and branches in or near the water which could obstruct your intended path. Keep an eye out for any river obstructions, because even a small branch sticking out of the water could be a sign of a larger hazard hidden beneath the surface. Remember to “*always look downstream*,” and “*when in doubt, stop and scout*.” Please report any navigation hazards or obstructions you may encounter. (Note: The possession of chainsaws, and the unauthorized cutting of trees, snags, logs, and vegetation is strictly prohibited and punishable by law.)

Holes From Burned Root Systems

Watch for burned-out holes in the ground. When stumps, root structures and duff burns, deep hollow cavities can be left below the trail surface. They may be invisible until your foot breaks through. These holes can keep burning for a long time after the rest of the fire is out and pose tripping hazards for years after the fire. Notice white ash as it may be retaining extreme heat or be a sign of a potential sinkhole.

Loose or Falling Rocks and Landslides

Stripped of its understory vegetation, burned soil is loose, so boulders, logs, and the soil can move. These dangers can increase as the freeze-thaw cycle loosens things up, resulting in uneven and unstable ground. On hillsides, if you encounter a downed log or pile of fallen rocks, go one person at a time in case the material shifts. If you must walk through a burned area, stay on trails.

Debris Flows and Flash Floods

Watch for higher than normal stream flow, especially as the snow melts. Burned areas may melt snow more quickly, resulting in higher than normal flows. And even if it’s just rainy, the chances of landslides and flash floods goes up. Water runs more quickly off the burned soil, and drainages can become clogged with trees, rocks, and debris. Debris can act like a dam, releasing a huge flash flood of water, mud, and debris that will destroy everything downstream.

Many primitive camping areas were affected by the fire. Boaters are encouraged to plan their trip carefully to reduce campsite competition and avoid overcrowding that could result in further resource damage and closures. Please obtain current, up to date information when planning your trip. Be extra cautious when choosing a primitive campsite. Don’t camp in a risky area. Look for dead trees that might fall toward your tent and steep slopes that could send rocks or landslides down on you. To avoid possible debris flows, don’t camp in natural swales or drainages. Avoid entering burned areas if possible.

Thank you for doing your part to help the river recover from the fire, and in staying safe outdoors.

YOU ARE RESPONSIBLE FOR YOUR OWN SAFETY. RECREATION USE HAS INHERENT RISKS AND YOU MAY ENCOUNTER A VARIETY OF UNEXPECTED AND/OR DANGEROUS CONDITIONS WHICH MAY LEAD TO SERIOUS INJURY OR DEATH. IT IS YOUR RESPONSIBILITY TO BE INFORMED AND TAKE PRECAUTIONS.

For more information please contact the Bureau of Land Management (541-523-1256) or Umatilla National Forest (541-278-3716)

