



Frankly Speaking

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The Newsletter for the Frank Church — River of No Return Wilderness

Fall 2023

Bitterroot NF Wilderness Monitoring Trip



Outfitter camp inspection at Eakin Ridge.

In September, a crew from the Bitterroot National Forest headed into the Frank Church River of No Return Wilderness to conduct outfitter and guide inspections and monitor wilderness campsites. Wilderness Ranger Jai Lust, Outfitter and Guide Permit Administrator Kelsey Dyer, and Packers John Leader and Nikki Kupfner embarked on a hitch in the Frank Church which began at Horse Heaven Cabin, hit the trail at Salmon Basecamp, overnighed at Swet Cabin, Eakin Ridge, and Lantz Bar, and headed out at Corn Creek.

The crew completed Outfitter and Guide Inspections and Campsite Monitoring at various sites along the way. “We do these monitoring activities to keep track

of trends over the years with resource conditions, visitor use patterns, wilderness character, etc. Each campsite is assigned an impact level based on the previous recorded inspection and revisited every five years. Should the level of impact at a site be deemed unacceptable, we can work internally (or with the outfitter assigned a specific site) to determine the right approach to rehabilitating the site and how to minimize future issues,” said Kelsey Dyer.



Packer Nikki enjoying an apple upon arrival at Lantz Bar.

Payette NF **acquires** land in the wilderness

The Payette National Forest recently acquired a 38.78-acre property near the Salmon River, converting it from private to public land. The Surprise Load property was a private inholding in the Frank Church River of No Return Wilderness, meaning it was privately owned before the wilderness designation. The land was purchased by the Wilderness Land Trust (WLT), a non-profit organization who acquires private lands and transfers them to public ownership to protect wilderness values. “The Wilderness Land Trust helps the Forest Service with wilderness inholdings by being able to move quickly when a landowner is ready to sell and then hold the property until the Forest Service is able to perform the due diligence and obtain funding for transfer,” said Kelly Conde, Wilderness Land Trust Lands Specialist.

The land was purchased in 2021 and it took two years for the Forest Service to go through official land acquisition processes. “We complete a process called a Land Purchase Analysis which goes into further details on the proposal, the third-party role, purpose, public interest, Forest Plan compliance, NEPA, water rights, minerals, hazardous material screening, and a detailed examination of the title history,” said Kit Woras, Realty Specialist, Intermountain Region. After completing the Land Purchase Analysis, the Forest Service purchased the Surprise Load property from WLT at the fair market value as determined by an appraisal.

The Forest Service actively looks for new properties that would make good additions to the National Forest System. “Consolidating or acquiring private inholdings that are within Forest Service boundaries is something that we are always working towards, because it is much easier to manage land that is under single ownership,” said Brendan Leland, Payette Lands Special Uses Program Manager. “For example, from a recreation perspective, we have a number of trails that are

fragmented by private inholdings, and if we do not already have easements for those trails, then the private landowner has every right to block or restrict trail access across their property.” The acquisition of the Surprise Load secures public access to fragmented National Forest System lands in a wilderness area and provides recreation opportunities for river-based activities such as hunting, day-hiking, and camping.

On the Payette, the WLT has helped with one other land transfer, the Painter Mine, a 38-acre parcel directly adjacent to the Surprise Load. “We transferred that one in 2017 after three years of cleanup; there was a cabin, lots of junk, and an open mining tunnel that needed a bat gate,” Conde said. When the WLT purchases a property, they are generally responsible for getting it wilderness ready by removing structures, cleaning up mining debris, and clearing any issues with the title.

“We wouldn't be around without the good work of the USFS and try our best to be a good partner. We understand your transfer process and can act as third-party contractors to help simplify that process and/or provide whatever support the agency needs to complete the transfer,” Conde said.



The Surprise Load property, overlooking the Main Salmon River.

Partnership Spotlight

Pulaski Users Group

What is your organization's mission?

The Pulaski Users Group (PUG) organizes volunteer trips focused on trail maintenance, trail reclamation, and invasive species monitoring. Volunteers receive related training which equips them with the skills and knowledge to complete a variety of trail restoration projects. We aim to inspire community members to be stewards and advocates for our public lands.



How long has your organization been working in the Frank Church-River of No Return Wilderness?

Since 2019—we just finished our 5th season.



What did you accomplish in the Frank in 2023?

We had 22 work days in the Frank this season and our volunteers put in 1,304 hours of work! We built 13 drains and maintained an additional 36 drains, completed 31,024 linear feet of brush work, 5,000 linear feet of tread work, and logged out about 15 miles of trail.

What do members of your organization like most about working in the Frank?

Helping immerse community volunteers in service to public lands by improving access to the National Wilderness Preservation System.



*Thanks to Greg Travelstead
Board President of
Pulaski Users Group*

*Find out more at
www.pulaskiusers.org*

Outfitter Corner

Kelsey Helfrich Helfrich River Outfitters

Tell us about your outfitting business.

Helfrich River Outfitters operates two permits on the Middle Fork of the Salmon along with businesses on the wild and scenic Rogue River, the Lower Main Salmon, Owyhee River, and McKenzie River. My great-grandfather Prince Helfrich was the first outfitter on the Middle Fork and well known for not only outfitting, but also pioneering rivers all around the Pacific Northwest. Prince got started guiding in 1922 on the McKenzie River in Oregon and steadily expanded to many other rivers. His first outfitted trip on the Middle Fork took place in 1940. Prince had three sons who all became outfitters as well. As the permit system came into play, my granddad Dave Helfrich and his brothers Dick and Dean were all allocated permits on the Middle Fork and these businesses thrived for many years. As the second generation of Helfrich outfitters retired, the businesses were passed down to the next generation. My dad purchased his dad's business and Dick's son Jeff now operates Tightlines, his dad's old permit on the Middle Fork. Once Dean Helfrich, the youngest of Prince's kids was ready to sell, he chose to sell his company to my dad and I, as his kids were outfitting in other areas already. We are very proud to own two of the three original Helfrich Middle Fork permits.

In an average year, HRO operates about 22 multi-day outfitted trips on the Middle Fork. We also operate about 15 multi-day trips annually on the Rogue. The trips we offer are quite deluxe and offer the public an opportunity to experience fly fishing and white-water rafting the Middle Fork with many of the creature comforts that help them feel at home in the wilderness. HRO specializes in drift boat fly fishing trips where our guests enjoy the comfort of a McKenzie River style drift boat with two guests and one guide in each boat. Our guests enjoy deluxe camps each night that are put up and taken down for them by our hard working crew of guides.



Why did you become an outfitter?

I guess you could say it's just in my blood. I grew up on the river and around guides and there was always something so amazing and intriguing about the lifestyle. Having the opportunity to impact peoples lives in such a special way is something that never gets old. We get to introduce people to these amazing places and help them experience not only fishing and rafting but also the history, the flora, the fauna, and more. It is human nature to be outdoors and most of our guests don't even realize how much they are subconsciously craving time in nature until they are there. We see couples, families, groups of friends and all sorts of groups who show up on the river and go through a life changing experience. We see families at orientation the night before the trip and they are all distracted, on their phones, and just out of touch with each other. Over the course of 6-days on the Middle Fork you can watch the transformation each day as they are able to fully disconnect from the outside world and reconnect with each other.

I also recognize how blessed I am to be born into the family that I was. Being a woman, most of the guides and even some of my own family just assumed that I wouldn't become an outfitter because I am a girl, and guiding (at that point) was a "man's world". Lucky for me, my parents always supported me and believed in me. They never pushed me into being a guide but they always encouraged me to follow my heart and do whatever I wanted to do. It was not easy to prove I belonged on the crew but I have always loved a challenge.

Over the last 20 years that I have been guiding on the Middle Fork, I have seen many changes to the guiding culture but one thing that hasn't changed is the wildness and grandeur of this amazing river and beautiful wilderness.

How is your work in the Frank unique?

There are a lot of outfitters on the Middle Fork and each one offers something special and unique to their guests. I like to think that our trips stand out not only because of our long standing history but also the level of genuine care we offer each guest who joins us. We have our own way of doing things and we call that "the Helfrich Way". Just good enough, is not good enough and we encourage each of our employees to always strive for excellence.

I like that we are keeping the tradition of wooden boats on the Middle Fork alive. It is a special craft and offers people a completely unique way of experiencing this amazing wilderness.

How does your company impact people's lives?

I really feel like giving people the opportunity to fully disconnect from phones, internet, the stress of work and life in general is so special. With our trips being highly catered, we get a lot of guests who have never even been camping before. The high level of care we offer helps our guests feel comfortable going on a trip like this and they end up with an experience so unlike anything they have ever done. I feel like this is why we have such a huge percentage of returning guests. They know that they can go into the wilderness and be comfortable with our crew. They wouldn't be comfortable with "roughing it" but they know how much they love being on the river and in the wilderness. This wilderness belongs to every American and it is so wonderful to get to share it with so many who would otherwise never get to experience it for themselves.

What do you appreciate the most about your partnership with the Forest Service?

Our company and the Middle Fork Outfitters Association has developed and maintained a good working partnership with the Forest Service over the years. We have been able to work together on a huge range of issues and projects.

I appreciate that the Forest Service is often willing to listen and solicit the opinions and expertise of the outfitters when dealing with projects and issues with the resource. Many of the Forest Service employees have such a heavy workload that they are unable to spend much of their time on the ground in the wilderness. They recognize that they have a great resource in the outfitters to help them know what is going on in the wilderness and to be able to call on us to help them with unique projects. For example, in 2022 when the Rams Horn Bridge was washed into the river by a massive mud slide, the Forest Service was able to call on our company to facilitate the removal of this man-made structure from the river. It was a difficult project but we were able to get it done quickly and efficiently. The MFOA also helped the Forest Service this year with the replacement of the Indian Creek boat ramp to ensure a safer experience for all river users launching from Indian Creek. The MFOA has spearheaded a program called Redd Alert to help spread awareness to river users about spawning salmon in the river and how to help protect them. This is another project that we have been able to take on to protect this keystone species and help the Forest Service meet their requirements with regards to fish protection and monitoring.



Kelsey Helfrich, with husband Kidd Youren and daughters Fallon and Quinn. Kelsey is the fourth generation owner of Helfrich River Outfitters. She is a drift boat fly fishing guide on the Middle Fork of the Salmon and many other rivers around Idaho and Oregon. She lives in Salmon, Idaho.

River patrol helps with redd surveys



Crews search for Chinook salmon redds on the Middle Fork Salmon River.

River Patrol's schedule is predominantly trips supporting the work of other resource programs on the Salmon-Challis National Forest (SCNF). These programs need to conduct important surveys and project work in the heart of the Frank Church River of No Return Wilderness. The most efficient and effective *[and enjoyable]* method of travel to work sites along the Middle Fork is by raft. Fortunately for these programs, the Forest employs a crew of expert rafters and kayakers to patrol the Wild and Scenic River corridors. Every float season the SCNF River Patrol organizes support trips with SCNF South Zone Botany/Invasives/Pollinators, Heritage, and Fisheries to accomplish mission critical work. These trips are not only beneficial to the management of these special places, but it promotes a collaborative work environment within the South Zone's Ranger Districts. Programs trade knowledge and work together to produce creative solutions to data collection and resource management issues.

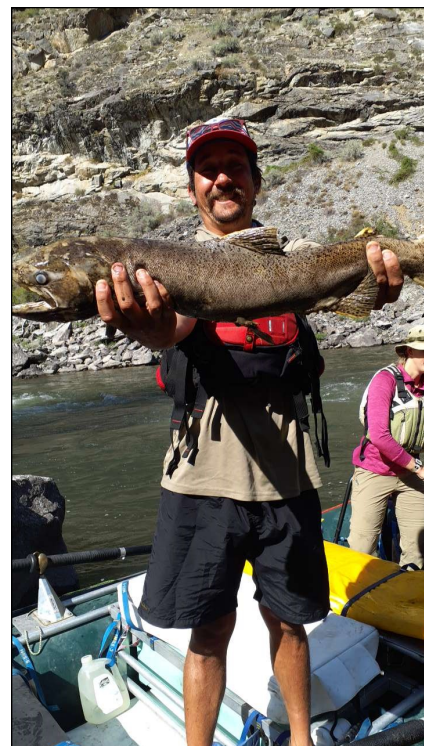
The most recurrent support trip since 2014 is the Chinook salmon redd survey. Chinook salmon originating in the Middle Fork and its tributaries are a threatened species protected under the Endangered Species Act. The South Zone Fisheries

program conducts surveys annually during the Chinook salmon spawning season, August through September, because this season coincides with the lower runnable flows boaters experience on the Middle Fork Salmon. There are typically five survey trips each season. These trips are meant to identify and mark the redds so that recreational float boaters do not disturb and potentially damage the sensitive spawning areas.

"It is important that boaters know where the redds are located on the river so they can try to avoid them," said Christine Stewart, SCNF South Zone Fish Biologist. "If the redds are disturbed, it can kill or displace the eggs at a sensitive developmental stage. When boaters avoid the redds, more eggs have a higher probability of surviving, with more fry emerging the following Spring to become adult salmon."

To accomplish these surveys, trained redd observers stand on frames rigged to the front of the patrol rafts. The frame elevates the observer above the raft floor providing them a better viewshed of the river bottom. They key into areas of gravel looking for depressions where gravel and sediment have been moved by a spawning female Chinook salmon. These are called redds. When a redd is detected, the location is recorded, a game camera is set up, and a sign informing boaters of the redd's location is placed on the riverbank.

(cont. on next page)



The crew finds a Chinook salmon carcass.

(cont. from previous page) The fish biologists are also looking for salmon carcasses. These carcasses provide genetic and migratory information to individuals monitoring Chinook salmon populations. Once found, the length and sex are recorded. They look for any hatchery or fish weir tagging such as pit tags or clipped fins. The caudal and dorsal fins are clipped for DNA and aging back in a lab. The carcass head is cut off and later sent to Idaho Fish and Game. Once all the sampling and data collection is complete, the tail is cut off so that other observers know the carcass was already processed. Finally, the remaining body and tail are thrown into the river allowing the nutrients carried from the ocean to stay in the ecosystem.



Fish biologists collect data from the Chinook salmon carcass.

953.5 miles

of trails maintained in the
Frank Church Wilderness across
four National Forests in 2023

WANTED...

Your Picture Here

Frankly Speaking

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- And More ...

The Newsletter for the Frank Church — River of No Return Wilderness

Spring 2020

This newsletter is only as good as its content, and no one can provide better content than those who know, love, and spend time in the Frank Church—River of No Return Wilderness. Every issue will feature a new banner photo, and it could be yours! For consideration, submit entries to:
kelly.martin@usda.gov

10,051

Floaters in 2023
on the Wild
Main Salmon River

12,310

Floaters in 2023
on the Middle
Fork of the
Salmon River

Brush Creek avalanche debris removal

On June 15, 2023, the Salmon-Challis National Forest was contacted by the Flying B Ranch, who informed Forest Service personnel of a landslide that had completely obstructed access to one of their primary outfitter camps. Flying B staff had attempted to access the camp, located on the Brush Creek trail deep in the heart of the Frank Church Wilderness, but there was a pile of debris so deep and substantial it would be impossible for them to clear on their own prior to hunting season.

Upon detailed examination of a video that was provided by the Flying B to the Forest Service, wilderness program staff made the determination that a reroute of the trail was undesirable. The decision was made to deploy a skilled team of sawyers to Brush Creek to clear the trail with crosscut saws. Arrangements were made to fly seven trail crew personnel, gear, and supplies into the Flying B airstrip on August 2. The trail crew then packed six miles up the Brush Creek trail from the Flying B Ranch to set up a base camp for operations. Stock support to pack in the necessary tools, equipment, and food to support the crew was provided by the Flying B Ranch. The Flying B also assigned a crew to assist in the debris removal.



Debris pile leftover from an avalanche on Brush Creek.



Crews arrive at the Flying B ranch and prepare for their hike to the site.

When the crew arrived at the site, it was obvious the debris pile was the result a massive avalanche that slid from the top of the mountain due south of the trail, crossed through the Brush Creek drainage at the bottom of the slope, and continued up slope on the opposite side of the drainage depositing an incredible pile of mature trees directly on top of the trail. The pile of logs was approximately 200 yards wide and approximately 10 feet deep in

the sections where the trail lay buried beneath. Most of the logs were remnants of large Douglas fir and spruce trees that had burned in past fires and were ripped from the hillside on the opposite side of the drainage and transported by the avalanche to the trail. The crew experienced quite a bit of “shock and awe” when first arriving to the site, but were well equipped and capable to tackle the task at hand. By the end of the second day, the crew had cut and cleared well over 100 large trees and 100 small trees, completely clearing and reopening the trail that had been buried the previous day. *(cont. on next page)*

(cont. from previous page) While cutting and clearing trees, the crew discovered a large, remnant pile of snow that had survived under the pile of logs for months. The date was August 4 and the snow was about two feet deep. The crew spent the remainder of the hitch clearing and brushing several miles of trail up the main and north forks of Brush Creek before flying out on August 9. For all who participated, this was an incredibly satisfying and rewarding experience. The members of the Salmon-Challis Wilderness/Trails program who participated were Sydney Baker, Kyle Wisman, Noah Fried, Evan Manuel, Kory Kreiner, Meghan Rorick, and Miles Miller.



Crews cut through massive debris pile to clear the trail.



Snow piles were discovered under the logs as crews cleared the trail.

Elkhorn Fire causes a rare river closure



Aerial view of the Elkhorn Fire and the Main Salmon River on July 30, 2023.

On July 24, 2023, the Elkhorn Fire was detected by the Sheepeater Lookout on the Payette National Forest. When initial attack arrived on scene, the fire was estimated around 100 acres and the following evening, it grew to approximately 1,250 acres. In the early afternoon of July 30, the fire took a drastic turn, making a 20,000-acre run that spanned nine miles up the Main Salmon River and crossed into the Nez Perce-Clearwater National Forest, eventually encompassing a total of 26,048 acres. At the time of the blow-up, firefighters and rafters reported 50 to 90 mile per hour winds along the river. Large pieces of debris were thrown by the wind, creating spot fires that added to the chaos that was unfolding. At Allison Ranch, firefighters made the decision to provide for firefighter and caretaker safety by retreating to a nearby sandbar along the riverbank, as the smoke column collapsed. In total, seven structures were lost between Allison Ranch and Yellow Pine Ranch. During this time, another mission was underway to provide safety for the rafters that were headed down river. One crewmember from the Snowslide Type 1 Wildland Fire Use Module was sent to reroute a rafting party to safety at a nearby sandbar. While the firefighter was securing a possible deployment site by burning out around the area, a large rafting party emerged from the smoke. Four loaded rafts, four inflatable kayaks, and 12 people, including children, made their way towards the firefighter. (cont. on page 10)

(cont. from page 9) At this point, a smokejumper and a jet boat operator made their way towards the rafting party and firefighter, and when they arrived, they made the plan to take the children to safety using a jet boat and the adults would follow in rafts downstream. While the loss of the structures at Allison Ranch and Yellow Pine Ranch is unfortunate, we are thankful that all firefighters and members of the public that were with them were quickly accounted for.

The harrowing events of the fire blow-up caused fire managers to consider a rare option: closing a portion of the Salmon River. On July 31, it was announced that there would be a three-day “no launch” closure on the Permitted Salmon River Wilderness section from Corn Creek to Vinegar Creek that would last through August 2. Risks and impacts to firefighting efforts needed to be reduced before the river corridor could be opened again. Once the river was opened, rafting parties were urged to stay together and navigate the portion of the fire-affected area as quickly as possible and without stopping.

It is not often that rivers close due to increased fire activity; Forest Service officials, river outfitters and guides, and other partners work together during a wildfire incident to ensure that rivers stay open to recreationalists. In most cases, the river remains open, and rafters recreate with the understanding that they may experience fire and smoke impacts. However, given the extreme weather event that resulted in the 20,000-acre blow-up, management personnel deemed a river closure necessary to provide for public and firefighter safety. This was not an easy decision, as managers understand the long-term planning and logistics that go into a multi-day river trip. In order to officially close the river, managers are required to make a phone call to the governor’s office and congressional staff to inform them of the decision and why it is being made.

Coordination during this time is crucial, especially when trying to communicate the situation to river outfitters and guides and their guests. During the three-day closure and in the following weeks, daily coordination meetings were held to discuss rafter and firefighter safety along the river. Local USFS River Rangers stepped in to help disseminate information about rapidly changing situations to river rafters and maintain constant communication with fire resources. River rangers made over 1,000 public contacts during this time.

After the Elkhorn Fire’s significant run, heavy rains created multiple mudslides within the Salmon River Canyon. These events resulted in the creation of a new rapid in what was previously a quiet stretch of river, near



Rafters find safety during the Elkhorn Fire’s 20,000 acre blow-up.



River Ranger Seamus McMorrow scouts the new Sapp Creek Rapid before running it.

Sapp Creek. The unbri-dled energy of wildfire and water flows both il-lustrate a key character-istic of Wild and Scenic River systems and Wil-derness areas, which al-low dynamic natural forces to unfold and con-tinue shaping these be-loved landscapes.