

Wilderness News

FROM THE QUETICO SUPERIOR FOUNDATION WINTER 2003



The Quetico Superior Foundation, established in 1946, encourages and supports the protection of the ecological, cultural and historical resources of the Quetico Superior region.

“Wilderness to the people of America is a spiritual necessity, an antidote to the high pressure of modern life, a means of regaining serenity and equilibrium.”

— Sigurd F. Olson

Wilderness News

Published by the Quetico Superior Foundation
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Special Burn Issue:

Fall Burning Increases in BWCA, Remains Short of Goal

By Diane Rose, Wilderness News Contributor

The U.S. Forest Service entered the fall burn season determined to carry out as many prescribed burns as possible in the Boundary Waters Canoe Area (BWCA), including several that they were unable to complete during the fall of 2001 and spring of 2002.



A controlled fire burns near Magnetic Lake on September 16th. About 1500 acres of fallen trees—the result of a July 1999 windstorm—were burned. Photo by Renee Knoeber, courtesy of the Duluth News Tribune.

This fall's goal was to reduce the backlog of planned burns and eliminate approximately 11,000 acres of extremely dry wildfire fuels that resulted from the huge 1999 blowdown storm. Fire teams worked quickly during a two-week window of dry, sunny weather in mid-September, completing 3,700 acres of burns – more than three times the 1,000 acres that were burned the previous fall. They had hoped for another burn window during October but cold, wet weather put a halt to prescribed burning for 2002.

In 2001, only one-fourth of planned acreage was burned; the proportion improved to one-third in 2002. A seven-year plan calls for burning 75,000 acres of blowdown-created wildfire fuels and creating a patchwork of burned areas that can hold wildfires in check in and around the BWCA.

Of the priority areas for this fall, prescribed burns were completed at: Magnetic Lake, 2,486 acres; Iron Mash/Overlap/Meditation Lake, 169 acres; and Three-Mile Island, 1,034 acres. Those burns were in the East Zone of the Superior National Forest near the Gunflint Trail. Crews were not able to complete East Zone burns at Kekekabic Lake, One-Island Lake and Dogleg Lake, nor

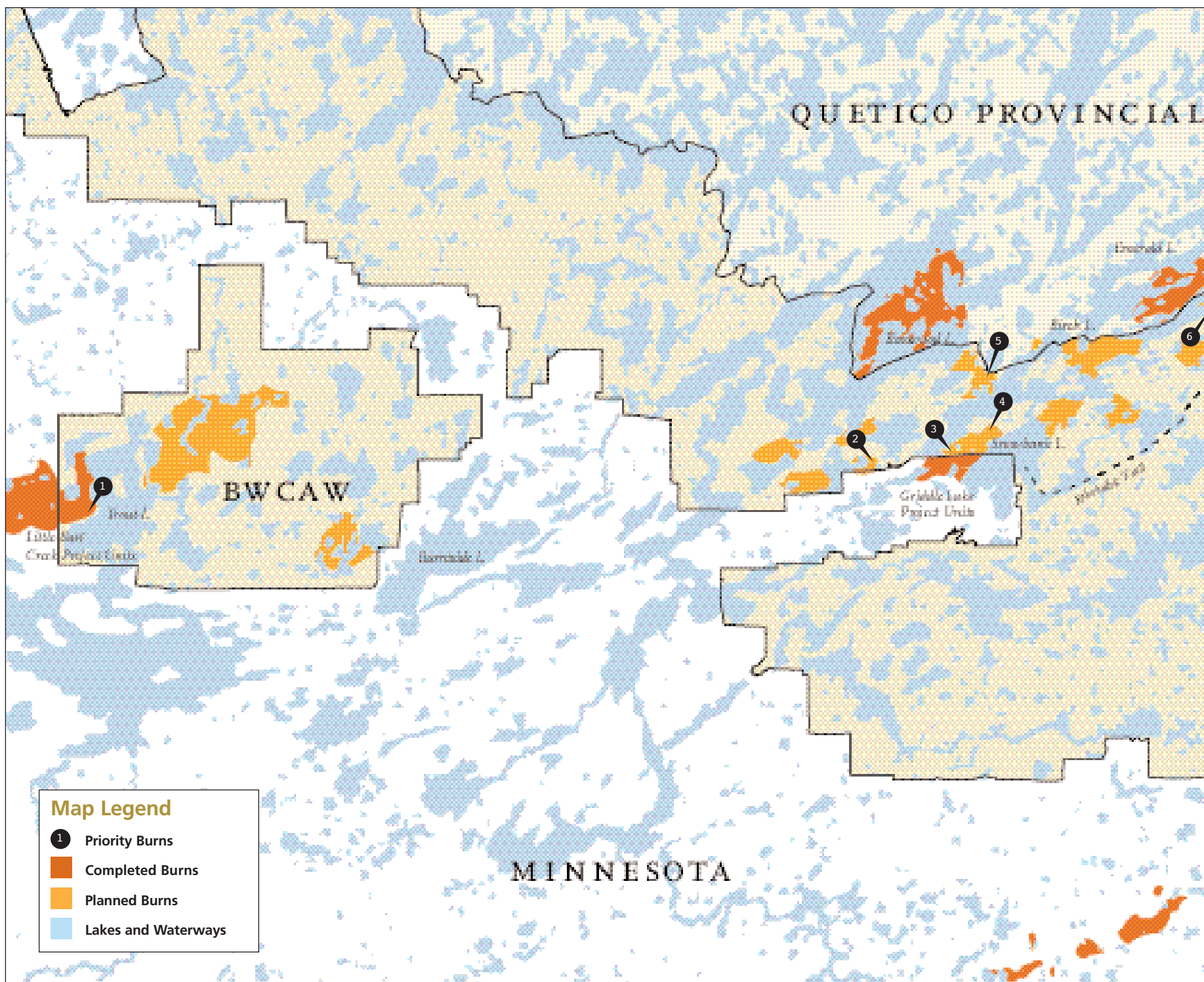
planned West Zone burns near Ely between Snowbank and Moose lakes, at Horseshoe Island, Wind Lake, Wood Lake, the four-mile portage between Fall and Basswood lakes and Knife Lake.

Jim Sanders, Forest Service supervisor of the Superior National Forest, said officials were extremely pleased with what was accomplished this year during a “phenomenal September” and said no burn window opportunities were missed in 2002.

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A Forest Service crew prepares 55 gallon accelerant tanks for flight to the Three Mile Island/Seagull Lake prescribed burn area. The staging area, a gravel pit, is located off the Gunflint Trail. Photo courtesy of Jim Wiinanen, Wilderness Canoe Base



Map Legend

- ① Priority Burns
- Completed Burns
- Planned Burns
- Lakes and Waterways

“When you put the whole picture together, we’re sitting in great shape,” he said. “We’ve completed the burns that were most difficult to accomplish, that carried the highest risk level and cost the most because of their proximity to populated areas. We have a couple more of those to do – near Snowbank Lake and at the end of the Gunflint corridor – but we’ve created a great anchor and the risk goes down as we begin to work our way into the wilderness.”

Sanders said the initial focus was along the Gunflint corridor, which has high public use, and is now moving into the BWCA. Results of the burns done so far have been excellent, he said. For example, the relatively cool prescribed fires have succeeded in maintaining soil conditions so that new seedlings will sprout right away. In addition, approximately 70 percent of the older trees that were not blown down in 1999 remain in areas such as Three-Mile Island where burns have been completed.

“Our objective is to prevent a wildfire that would threaten the health and safety of people in the area,” he said. “The danger of a big fire is still there; that won’t be gone for 10 to 15 years until we’ve completed the burns and everything has decomposed. But with what we’ve accomplished, we have more options and better ability to control a wildfire.”

Master Plan, Weather Woes

The Forest Service’s master plan calls for prescribed burns in the BWCA to be completed over a five- to seven-year timeframe, starting with the signing of the Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) September of 2001. Acreage goals spike in year four. Burns are planned for periods in the fall and spring when materials are dry enough, but not so dry that a prescribed fire could easily become an uncontrollable wildfire.

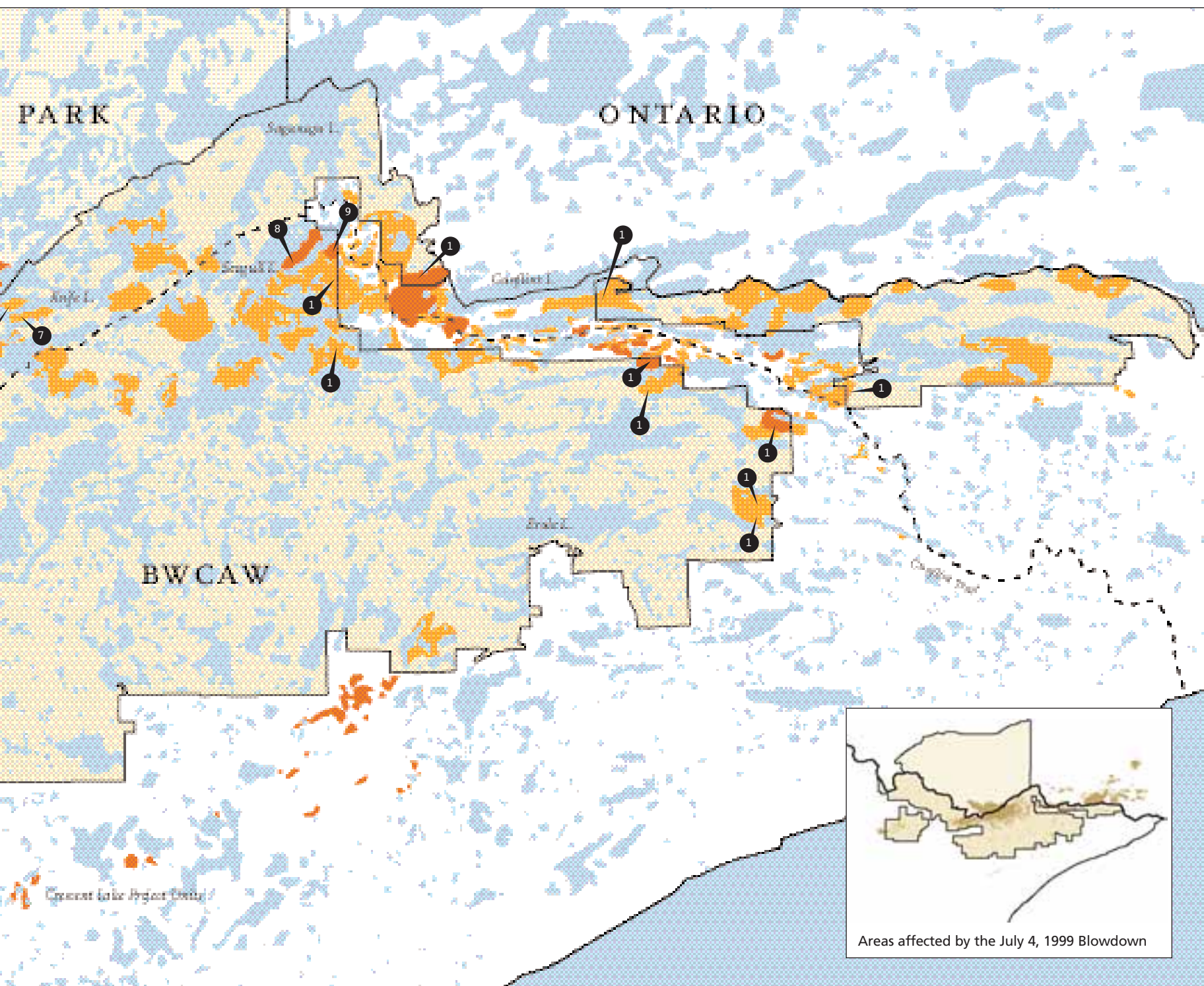
Jim Hinds, fire management officer for the West Zone of the Superior National Forest near Ely, said: “It’s not going to be easy by any means; it’s a real aggressive program.”

Weather conditions are crucial to prescribed burning – and extremely unpredictable. The last several falls have been uncharacteristically wet. In the fall of 2001, an additional challenge was that aircraft used for the burns were grounded after the September 11 disasters and later were diverted to fight western wildfires. Last spring, Forest Service officials said the burn window never opened because conditions went from wet to hot and dry almost overnight. The summer was relatively dry, with campfire restrictions imposed in May, lifted in late June and imposed again in July. In early July, crews fought to contain a wildfire between Hovland and Grand Marais that started in trees that had been blown down in a storm 10 years ago, and 1,400



Prescribed burns are ignited by helicopters dropping a gelatinous accelerator across a prescribed area, working upwind, so that new fires zones burn into a 60 foot rise on the northeast tip of Three Mile Island looking across Seagull
Etten Williams

Superior National Forest employees spent much of the summer on the road assisting crews fighting huge wildfires burning in the western United States. Fortunately, the need for national firefighting resources out west dropped off as the



which ignites in midair and falls to the ground. The pilot flies patterns old ones and lower the chances of fire escaping the area. This view is from and east toward the Magnetic Lake area. Photo courtesy of Dyke Van

September burn window opened in the BWCA.

This winter the Forest Service will critique the 2002 burns, make detailed plans for 2003 and hope to be able to do some burning in the spring. Spring burns would take place between

mid-April and mid-May, after the snow is gone and before things begin greening up.

Lee Frelich, a forest ecologist with the University of Minnesota, said last summer that he hoped the Forest Service would be able to complete a large number of burns in 2002 and 2003. After that, he said, seeds in the cones of downed jack pine trees will be dead, and a different type of forest dominated by aspen would come back in the wake of a burn.

“Ideally, they would have started the burning sooner,” Frelich said. “At this point, I would try to stick with the plan. But if it rains in September for the next few years, they’re not going to get it done.”

In Frelich’s opinion, the EIS for the burn plan took a long time to complete because the Forest Service approached the burns from a public safety perspective rather than a benefit to the ecosystem, which he said would have been more compatible with the Wilderness Act. Sanders said two EIS’s were completed in 18 months, which is a very fast pace. He said the prescribed burn plan is benefiting both public safety and the health of the wilderness.

Divergent Views on Danger

Opinions about fire danger and priorities in the BWCA reflect the independent nature of the people who live in northeastern Minnesota.

“People in this area are generally very supportive of the prescribed burning and glad to see what we’ve been doing,” Sanders said. “There are very few communities who’ve taken on preparedness themselves like the Gunflint has.”

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Priority Prescribed Burns in the BWCAW

- | | |
|---|--|
| 1. Little East Creek Project
465 acres
completed 2001 | 11. Tuscarora Lake
2,112 acres planned |
| 2. Wood Lake
580 acres planned | 12. Magnetic Lake
1,090 acres
completed 2002 |
| 3. Sommers
277 acres planned | 13. Saucer Lake
2,369 acres planned |
| 4. Snowbank Lake
1,372 acres planned | 14. Skipper
192 acres
completed 2001 |
| 5. Horseshoe Island
54 acres planned | 15. Meeds Lake
1,626 acres planned |
| 6. Thunder Point
386 acres planned | 16. Crocodile Lake
731 acres planned |
| 7. Bonnie Lake
848 acres planned | 17. Brule River/
One Island Lake
313 acres
completed 2001 |
| 8. Three Mile Island
1,034 acres
completed 2002 | 18. Rum/Sled
515 acres planned |
| 9. Meditation Lake
129 acres
completed 2002 | 19. Bower Trout
1,039 acres planned |
| 10. Arc Lake
2,633 acres planned | |

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Wilderness News

Winter 2003

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Forest Service fire crews observe the Magnetic Lake burn from the water prepared to land and control the fire on foot should it burn beyond set bounds. The area of the BWCA around Magnetic Lake is a Jack Pine forest that was created by a natural fire in 1910 when the pine cones burst open and populated the forest floor with seeds. *Photo courtesy of Dyke Van Etten Williams*

Cook County Sheriff Dave Wirt agreed, saying residents understand the need for a conservative, cautious approach to the prescribed burns. He noted that some people still advocate mechanical harvesting of downed trees to salvage the lumber, but that any action on that front is unlikely because logging is not allowed in the area and could not happen without Congressional approval.

Hinds said he is a strong supporter of using prescribed burning in the wilderness to help restore ecological balance in areas such as the BWCA where nature's fires have been suppressed for many years, but he knows there is a lot of opposition to his stance. Forest Service policy has long supported prescribed burning for fuel hazard reduction, he said, but has not viewed it as an ecological tool for wilderness management.

Frelich of the University of Minnesota said the rapid growth of dogwoods in the blowdown area is shading fallen logs, which are rotting more quickly than expected. But Sanders and Ellen Bogardus-Szymaniak, a fire behavior specialist with the Forest Service, said that while the shade will keep humidity levels up and

delay the timing of the fire season, drying fuels from the blowdown remain and it will be many years before decomposition will mitigate the wildfire danger.

Dan Baumann, president of the Cook County Fire Chiefs Mutual Aid Association and owner of Golden Eagle Lodge, believes the Forest Service should have started doing prescribed burning years ago, and should use it to reduce wildfire fuels after an area is logged. He said the Forest Service is doing a good job with the BWCA burn plan – balancing caution with action and working well with private property owners. “I disagree with the amount of red tape the Forest Service has to go through to please a small minority of environmentalists,” he said. “It’s micromanagement. The Forest Service had enough knowledge to do this without going through the whole EIS process.”

Bogardus-Szymaniak said: “Our biggest message is that we will have a fire at some point, and we need to be sure we’re prepared. I don’t have a sense that people are paying attention to this, and it’s easy after two or three years to think that there isn’t going to be a big fire if there hasn’t been one yet. That’s not the case.” □

WILDERNESS VOICES

Mourning the Loss of Wally Dayton, Friend of the Wilderness

We were privileged to have Wally Dayton on the Quetico Superior Foundation Board for more than two decades. Wally died at his home on October 27, 2002 after a prolonged illness. Members of our Board cherish memories of happy weekends hiking and savoring the beauty of the BWCA with Wally and Mary Lee. Weekends at Frank Hubachek’s wilderness retreat on Basswood Lake were glorious. For the last forty years Wally has been the prominent leader of Minnesota’s dedicated conservationists. He was a man who could identify all of our Minnesota birds and he photographed them beautifully. Wally was active in the Nature Conservancy, the Wilderness Society, the Audubon Society and many other conservation groups. The quality of life in Minnesota is better today thanks to Wally Dayton’s committed leadership and generosity.

- *The Quetico Superior Foundation*

BWCAW Permit Deadline: January 10, 2003

To reserve a permit for the 2003 season, submit an application via fax or mail by Jan. 10, 2003, or apply via the web site by Jan. 15. All applications are processed by lottery; after January 15, all applications will be processed on a first-come, first-served basis.

Web site: www.bwcaw.org

Mail: BWCAW Reservation Center
P.O. Box 462
Ballston Spa, NY 12020

Phone: 1-877-550-6777(Toll Free)

Fax: (518) 884-9951

TDD: 1-877-TDD-NRRS (Toll Free)

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