

# IS YOUR SMOKEY BEAR REALLY A FOX IN BIB OVERALLS?

By Kirk Schmitt, CFI

*“Reno, Nevada: Neighborhood Wildfire Destroys One Home, Damages Two Others”*

*“Hayman Fire Tops \$40 Million in Damages”*

*“600 Structures Lost in Hayman Fire”*

*“Fire Officials Anticipate Active Wildland Fire Season”*

Each spring, headlines such as these appear in newspapers and magazines across the nation, and each spring, new residential and commercial structures shoot up like quaking aspens in America’s woodlands. Our desire to live in the natural vegetation, while working in urban areas, has even generated new terminology: **Wildland Interface**. This is the description given by the Forest Service and BLM to the band of natural vegetation bordering our urban and suburban areas, usually receiving heavy usage as wooded housing developments or day and overnight picnic and camping areas.

Wildland interface is also the area most likely to experience the highest dollar loss in a wildland fire. These areas closest to the forest are prime real estate. Large lots, large houses, and large vehicles mean large losses should a wildland fire impinge upon these upscale neighborhoods. In Colorado, almost the entire Front Range, from Ft. Collins south to Pueblo, could be considered wildland interface.

Did you know the Front Range of Colorado has been on the Feds’ top 10 list as an area of concern for years? They realize the potential for a catastrophic loss exists should conditions such as drought, beetle kill, high temperatures and low humidity, heavy forest usage, little or no logging, lightning, and/or arson continue.

Wildland fires, unlike structure fires, are not always properly investigated to determine just what caused the fire. In Colorado, the responsibility to suppress and investigate wildland fires not involving Federal lands falls to each individual county sheriff’s department. All too often a cursory look at the fire results in a call of lightning or careless smoking, when the actual cause of the fire was an incendiary device, or a failure of equipment operating nearby.

When it comes to lightning fires, I’m not about to depose the Big Man upstairs and request he bring a copy of his electrician’s license, but if the railroad is operating a locomotive with a faulty spark arrester on its stack, they may well have some financial responsibility for the outbuilding the resulting grass fire damaged. But, you have to be able to prove the fire resulted from a hot cinder. You have to know where and how to find that evidence.

The majority of working fire investigators are well versed in examining a burned structure, but very few of them have ever investigated or processed a wildland fire scene. They don’t have the proper equipment or the knowledge of wildland fuels

behavior and the ability to interpret fire movement patterns in these fuels. Unless you can identify where the fire originated and how it moved outward from the area of origin, you will have little chance of locating the evidence you need to determine responsibility.

## **Enter Smokey Bear!!**

Processing a wildland fire is very different from processing a structure fire. You need to work from greatest damage to the least damage. You have to be able to differentiate between **advancing fire** from **backing fire** from **flanking fire**. You must have the skills and tools to determine where exactly in your 1 or 2 acre area of origin the evidence may be located and have the knowledge to apply the evidence to a method of ignition.

There are fire investigators specifically trained and certified to work a wildland fire investigation. Most of these investigators received their training from the Forest Service and have significant experience in wildland fires both as investigators and as firefighters. They speak the wildland language and are able to work within the Federal forestry system. Many structural investigators claim to have experience in wildland investigations, having investigated small grass fires or fires involving ornamental shrubbery. **This is not** wildland fire investigation, and has little resemblance to conducting an actual wildland fire scene origin and cause investigation.

A few select wildland folks are certified both as wildland investigators and as structural investigators, allowing them to not only determine and document how the wildland fire started, but also examine the structural scene resulting from the fire.

Phoenix/Rampart Investigations, Inc., employs wildland fire investigators who are IAAI CFIs and are certified by the National Wildfire Coordinating Group (NWCG) as Wildland Fire Origin and Cause Determination Investigators Level 1. Our investigators have real working experience on wildland fire scenes resulting in the successful prosecution of those responsible for incendiary fires. They are able to help you understand the wildland fire arena and advise you on subrogation potential involving wildland fires.

Don't be fooled by the Fox calling himself Smokey. (Hint: foxes have big bushy tails, bears don't.) Ask what certifications they have. Are they wildland certified? What fires have they worked? Do they know what a Pulaski is? (Wildland tool used for digging fire line.) If they show up in tennis shoes, kindly ask them to get back in their Pinto and leave your fire scene.

Give Phoenix a call, we'll be glad to assist you with your wildland fire questions. Ranger hat and bib overalls available upon request! Remember. Only YOU can prevent forest fires!