

[http://missoulian.com/news/local/hideous-brown-spiral-of-misery-and-despair---aka/article\\_7d5269c2-82af-582f-9dea-f9da4d7001af.html](http://missoulian.com/news/local/hideous-brown-spiral-of-misery-and-despair---aka/article_7d5269c2-82af-582f-9dea-f9da4d7001af.html)

# 'Hideous brown spiral of misery and despair' - aka smoke. Expect more.

[KIM BRIGGEMAN and PETER FRIESEN](#) [kbriggeman@missoulian.com](mailto:kbriggeman@missoulian.com)  
[peter.friesen@missoulian.com](mailto:peter.friesen@missoulian.com)

Sep 6, 2017

As bad as the smoke was Wednesday in most parts of southwestern Montana, it's going to be worse Thursday in several places.

A "smoke spiral," air quality specialist Sarah Coefield called it, comprising smoke from northern California, Oregon, Washington, Canada, Montana and Idaho, all of it merging "to swirl around over our heads in a hideous brown spiral of misery and despair."

"This is, to put it lightly, bad. It is so bad," Coefield, of the Missoula City-County Health Department, wrote in her Wednesday-afternoon update.

On Thursday, residents of Florence, Lolo, Arlee and Seeley Lake are likely to awake to Hazardous air quality, Coefield said. "The rest of us will likely have, at minimum, Unhealthy air quality."

In Seeley Lake, readings reached the highest measurable point on the Hazardous scale at 1 a.m. Wednesday and remained there all day as wildfire smoke remains trapped under a high-pressure system.

In fact, air quality graphs for most of western Montana showed straight lines all day Wednesday, hanging steady in the Unhealthy-Hazardous zones.



Firefighters walk through the Rice Ridge fire camp early Tuesday morning shrouded in smoke from the fire burning more than 100,000 acres just east of Seeley Lake. Morning temperatures also dipped below 40 degrees in the camp. [KURT WILSON, Missoulian](#)

Winds will remain light as the high pressure moves across the region Thursday and Friday, shifting to west and southwest and retaining dry, warm conditions.

"The surface and transport breezes (weak though they may be) will be easterly tomorrow, which will keep smoke trapped in western Montana and part of the Smoke Spiral," the Wednesday afternoon report said. "The Smoke Spiral is going to continue picking up smoke and getting thicker and more horrible as long as it is overhead."

When the air registers Unhealthy, people within sensitive groups should avoid all physical outdoor activity. At Very Unhealthy, everyone should avoid prolonged or healthy exertion. At Hazardous, everyone should avoid all outdoor activity.

Detailed air conditions in Missoula County are available online with a search of "Missoula air quality" or at [missoulacounty.us/departments/health-department/air-quality](https://missoulacounty.us/departments/health-department/air-quality).

Although the smoke is at its worst levels in many parts of the state, take solace in the fact that that same smoke is keeping the fires in check.

"Smoke is the **Sprague fire's** friend," went the title of Wednesday's fire update for the 13,000-acre fire burning in Glacier National Park. "The advantage of smoke is the 'dampening' effect it has on fire behavior."

On the **Rice Ridge fire**, Public Information Officer Mike Cole said the smoke acted as an umbrella, shading the fire from direct sunlight.

"We had a lot of smoke sitting over the fire all day and that's kept the fire down," he said. "We've had a very good day."

Wednesday, firefighters worked on establishing line east of Seeley Lake, in an attempt to seal off the fire from making a run toward town and Montana Highway 83.

Tuesday, firefighters saved a lone cabin east of town, coming upon it just as a burning tree fell on the roof. Crews also installed hose and sprinklers around one-third of the cabins in the Coopers Lake area and worked on fire line in the Morrell Creek drainage, where an unusually dry wet spruce bog continues to burn.

Many fires have stayed calm, though still burning, since the gusty winds blew up over Labor Day weekend, allowing evacuation orders to be withdrawn in Lolo, Florence and Seeley Lake.

**Lolo Peak fire** crews focused on burnout operations Tuesday and Wednesday, according to Inciweb, the Incident Information System, with limited retardant drops due to the inversion. They worked on establishing line south of Kootenai Creek, to try and turn the fire away from houses if it kept moving south.

**Smoke or more smoke**, you can play on Seeley Lake again.

Effective at noon Wednesday, the waters of the lake are again open to boating and other recreation. The Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks made the announcement the morning after the Missoula County Sheriff's Office lifted an evacuation order for some 230 homes in and around the town of Seeley Lake.

The lake had been under temporary emergency closure while aircraft used most of the lake to draw water to fight the Rice Ridge fire.

"Fire crews may continue to scoop water from portions of the lake, so boaters must be alert for aircraft and stay clear of fire suppression operations," an FWP release said.

Fire conditions could prompt another closure, so boaters and others should stay tuned for updates. Visit [fwp.mt.gov/news/restrictions](http://fwp.mt.gov/news/restrictions) or call the FWP office in Missoula at 406-542-5500.

\*\*\*

**The Nature Conservancy** joined Weyerhaeuser and Stimson Lumber Co. in closing its lands in western Montana to all public access until fire conditions improve.

FWP said fall hunting seasons and districts are open as planned, but many areas have wildfire-related land closures that affect hunter access and travel. The agency helps manage hunter access and recreation on some private lands.

Hunters and recreationists should review closures and restrictions before heading out.

For current fire closures and maps that include Forest Service and BLM public lands, visit InciWeb online at [inciweb.nwcg.gov/state/27/](http://inciweb.nwcg.gov/state/27/).

All Weyerhaeuser and Stimson timberlands are part of FWP's block management, and The Nature Conservancy has a cooperative management agreement with FWP.

Violations of the closures will be considered trespassing.

"We'll be doing some level of patrolling," FWP's Vivaca Crowser said. "Obviously it's a lot of land, so that'll be a priority and emphasis for us.

"We're hoping to sign those areas so we're not catching people unaware and we're looking for fire crews and members of the public to let us know about violations."