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Idaho Statesman

Investigation ties Forest Service leader Michael Boren to \$1M Idaho wildfire

By Nicole Blanchard

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A recently published investigation by two news outlets uncovered ties between Idaho businessman-turned-bureaucrat Michael Boren and an Owyhee County wildfire that cost taxpayers nearly \$1 million.

High Country News and Public Domain published the article in tandem Sept. 17. According to the outlets' reporting and fire investigation documents, Michael Boren's brother Steve Boren lit several unauthorized fires on state-owned land to clear slash piles, ultimately igniting a fire that burned roughly 5,600 acres.

Michael Boren, who cofounded Clearwater Analytics, joined President Donald Trump's administration last year to oversee the Forest Service. He is also a part-owner of Josephine Creek Ranch, a 2,500-acre property in the Owyhee Mountains managed by Steve Boren.

According to High Country News and Public Domain reporting based on an Idaho Department of Lands investigation, Steve told fire officials on Sept. 30, 2024, that he was conducting a prescribed burn on private land near Josephine Creek Ranch.

Investigators would later discover he had no burn permits and had started "at least 20 ignitions" on Department of Lands-managed property adjacent to the ranch where Josephine Creek had a cattle grazing lease, according to a fire investigation report.

"Boren told us this was in effort to restore grassland for cattle farming," the Department of Lands fire investigation report said. "This area was determined to be State of Idaho Land, which was contradictory to what he initially told the BLM dispatcher."

The fire, called the Rosie Fire, cost at least \$950,000 to extinguish, the investigating news outlets reported.

Idaho Department of Lands spokesperson Sharla Arledge told the Idaho Statesman the department is waiting for final suppression cost totals from other agencies before it decides whether to pursue restitution from Steve Boren.

“Historically, we have waited to initiate cost recovery actions until we have a final total, which can take years,” Arledge said.

A spokesperson for the U.S. Department of Agriculture told High Country News and Public Domain that Michael Boren was “not aware of his brother’s action at the time, and he was only a non-operating minority owner of the Josephine Creek Ranch, additionally, the Ranch had no involvement in this fire and was not aware of it. The fire was not on Ranch property.”

Idaho Department of Lands Michael Boren is listed as the ranch owner on the Department of Lands investigation report.

The report included notes from investigators who spoke to Steve Boren and quoted comments where Boren seemed pleased with the fire and critical of suppression efforts. One investigator said Steve Boren called the firefighting response “a waste of taxpayer money” and claimed the fire “was nothing but good.”

Arledge confirmed Josephine Creek Ranch still has two active grazing permits on state land. One runs through 2027, and the other through 2029.

The investigation came just weeks after The Washington Post published reporting that claimed Michael Boren used his position with the Forest Service to put pressure on agency staff to add resources on a wildfire that burned near his Hell Roaring Ranch property on State Highway 75 in July.

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