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For more information:

Laura Follis

lfollis@paws.org

(425) 318-2380

Orphaned bear cubs suffering severe burns from Washington wildfires get lifesaving care at PAWS

Unprecedented number of burned bears come to PAWS Wildlife Center in July and August during record-breaking wildfire season.

LYNNWOOD, Washington – Wildlife experts from PAWS and wildfire experts from Department of Natural Resources, including Washington Commissioner of Public Lands Hilary Franz, joined forces at a news conference at PAWS on Tuesday, August 31 to discuss the dire state of wildfire in Washington and examine a consequence not often talked about—the grave impact on wildlife forced to flee burning habitat or succumb.

Jennifer Convy, PAWS Senior Director of Wildlife, Companion Animal and Education Services; Dr. Nicki Rosenhagen, PAWS Wildlife Veterinarian; and Hilary Franz, Commissioner of Public Lands, took turns talking about the severely burned orphaned bears rescued from the Cedar Creek and Twenty-Five Mile wildfires in Eastern Washington, the impact this season's wildfires are having on wildlife, and what is being done to prepare for future wildfire seasons.

“What we’re seeing is extremely unusual,” said Convy. “The number of severely burned bears coming to PAWS is not something I’ve seen in my 25 years at PAWS.” PAWS has been admitting black bears for rehabilitation since 1987. As the largest bear rehabilitation facility in Washington, Convy notes that PAWS rehabilitates and releases back to the wild an average of six bears every year. “Historically, burns have not been a common injury we’ve seen but we expect this may become more common and we’re prepared at PAWS to admit black bears and other wild species injured by wildfire.”

Commissioner Franz agreed that the 2021 wildfire season is breaking records and wreaking havoc on people, property and, sadly, the wild animals who live in the path of the wildfires. “Wildfire threatens every corner and every community in the state, especially this year,” said Commissioner Franz. “This fire season, we’re experiencing a historic number of fires: we have seen already more fires in 2021 than we saw in all of 2020, with more than 1,650 fires that have burned more than 630,000 acres. And the season is far from over—drought and extreme temperatures have left us at risk of heightened wildfire danger deep into September and October.”

“She’s an absolute trooper,” said Dr. Rosenhagen when she took the news conference podium. She was talking about the first of the wildfire bears admitted to PAWS on July 27 with second degree burns on her face and feet. “Her resilience is inspiring, and in spite of all of the trauma and stress she has endured, she’s acting as much like a normal bear cub as she can—eating, sleeping and even starting to play.”

Dubbed Cedar Creek Wildfire Bear, the 7-month-old cub was found alone and injured in the Cedar Creek fire burning in Mazama, WA. According to Lindsay Welfelt, Assistant Bear & Cougar Specialist at Washington Department of Fish & Wildlife, firefighters kept eyes on the cub until she and Rich Beausoleil, another WDFW Bear & Cougar Specialist, arrived. Welfelt and

Beausoleil suspect the small cub was unable to keep up with her mother or fled up a tree to avoid danger and got caught up in the fire. The bear was very thin and was easily captured. They treated wounds to her face, ears and paws and determined she stood a good chance of survival if taken to a rehabilitation facility. “We have full faith in the expert care the cub will receive at PAWS. Our hope is that with some time to heal she will be able to return to life as a regular wild bear,” said Welfelt and Beausoleil, who for many years have been bringing injured and orphaned bears to PAWS for rehabilitation and return to the wild.

Immediately upon admission to PAWS Wildlife Center, Dr. Rosenhagen started the 13-lb. cub on pain medications and broad-spectrum antibiotics. In an exam, the medical team confirmed second degree burns over her muzzle, around both eyes, on her ears, and the tops and bottoms of all four feet. The skin on her face was so badly affected that her eyes were not visible due to the swelling, and when the ears were being cleaned, the skin completely sloughed off. The damaged tissue was removed and thoroughly cleaned, and a medicated cream was applied for its antimicrobial effect. Her feet and ears were bandaged with gauze and a protective wrap to keep them clean while maintaining contact with the cream, and a medical foam bandage was sutured to the burned tissue on her face to prolong contact.

Fortunately, the cub did not bother the bandages when she recovered from the procedure and went right back to eating and sleeping. She received four more treatments under anesthesia to remove dead tissue, clean underlying tissue, apply cream, and change bandages. At her most recent veterinary exam on August 9, the integrity of both eyes was confirmed. The tips of her ears are healing more slowly as the blood supply is less vigorous to this area but the tissue is healthy and the wounds are shrinking. The wounds on her front feet have completely healed; the wounds on her hind feet were more severe but the veterinary staff is optimistic that with time and continued medical support, that tissue will also fully heal.

Due to her impressive progress, staff installed a “howdy” door between her enclosure and that of two other orphaned black bear cubs who had come into care in May. This allowed the trio to see and smell each other while maintaining separation. Cedar Creek Wildfire Bear took some time to get to know her neighbors and recently the barrier was removed and the three little bears have officially met. They will be her roommates and playmates until she is old enough to be returned to the wild next spring.

Just as staff was feeling relieved that the Cedar Creek Wildfire Bear was out of the woods, the call came that two more severely burned cubs rescued from the Twenty-Five Mile Fire in Lake Chelan, WA, were coming to PAWS. On August 23 and August 26, Welfelt and Beausoleil brought the newest wildfire victims to PAWS Wildlife Center.

Homeowners Dave and Karen Case live on a remote 50-acre property surrounded by state and forest land and have operated a wildlife camera for ten years, capturing photos every night. “That’s how we came to see the wounded bear cubs. One of them was crawling and unable to walk,” recalled Karen Case. The homeowners called WDFW and once again, Welfelt and Beausoleil set out to rescue the injured cubs. “They spent hours running up and down in the hillside looking for the bears in heat and smoke,” said Karen Case.

Confirmed siblings, the twin Twenty-Five Mile Wildfire Bear patients are at PAWS undergoing similar treatments as the Cedar Creek Wildfire Bear for even more severe burns to their legs and feet. They are currently being housed separately as they stabilize from their trauma and injuries.

“We are seeing more animals harmed by extreme heat and wildfires than ever before in our 50-year history as an organization,” says PAWS CEO Heidi Wills Yamada. “Certainly we know that people and property are harmed by wildfires, and the devastation affects wildlife too. It can feel

overwhelming for people to see the destruction of these wildfires, but no one is powerless to help.

“PAWS is capable of saving animals like the burned cubs bears in care, but the work is expensive and intensive.” Wills Yamada continues. She notes that 2020 and 2021 have been challenging years operating amid the pandemic with limited staff and volunteers. Extreme climate is another overlay in 2021, with increased admissions of orphaned wild animals, including eagles, hawks, swallows and terns, suffering from the late June Northwest heat events, and now bears from the wildfires. “PAWS relies on the generosity of the community to help animals. Our resources are stretched thin and we are asking the public to please support our work by donating or volunteering for PAWS.” Community members who want to help support the care of injured and orphaned wild animals at PAWS Wildlife Center, can donate at paws.org/helpbears.

PAWS is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization located in Lynnwood, Washington, with a satellite adoption center called PAWS Cat City in Seattle’s University District. PAWS helps cats, dogs and wild animals go home and thrive—whether home is the family room or the forest. Since 1967, PAWS has united more than 130,000 cats and dogs with loving families, cared for more than 140,000 sick, injured and orphaned wild animals, and made the world a better place for countless others through outreach, education and advocacy.

[Click here to access a gallery of photos and videos](#) of the Cedar Creek Wildfire Bear and Twenty-Five Mile Wildfire Bears currently in care at PAWS. All photos should be credited to PAWS except several in a folder marked Washington Department of Fish & Wildlife.