

# Opinion: The nature of fire has dramatically changed

By Mike Benefield, High Country News

It's time to move irrigation pipe. It's one of those things you have to do when you have a certain amount of land and enough water to irrigate it. My knees hurt as I walk each piece of pipe over to the next dry spot. Here in central Oregon, it's always a race with evaporation. The sun beats down hot as I hear that familiar sound overhead; it's a DC-7 air tanker flying to another wildfire.

I didn't always spend my summers moving irrigation pipe. I was a city kid growing up on the beaches of Southern California until I turned 18 and started fighting wildfires. At 19, my wife and I loaded up all our possessions in a Volkswagen bus and moved to north-central Washington.

It was 1978, and a new world lay before us. We had both ended up working for the Forest Service. We rented an old, five-bedroom farmhouse on the banks of the Entiat River for \$185 a month. It was surrounded by massive black walnut trees and heated by a woodstove. I was fighting fire in the summer and doing whatever I could do in the winter to survive until the next summer. Some winters, I'd work at the local salmon hatchery. As the years passed, I worked as a fire lookout and served as a fire-prevention technician, while gaining more fire experience on hotshot, helitack, engine and fuels crews.

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