

March 22, 2012

## End of the line

Dear Friends,

I regret to have to announce that I have had a nasty falling out with my long time employer, the National Park Service, Glen Canyon National Recreation Area, and as a result my role in the war against the Russian Olive on the Escalante River is all but over. For the last several years I have been in an ongoing struggle with the Glen Canyon administration over the need to clean up the worst of the Russian Olive slash along the Escalante. As we have worked up the river over the last 12 years the Russian Olive has gotten steadily worse, both with time and with distance up the river, since it had started out upstream near Escalante and was moving downstream. Several years ago it reached the point where there was far too much to simply toss it all in the river to be washed away, and the only other feasible way to dispose of any significant amount of it is to burn it, which I have done a lot of over the years, in complete safety, with never an undesirable incident of any kind, anywhere. After the park service burned down much of the town of Los Alamos, New Mexico, with a “controlled” burn that got away from them in Bandelier National Monument around the year 2000, every unit of the service was required to update their fire management plans. I saw this huge slash problem coming as we progressed up the Escalante, and took advantage of the updating of the fire management plan to have a provision included for burning the Russian Olive slash. That was done, and the fire plan was approved by all concerned. Two significant elements of the provision were that “fire qualified personnel will not be required for these burns”, and “appropriate PPE (personal protective equipment) will be worn”. It did not specify what was appropriate, and no one ever said what would be required, which left me free to exercise plain simple common sense. It does not make any mention of how the burning is to be done, except for prescribing limits on the size of piles to be burned. Those limits, impossibly small and hopelessly unrealistic, would have required a huge number of such piles to be made, where there is no possibility of finding enough safe sites for them. This provision is apparently based on the idea that the only way to burn slash is to make piles of it and then light them as they lay. This seems to be based on the practice used in a forest setting, where slash is produced during the summer when it is not safe to burn, and is then burned during the winter when it is safe. I was told once that the objective is to make them so that they can be ignited and left to burn on their own with no likelihood of escaping.

I have only rarely ignited a pile of slash as it lay, and the times that I did made it very clear that most of the time it was not a viable, safe way to do it – the fire can get far, far too big to be safe, and once it is lit it is going to do whatever it is going to do and there is precious little anyone can do to stop it. So I have almost always burned it by starting a fire in a clear area, either an existing one or one that I have cleared, and feeding it a piece at a time. In that way it can only get as big as I am either capable of making it or willing to let it get, given the size of the site. One person working alone can actually make a very large fire if the fuel supply is close by. It is a no-brainer, requiring only a little basic common sense and reasonable caution. And it is in a river riparian area, in a canyon with bare slickrock walls, surrounded by mostly barren desert, not a forest, where if it ever got out of control it would very soon run into the river or the rock wall of the canyon, neither of which seem to burn very well at all. Far, far more slash can be burned on one

site this way than can ever be burned in an individual pile that is ignited all at once, drastically reducing the number of fire sites and the consequent impact. And because the fire is completely under control and not going anywhere there is no compelling need for fire resistant clothes, any more than there is for sitting around a campfire. I have burned many times in hiking shorts and a short sleeve shirt without any harm to myself. The fewer clothes you have on the farther you will stay from the fire – no one is going to go so close as to get burned by it. A Nomex fire shirt was found to be useful to prevent an occasional spark from melting a hole in a synthetic shirt, but that is the only benefit of it.

My experience with doing this goes back, literally, to childhood, when we used to dispose of dead trees from some 7 ½ acres of orchards where I grew up, and we always did it by feeding the fire a piece at a time. Unfortunately all of my experience is “off the record”, so to speak, gained on my own, alone, learning by doing instead of in a classroom, while doing what I had to do to get the job done out in the backcountry where no one was watching. Such experience is apparently neither recognized nor accepted by the park service.

In 2009 and 2010, with the acquiescence (reluctantly, I suspect) of the powers that be, I enlisted the help of a volunteer Sierra Club group to collect and burn some huge amounts of scattered Russian Olive slash in the heavily visited Choprock/Fence Canyon/Neon area, and we got a tremendous cleanup job done, leaving the area far better than it had been, plus I burned lots of it myself where it could be done without extra help. The entrances to all three of these canyons were a horrendous mess of slash that would have been there for a long, long time otherwise. And everyone who helped had enough basic common sense to be safe around the fires and no one ever got burned or otherwise injured.

Then in March 2010 I was asked to do a presentation and slide show on the project for the Escalante River Watershed Partnership, which had been organized after I had made enough progress against the invader to get peoples’ attention. Because I had been working under an approved fire plan and believed that I was in compliance with it and had nothing to hide, I included a few slides of the slash fires. That proved to be a critical mistake. Unknown to me the new deputy superintendent of Glen Canyon NRA, who I had never even heard of, was in the audience. Afterward he introduced himself, complimented me on the work, then asked if any of those fires had ever gotten away. That was all he wanted to know. Of course the answer was no. Unfortunately that was the beginning of the end. Other people in the audience described his very obvious visible reaction to those pictures to me later, and it sounded like he was nothing less than horrified. Next thing I knew he had taken vigorous exception at headquarters to the burning and, as I was told, “came down really hard” on two of the people I worked for. What was the problem? A couple of the pictures showed a volunteer or two not wearing Nomex fire clothes. That was the only specific objection I ever heard. That could have been very easily resolved, and in fact the only reason we didn’t provide them with Nomex fire shirts was that the only ones on hand in Escalante were of sizes such as XXXL and XXXXL, ridiculously huge for most people. I had already taken the only medium one available. Instead I asked them all to wear an old cotton shirt that could be considered sacrificial, no synthetics that could melt. That was quite “appropriate”, in my humble opinion, for the circumstances and served very well – no one ever got burned from sparks or from getting too close to a fire.

The result was an utterly absurd, long drawn out ordeal of endless discussions among fire people at Zion and Bryce Canyon as well as Glen Canyon. It was as if the provision for burning the Russian Olive slash had never been included in the fire management plan, and I had caused a brand new, unexpected crisis by merely doing what the plan provided for. I was never included directly in any of this, only being able to pass along no end of written, photographic, and verbal arguments trying to make my case that I needed to clean up the worst of the mess. My only direct contact was with my immediate supervisor who, to his credit, was the only one who supported me in this and did his best to find a resolution to the issue, against overwhelming resistance. Unfortunately he never once, in 6 years, went out to see any of the work or how I went about burning, so he could not speak from any firsthand knowledge of the situation. (Neither did his predecessor in 3 previous years) None of it did any good – they absolutely would not yield. They seemed to be completely paralyzed, either unable or unwilling to make a decision. A new superintendent eventually over ruled the provision of the fire plan that my burning would not require fire qualified personnel, meaning that I would have to get “red carded” – agency speak for being certified as a wild land fire fighter. Never mind that I was not going to be fighting fire, only using it in a very limited, carefully controlled way in a setting where the danger of a wildfire was minimal. A grandiose campfire, in effect. I had been red carded once, in 1989, but was never sent out on a fire and it had long ago expired. And the basic firefighter class I took in order to get red carded had offered nothing on the subject of burning slash anyway, only in fighting wildfire. But having been red carded once meant that all that would be required to renew it would be to go to a fire “refresher” class, which I did, plus take the infamous “pack test”. The pack test requires one to walk 3 miles with a 45lb pack in 45 minutes or less. That’s a 4 mph pace, which is something that I had long ago found I could do, and still could, barely, but had never done it with any load. It’s intended to assure that anyone going out to fight fire is fit for very arduous work, and most of those getting into fire fighting are young – probably only 20-30 something, not over 60, as I am. It didn’t matter that all I needed to do was be able to drag scattered branches to a fire and toss them on it, at a necessarily leisurely rate in order to be safe, no more exertion than the process of cutting and piling them in the first place. No, I had to be able to walk at what, for most people, is a killer pace with a big load on my back. Nor did it matter that I spent most of my working time trudging around in the backcountry with a load that was all too often a lot more than 45lbs, for miles on end over very rugged terrain, all day long at times, not just 3 miles on a flat surface. There was never any fitness requirement for doing THAT out in the backcountry. The only physical fitness test I ever had to pass was one imposed by a form I had to fill out at the start of each season titled “Statement of Physical Ability for Light Duty Work”, which asked such silly, irrelevant nonsense as could I perform activities involving: (quoted verbatim from the form)

Frequent walking and/or climbing of stairs or steep inclines.

Frequent pushing and pulling motions (For example, frequent opening and closing file drawers)

Frequent bending, stooping, and crouching (For example, frequently opening and closing lower file drawers)

Occasionally lifting and carrying objects weighing 20-25 lbs. and frequently carrying objects weighing 10-12 lbs. (My backpack is seldom less than 40 lbs and a chainsaw is generally at least 12 lbs)

So I inquired of one of the guys at the Forest Service who administers the pack test about taking it. He wanted to know if I had some form clearing me to take it. Well, no, nobody ever said anything about that. So I asked about that and was told I may have to have a physical exam first. "May" have to. As far as I know it was never determined if I actually had to do so. They went as far as sending me the forms, which were for a very thorough, detailed physical exam (not required for getting out in the backcountry, remember), but then someone found out that the contract they had had for getting physicals had expired, been canceled, or something. It didn't matter what exactly happened – no physical could be done, and never was. And I never got to take the pack test either.

There was never any mention of any "training" in burning slash throughout all of this, or about doing it any differently, so presumably if I had passed these things and gotten red carded again I would have been free to continue burning just exactly as I had always done. After all of the angst and uproar nothing would have changed.

Eventually, after taking the fire refresher class, which was a useless waste of time, I went out in March 2011 with the fire management specialist from Bryce Canyon, who handles such things for Glen Canyon as well, to show him what I needed to do and describe how I do it and why. He was the ONLY person from the National Park Service, and not even from Glen Canyon, who ever went out with me to look at what I needed to do. He agreed that it was an acceptable thing to do and that my method of feeding a fire a branch at a time was valid, given that sites to make "burn piles", which is what I will call, for lack of any better term, the "institutional" way, are very limited, besides which they are very labor intensive to build and could just end up getting washed away by a flood before being burned. If that were to happen it would be fine, but all the labor to cut everything up and pack it into nice compact burn piles would have been wasted. He agreed to go ahead with some additional paperwork that I was never told was required – a burn plan, emergency medical plan, and I suppose a few other things, so that we could resume burning in the fall, plus he would scrape a crew together to help me with it. That was the last I heard until October, when my supervisor told me that a key person in the Resource Management Division, who I had worked with for years, had told the superintendent that there was no need to burn anything, so the superintendent forbade any burning, just as I thought we were close to a resolution of the matter and I was going to be able to start getting caught up on some badly needed clean up. It didn't matter that the person who told the superintendent there was no need to burn anything had NEVER been out there in the thick of it with me and seen what a horrifying nightmare it had become, or that no one else from Glen Canyon had ever been out with me. It had been 7 years since this individual had been out with me, on a follow up trip on the lower 20 miles of the river, after all the Russian Olive had already been removed and where it had never been nearly as bad as what I was dealing with currently. Since then no one else from Glen Canyon management had ever gone out to see what it was all about. They had absolutely no idea how awful the mess was, they had no idea how awful it could be to have to pick your way through it on follow up trips, and they had no idea how easy it was to find or make a safe fire site and burn it safely and under complete control at all times. All they knew was from many pictures

I had provided in my efforts to allay their fears. That included a rather lengthy Power Point presentation with pictures of various fires from beginning to end and text slides explaining the circumstances of each. I spent several hours of my own time putting that together, and was eventually told that “everyone” had seen it, to no avail. On top of that, the same person who told the superintendent that there was no need to burn anything had said at a meeting of the Escalante River Watershed Partnership that they were going to get a “fire crew” out there to burn the slash, after someone asked about the disposal problem that I had brought up previously. He also told me sometime later that I should go out with a GPS and get coordinates of the “piles” so that they could go out and burn them without me having to be present, so that I could spend more time killing more Russian Olive. I somehow failed to ever get it across that it was not about just lighting carefully prepared piles, that there were no such piles all ready to be ignited, and that it was a matter of cleaning up a large scattered mess of slash, and slash packed into whatever space could be found for it, to my satisfaction, and cutting down and burning selected standing dead trees, at my discretion. No one could ever have done what I needed done without me being there with them. Then in March, 2011 he asked me to go out on a field trip with some members of the partnership in the local Escalante area to address the slash disposal problem. I questioned the need for me to be there, since my slash disposal experience was primarily with burning and no one else seemed willing to consider it either, and his response, quoted verbatim from his email to me on March 14, was “Bill - its critical you be there to represent the NPS. Burning is one of the topics and it is on the table.” In other words, my experience with burning was so valuable that it was “critical” that I go out with this field trip, but worth nothing when it came down to actually DOING any burning. It was less than 7 months later, in early October, that I found out that he had gone behind my back and told the superintendent that there was no need to burn anything, jerking the rug right out from under me, effectively sabotaging my efforts, just as I had thought that we were close to a resolution of the issue.

I had tried my best to be patient, to let them work things out their way, according to policy, which seemed to be happening, but after the tormenting ordeal they had put me through over this for the previous couple of years this news was too much, the last straw, and I practically blew up in my supervisors face, with no regard for who else might be around listening. I told him, very angrily, in no uncertain terms, that we WOULD get the clean up caught up the following spring or I would not come back to work. This outburst was totally spontaneous, with no thought given to it at all. I had just been out working with a chainsaw crew for a week, and had one more week to spend with them afterward. We had already been working in some really thick Russian Olive, where there was hardly any room to pile it and far too much to put it all in the river, and more and worse was just ahead. One section, almost a quarter mile long, was continuous, solid Russian Olive, virtually impenetrable without a chainsaw. As we worked our way through this awful mess I found myself seething, fuming, raging mad at those who believed that there was no need to clean any of it up, who thought that it was just fine to leave it in the theoretical hope that it would eventually decay or wash away, never mind the hideous eyesore and the miserable access problem for follow up in the meantime, never mind the slash jams that have gotten stuck in the river bed as a result of too much of it being tossed in. (River runners found out all about those) Not their problem, they’ll never see it or have to pick their way through it, or portage a boat around it. I seldom sleep well under the best of circumstances, and I was so mad that I hardly slept at all that whole week, lying awake most of every night thinking of all the things that I wanted to tell those people. I found myself wishing that, when I had been told that there was to

be no burning, I had just walked out of the office and never returned, and left them to figure out on their own what to do with the chainsaw crew that they had paid dearly for. The only satisfaction I had in going out for the second week with that crew was that we made it to the halfway mark of the main river canyon, 42 ½ miles from where I had started at Coyote Gulch, out of 85 miles from the entrance to the canyon below Escalante to Coyote.

There was a meeting of the Escalante River Watershed Partnership scheduled for November 9, after the end of my work season, which I ordinarily would have attended. Unfortunately, the individual primarily responsible for sabotaging my efforts was going to be there, as he always was, and there was no way I could go because of that. I'm afraid that if I had there would have been some very hot, angry words. Instead I sent an email letter to selected members of the partnership, which included the principal villain, his supervisor, and one other from the Glen Canyon Resource Management Division, airing all of my grievances and frustrations with them over the slash burning issue. I was not very nice or tactful about it, and I pulled no punches. I was backed into a corner, trapped, with no place to turn, and I lashed out at them. I was helpless, completely overwhelmed with rage at seeing the last 12 years of hard work brought to a screeching halt, with the finish line almost in sight, by being denied the ability to do the job right and clean up the mess. I pointed out all of their failings, in never having taken any part in the project, yet acting as if they knew better than I do how to go about it, as if my experience and judgment after 12 years of working on it were of no value whatever. I made it clear that I wanted to go on and finish it but that I could not and would not do so if there could never be any cleanup of the slash mess. This was soon passed on to the superintendent, who was not one bit happy about it, to say the least. Furious was what I was told. But rather than anyone addressing any of the issues I raised, he eventually refused to let them hire me back for another season, even though others apparently would have been willing to forgive and forget. A classic case of the old adage of "if you don't like the message then shoot the messenger". Thankfully I only got fired instead of being shot. Fired solely for speaking my mind, nothing else.

A few days after the November meeting of the partnership my supervisor told me that the fire management specialist from Bryce Canyon had actually come up with some money to go out and get the cleanup done, apparently unaware that the Glen Canyon superintendent had forbidden any burning. Unfortunate timing, and suggesting that there was no communication taking place.

So my NPS career has come to a very angry, bitter end, after 24 seasons, including 17 full seasons and parts of three others with Glen Canyon in the Escalante, and the last 12 of those spent working (slaving might be a better word for it) on the Russian Olive, entirely on my own initiative, with no participation of any kind by management, their only support being to pay my meager wages and buy the tools and supplies I needed to do the job. Otherwise it was entirely up to me to figure out how to go about it, with no management direction, assistance, or input of any kind, and drawing on years of previous knowledge of the river and its many canyons and routes in and out in order to be most effective. Ultimately their only role in it was to interfere, to prevent me from doing what I needed to do to do the job right. It has made me feel almost like a criminal for doing what needed to be done.

If I had not suffered through this whole rotten ordeal personally I never would have imagined it possible to make such a mountain out of a molehill while knowing next to nothing about the

molehill and not bothering to take the trouble to learn anything about it, or that anyone could be so stubborn and unreasonable. It is inconceivable to me that any of those who were so afraid to let me burn anything could possibly have any firsthand experience doing what I needed to do. Maybe they do, maybe they don't, but certainly if they did they never would have made such a fuss over the whole thing. Regardless of any experience though, the fact remains that none of them ever went out and saw what I was dealing with or how I went about burning the slash.

It's all over now, with no going back, thanks to the fears of people who would not take the trouble to learn anything about the situation I was dealing with, who would only sit in their distant offices and say NO, over and over and over and over, to what I needed to do, as if the problem were of no more consequence than digging a few dandelions out of a lawn. They reminded me of the proverbial two year old who had just learned the word NO and that was all he would say in response to anything – the “NOs” I heard one parent describe that stage. (Since I never had kids I have no firsthand experience with this) And their fear was no more rational than that of the two year old afraid of the dark, since they knew no more about what I was dealing with than the two year old who doesn't know about the dark.

“NO” was even the answer to one last request I made to burn some slash in Harris Wash at New Years, with the help of some friends in town for the weekend. They had already helped me on two previous New Years weekends, also in Harris Wash, without incident as always, with official permission, and I was even going to donate my own time during my off season, as I had before. New Years weekend, in the dead of winter, freezing cold, a narrow canyon with vertical slickrock walls, no place for a fire to go if it got away, everything cold and damp, all free labor, and the answer was still NO. No reason given, just NO.

I never encountered a Russian Olive, no matter what a nasty, tangled mess it may have been, no matter how badly flattened by floods, packed full of debris, always bristling with the ever present sharp, wicked thorns, no matter how deep or fast the river may have been, that I could not find a way to deal with, but in the end I was no match for the institutional fear of fire. I was beaten, defeated. I don't know what they are so afraid of, and they never gave me any reason why I could not burn in compliance with the approved fire management plan. I can only guess that they must have thought I was likely to set the whole place on fire and they would have had to call in the air tankers, the helitack crews, and who knows what else to put it out before it burned all the way up the river, 40 or 50 miles, jumping the river a few dozen times along the way, and burned down Escalante, as with Los Alamos, and they all would have been held responsible and lost their jobs over it. Ridiculous? Of course, deliberately so. A bit of an exaggeration? Maybe. But maybe not. But no more so than their fear of a bunch of oversize campfires.

I suppose they will find some way to carry on, since they are committed to it as a major part of the Escalante River Watershed Partnership, whose number one goal is to finish what I started. But they will be starting from scratch, the blind leading the blind, since none of them have any experience with it and none of them know the Escalante River in any meaningful way, if at all. And I suspect that, as they proceed, they will leave behind a trail of slash piles for everyone to see when they hike the river or Harris Wash that will never be disposed of. Not an inviting prospect. That will include, unfortunately, everything I did for 3 ½ miles above Choprock and was not allowed to clean up, plus a few remaining eyesores in the vicinity of Neon, Choprock,

and Fence Canyon that I wanted to clean up for the sake of visitors but was denied, and now they will have no way of knowing what they were, even if they cared, which they obviously don't. "Conserve the scenery" is part of the NPS mission statement, set forth in the 1916 organic act establishing the service, but apparently it doesn't apply when it is necessary to use carefully controlled fire to clean up a man made mess in an otherwise natural area, at least not in Glen Canyon National Recreation Area where the only people unfortunate enough to have to see it are the backcountry visitors. In addition to that, I'm afraid they will probably take the "institutional" approach, of mincing everything up into little short pieces and very laboriously packing it all into nice compact burn piles, even if they never burn them, and by doing it that way they will take many, many more years to finish it than I would have with my approach. And all the while that they are squandering the precious time of the chainsaw crews doing that it will be getting worse and worse ahead of them, just as it got ever worse in the 12 years I spent working on it.

I have agreed to go to work for the Boulder Community Alliance, which is a member of the ERWP and is spearheading the Russian Olive work on private land in the Escalante-Boulder area, and will be doing the follow up work for them. In addition I have hijacked two of the volunteer groups, Sierra Club and Wilderness Volunteers, that were going to work for me in Glen Canyon, and we will be working on the private land on the river below Calf Creek, since Glen Canyon has no one to go out with them. That will at least give me a project I can complete and do it right by burning the slash. The landowners want the slash gone and are not terrified of fire as NPS is. It can also serve as a readily accessible demonstration site for others to see how things look when it's done right, with the mess cleaned up. A third group of three individual volunteers is still going to help me with follow up on last years' work on the river in Glen Canyon, and I will be doing the rest of the follow up in Glen Canyon myself as usual, since they have no one to do it, but it will be through the BCA and not as an employee of the park service. I will only be doing it for the sake of the Escalante River and to protect my own personal investment in it, not to help the park service.

It's tragic that this had to end so badly, but even if I had not sent the email that got me fired, it was going to end anyway, because of Glen Canyons' stubborn intransigence over burning. I simply could not have gone on without being able to clean up any of the mess, and their refusal to give my position on it any credibility, as if I were no more than some reckless, irresponsible firebug that wanted to burn for no valid reason, or to take the trouble to learn anything about it, makes it much easier to part company with them. I leave it with a clear conscience and damned proud of what I accomplished – half of the main Escalante River canyon, 42 ½ miles, and every side canyon of the river in Glen Canyon except Harris Wash free of Russian Olive, and a strong partnership organized because of my efforts, with a primary goal of finishing what I started. And realistically, at the rate of progress I had been making, around two miles a year, it would have taken another 6 or 7 years to finish it, by which time I will be 70 years old. I'm not that sure that I would have wanted to stick with it that long, although I was willing to try.

Bill Wolverton