

# Friends of the South Slopes

August 2023

*Sept. 4, 2003 Myra Canyon Trestles in flames*



Box 28011 RPO East Kelowna, Kelowna BC V1W 4A6

<http://www.foss-kelowna.org>

[info@foss-kelowna.org](mailto:info@foss-kelowna.org)

We acknowledge that our community is located on the traditional, ancestral, unceded territory of the Syilx/Okanagan people

## ***SPECIAL EDITION***

### ***Reflecting on the Twenty Year Anniversary of the Okanagan Mountain Provincial Park Wildfire***

In the early morning of August 16, 2003, a lightning strike near Squally Point in Okanagan Mountain Provincial Park (OMPP) sparked the most destructive Canadian wildfire to that date. This wildfire was just one of many ignited in the Kamloops Fire District. With tinder-dry conditions in the Okanagan, and unforgiving winds, the fire quickly spread across the park. Within a day it covered 1,000 hectares and was spreading north towards Kelowna and south towards Naramata. The rugged terrain that so many of us love about OMPP made this wildfire extremely challenging to fight. It was clear that this was a monster, sending ash and debris and even burning embers down on the areas around it. Evacuations started on Aug. 21, when residents at the south end of Lakeshore Rd. were ordered to leave their homes, and the first homes were lost to the fire on Rimrock & Timberline Roads. However, the worst was yet to come as on August 22 high



*Aug. 20, 2003—View from Harvard Rd. FOSS Volunteers were putting up 'Park Closed' signs at the entrances to Myra-Bellevue Provincial, at the request of BC Parks.*

winds fed the fire and another 17,000 people were ordered evacuated. Many of us scrambled to leave, frantically gathering the things that were important to us and moving livestock to safer ground. Some who were evacuated in the early days faced evacuation from the places they'd fled to, when the evacuation area expanded.

The full devastation of the August 22 firestorm was revealed the following day: 155 homes in Okanagan Mission and 68 homes in Crawford Estates were destroyed. In total, 238 homes were lost to the fire, 25,900 hectares burned and more than 33,000 people were evacuated.

But this monster wildfire wasn't finished—after it burned through Okanagan Mtn. Provincial Park and much of Myra-Bellevue Provincial Park, the fire jumped the KVR and on Sept. 4th it roared back down and started burning the Myra Canyon Trestles. A huge jolt to the community, but firefighters succeeded in stopping the fire from advancing any further down KLO Creek Canyon.

### **Recovery:**

The community, the Province and the Nation rallied to help. The Myra Canyon Trestle Restoration Society, funded by the Governments of BC and Canada, facilitated the rebuilding of the 12 burnt wooden trestles and the 2 damaged steel trestles—an epic undertaking.

FOSS was significantly involved in the restoration of the trail systems in Myra-Bellevue & Okanagan Mtn. Provincial Parks. FOSS partnered with Katim Enterprises who applied for a Job Creation Program funded by Human Resource Development Canada, (HRDC funded employment opportunities for unemployed individuals), with a goal to rehabilitate the trails, rebuild bridges and mitigate the damage from the fire. Beginning in August, 2004, it was a 44 week trail enhancement project throughout the fire-affected parks. Katim supplied the workforce and FOSS' raised funds for materials and provided hundreds of hours of volunteer support.

FOSS successfully applied for a number of grants in support of the Katim/HRDC project, including a City of Kelowna Fire Recovery Grant and an Interior Savings Community Development Grant, and FOSS received many other donations and in-kind support of the project. Funds were used for fencing, bridge materials, contract work (erosion mitigation and danger tree mitigation for a minimal risk corridor), signage & posts, developing the first MBPP/OMPP trail map, tools and paying the wages for the Leadhand in the HRDC/Katim.



**Sept. 2, 2003 NASA Satellite Image**



**Sept 6, 2003 Myra Canyon Trestles on fire (BC Forest Service photo)**

What follows on pages 3, 4 & 5 is a collection of photos taken on Oct. 11, 2003 (unless otherwise identified) when the BC Park Ranger took FOSS Directors on a tour of the lower trails in Myra-Bellevue. The photos on the left were taken in 2003, the photos on the right were taken in July, 2023, when we returned to the same locations and took photos of the changes that have occurred over the past 20 years.

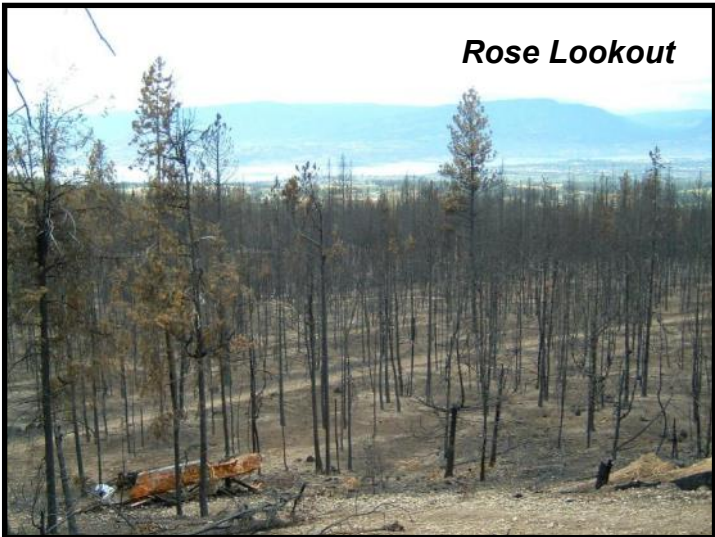
**Looking southwest from Teddy Bear Jct.**



**View of Moose Trail on the south side of Lost Lake (photos were taken from Piper's Trail)**



**Rose Lookout**



***Fairlane Trail (the old 'Fairlane' car is still visible today)***



***View looking north from Lost Lake Loop***



***Pink Highway Trail,  
Nov. 1, 2003***



***Pink Hwy Trail, 2023***

**Oct. 19, 2003  
Fire guard-Angel  
Springs Trail**



**The story of the Angel Springs Trail**—To fight the fire, firefighters built a fireguard east off of Little White Forest Service Rd., mostly following the Angel Springs Trail. This trail was extremely important to FOSS, as in 2000 FOSS had rallied the community and circulated a petition to deny a tufa mining claim that was filed just prior to the establishment of Myra-Bellevue Provincial Park. The mining claim was denied and Angel Springs was included in the Park.

During post-fire remediation, this fire guard was decommissioned, destroying the trail. Just another post-fire challenge, and FOSS worked with BC Parks to reroute Angel Springs Trail to its current location.

**Ministry of Forests—decommissioned the  
Angel Springs Trail!**



**July, 2023—The fireguard today! The Angel  
Springs Trail is located just south of this.**



**Fairlane Trail, east of Priest Creek**



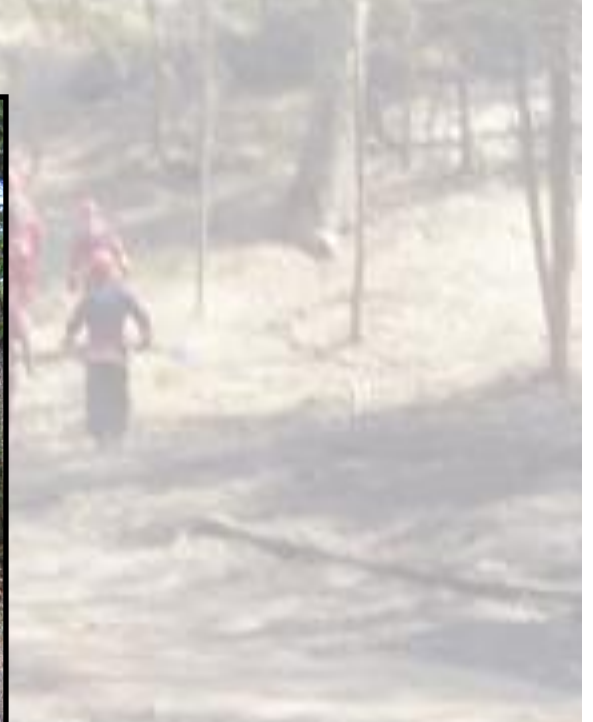
**Kelowna's Apple Bowl—a staging area for firefighters from the Canadian Army**



**Oct 8, 2003—Regeneration near Lost Lake**



**Oct. 19, 2023—Some areas of Myra weren't impacted by the fire. This was Bellevue Access Trail**



**Oct. 8, 2003—Danger holes by Fairlane Trail  
(We were told they were 'dragon feet'!). This happened when a tree's root system completely burned out.**



## ***Memories of the 2003 Okanagan Mtn. Provincial Park Wild Fire.....***

### **Penny Gubbels (FOSS Director 1997-2017)**

On Aug. 16, 2003, the day the wildfire started, we were living less than a km from the Harvard Rd. entrance to MBPP. Within days our neighbourhood was on an evacuation alert. That became an order on the night of August 21. I remember fire trucks and police sirens wailing, as we and our neighbours frantically prepared to evacuate. Living on a farm with cattle and chickens, this was not easy. We filled every container we could with water and then turned the cattle loose in the pasture, hoping for the best. We loaded up our truck with the essentials, including our very frightened farm dog, and headed down the hill to our daughter's friend's house near the hospital. We registered at the evacuation center (Parkinson Rec. Centre) where my husband volunteered with an animal rescue group, Noah's Wish. He knew the South Kelowna area well and he travelled with them to check many farms and homes within the evacuation zone. They fed and watered everything from horses to fish, and they also arranged for foster care for pets. I will never forget the night of the 'firestorm' and the sounds the fire made – like a 747 airplane. We watched from downtown as the fire raced across the South Slopes, over Bellevue Creek and into Myra-Bellevue, destroying homes and parklands. After the evacuation order was lifted, we returned to our farm. On Sept. 2, we were baling our hay and we watched in horror as the KVR trestles started to burn. It was a heartbreaking day for me.



### **Daphne Richard (FOSS VP in 2003; retired from the board in 2023)**

Layers of fine dust covered our woodland trails. The sound was hollow each time my horse's hoof struck the ground. Instinctively we knew to stop riding for fear that a spark from a metal shoe could ignite a disaster. Our worst fear became a reality; dry lightning ignited an old Ponderosa on a rocky bluff – and fire began its march across the South Slopes.

The Pan American Endurance Championships, for which I was training, were forgotten. We were given less than an hour to leave. We loaded our nervous horses in the dark and said our silent goodbyes to our home and property of 30 years. I cannot describe our sense of hopelessness.

During that next 24 hours we were forced to move the horses four times; everywhere we went the firestorm followed us, its jet-like roar terrifying, trees exploding. We finally settled the horses in temporary stabling at the polo fields near the airport.

The Pan Americans were only a week away. We were given special permission and an escort to go home to pick up the remaining supplies. Strange, eerie, people-less, horse-less. Our close friend still talks about her feelings of despair and loneliness as she watched our rig pull away.

Canada West won the bronze medal; how proud we were, and tears flowed freely as the adrenalin ride of the past month began to subside. In our absence the rains had come; what nature had begun, it had ended. Miraculously, our house and property had been spared.

## Sharon Shepherd, Former Mayor & City of Kelowna Councillor and current FOSS Director

My memories of 20 years ago, the August 22, 2003 Firestorm:

"You must leave", radio announcer, Kim Calloway mouthed to me. "You must leave right now!" "There will be an interruption in this program to announce that homes in the South Mission, including your neighbourhood, is under evacuation order!" As Chairperson of the CORD Air Quality Committee, we were discussing the worst Air Quality condition in Kelowna due to the very dense heavy smoke. So thick that in my neighbourhood the house next door was barely visible.

My husband Michael arrived home the same time as I did. We grabbed the documents, photos, and clothes organized through the evacuation notice. Two frightened German Shepherds were loaded into the vehicles. Emergency personnel were knocking on our doors to leave. We proceeded slowly to the Lower Mission. In two days, a new evacuation order moved us to Lake Country.

The devastating fire storm of August 22, 2003 burned 223 homes. Our neighbourhood and neighbours' lives were forever changed. The fire singed our property. However, our home with large trees survived. In 10 days, we returned. No power resulted in sending fridges unopened to the landfill. The walls smelled of smoke. One-half a block away many lots had only foundations. Some had only chimney stacks. Some had a home standing. The entire previously treed area looked like a conflict zone.

Twenty years later, many lessons were learned and shared.



*Kelowna city councillor Sharon Shepherd and her husband, Michael, walk through their neighbourhood along Okaview Road after residents were allowed back in. (Gary Nolander/The Daily Courier)*

Make a list of what is important to you. Take pictures of your home and contents. Have a family plan. Discuss with your children. Plan for your pets. **Be Prepared.**

## Alan & Sylvia Milnes (Alan is a current FOSS Director)

People helping people; especially people who didn't know each other. That is the primary memory that we have of the 2003 Okanagan Mountain Park fire as we look back 20 years. Although our house did not burn, all of the houses around us did. The damage and losses were astonishing, powerful and heartrending. We had evacuated to a friend's house in Glenmore when the fire raced into Kelowna. The generosity of our friend to open her house for two weeks to 4 individuals she knew but not well is something none of the family will forget. This inspired Sylvia and I to 'pay it forward' and do what we could to assist others in our position. We decided to volunteer for evening shifts at the intake centre at the Parkinson Recreation Centre. Those registering or seeking information were understandably anxious, fearful and worried. But the people volunteering and working in the intake centre were a special bunch: incredibly supportive and helpful some even joyful at the opportunity to help fellow residents at a time of unbelievable need. Despite all the destruction caused by the fire, to experience that mood of cooperation, collaboration and togetherness at PAC in August and September of 2003 was indeed unique, infectious and life changing.

## ***The Stewart Rd. East Information Kiosk***

In July, 2003, with 'in kind' support from Somerville Corner's developer, Jamie Browne, the Stewart Rd. East Information Kiosk was constructed. Jamie's carpenter 'Dan', assisted by FOSS volunteer Fred Gubbels, completed construction of the kiosk just a few weeks prior to the wildfire.

The wildfire burned through the forest adjacent to the Trailhead, but we were thankful to find the newly built kiosk fully intact and undamaged. Following the fire, both Myra-Bellevue & Okanagan Mtn. Provincial Parks were closed to the public. MBPP was officially reopened April 30, 2005; OMPP

remained closed until later in 2005, as hazard tree contractors were still working in that park. Volunteers finally installed the sign panels for the kiosk in April, 2005. It would be 3 more years, in June of 2008, before the work to restore the Myra Canyon section of the park was officially reopened.

### ***July, 2003—Construction of the Kiosk***



### ***April, 2005—The Kiosk panels are finally installed***



This Thermal Map identifies the active fire areas in Myra Canyon & KLO Creek on **Sept 7, 2003**.

The area in brown pinpoints where the fire had burned, and clearly shows where the wildfire jumped the KVR and moved south into the Crown Land we call the "Donut" (south of the KVR). The fire then shifted south and eastwards to burn the trestles, before travelling north into KLO Creek Canyon. This map shows just how close the wildfire came to reaching the June Springs/McCulloch Rd./Gallagher's Canyon community. Thanks to the heroic efforts of the wildland firefighters and residents, these communities were saved. Traces of fire retardant are still visible on some rock faces along the KVR and in KLO Creek Canyon.

