A simple lesson to be learned from Pagami: Don’t play with fire

There are a lot of people in Ely who remember what has happened in years past when the U.S. Forest Service attempted to do controlled burns. And then the fire got away and did what it wanted to do.

Our advice to the USFS: Don’t play with fire. If this fire had been set by a camper, even accidentally, that person would be hunted down, fined and held up for public ridicule. Sound familiar? Then you remember the Ham Lake fire and the man charged with starting the blaze. You may also remember he committed suicide after being indicted.

But we know how the Pagami Creek fire started: Mother Nature. A lightning strike on Aug. 18 started a small fire - two acres according to the Forest Service. But instead of dousing the fire, the feds let it burn. And burn some more.

That wasn’t good enough. When the fire reached 130 acres the Forest Service decided to use several hundred gallons of a napalm-like material to really get it going. By a week ago Thursday the fire was at 1,750 acres and several Forest Service representatives noted “we were putting quite a plume up in the air.”

We were told the fire was moving to near mop-up stages and would be watched, not fought. The goal was to follow some idiotic plan based in the fallacy that man can outdo Mother Nature.

Here’s an example of the rhetoric that goes with the policy:

“Wildfires provide many benefits to the ecosystem such as jack pine regeneration, seedbed preparation, and the natural creation of fuel breaks.”

And don’t forget blueberries. Yup, another great reason to burn the forest, so it will rebloom with blueberries. We can’t make this stuff up.

So far the strongest comments on this disaster came from a meeting in Isabella, where a number of people were told to leave their homes and cabins under evacuation orders. Many more were put on notice they may be advised to leave as well. There were some angry people there, and they had every right to point out the faults of a faulty policy to let fires burn.

It’s one thing to have a fire that burns part of the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness where hardly anybody goes. It’s quite another to have the fire grow to 100,000 acres, burn 10 percent of the BWCAW and then leave the magic line and head into private property.

A Forest Service spokesman was asked Thursday how many acres have burned outside the BWCAW. That’s a good question, he said, a lot of people have been asking that.

Some basic math counting sections and multiplying times 640 acres gave us a figure of 10,000 acres south of the Isabella Lake area. That includes the historic Forest Center townsite and some areas planted by CCC groups in the mid-1940s. Trees that were ready to be harvested soon are now black toothpicks because of a policy that ignores the logic of not playing with fire.

We’d hear more on this issue if there were homes lost, such as what happened along the Gunflint in the Cavity Lake fire. But the only structure reportedly lost so far is the DNR’s cabin/vacation spot on Insula Lake. Yes, a cabin for certain people located inside the BWCAW. Dorothy Molter out, Benny Ambrose out, DNR in. But that’s another story.

The story just starting to be told now is who and why a decision was made to make a fire 10 times bigger instead of putting it out. That decision led to the fire becoming nearly 1,000 times bigger, wiping out a lot of forest and endangering lives and private property.

We don’t want to hear about computer models or what the weatherman said. We want to know if this person or these people live here. Because if they do, they must not go outside.

It’s dry in the Ely area. It’s a mini-drought. Our last significant rainfall came on Aug. 6, and that was one-half an inch. The last time Ely received more than a tenth of an inch of rain was on Aug. 17 and that was .21 of an inch. The lightning storm that started the Pagami fire was the next day.

Our hope at this point is this fire gets under control in a hurry. And while we’ve got an airport full of aerial attack weapons to go along with local fire departments and now nearly 500 firefighters including Hot Shot teams, the fear is still there. Another day of wind like we had on Monday and this could really get ugly.

In a best case scenario, the Pagami Creek fire will result in the loss of one DNR cabin and nothing more. We’ll hear plenty of diatribe on how this is such a great thing for the forest.

But people will remember how the Forest Service in its infinite wisdom decided to play with fire instead of following common sense.

U.S. Rep. Chip Cravaack told the Star Tribune Thursday he would work to change the federal law to have fires in wilderness areas put out instead of dumping gasoline on them.

To quote the Congressman, allowing this to happen can be summed up in two words, “It’s nuts.”