Drought, Climate Change & Sick Forests Fuel Super Fires
(continued)

And that was what concerned researchers: That a new era of super fires—like none we had ever experienced—is dawning. But this is only part of a perfect storm which might be converging on the region.

Climatologists, as drought hit during the winter of 1995-1996, pointed out that 1950 to 1995, despite the "fifties drought," were the wettest in the Southwest in roughly 2,000 years!

Despite trees dying by the millions, huge forest fires and even the high country turned brown at mid-summer by a lack of rain, climatologists remind us that 2000 and 2002 were average precipitation years compared with the real droughts, such as that which triggered the exodus of the Anasazi between 1200 and 1300, not to mention the absolutely catastrophic drought between 300 and 500 A.D.!

Because it was all most of us ever knew, we assumed that post-1950 moisture was the norm. Thus, a return to what the Southwest historically has been, not to mention a Southwest perhaps made even worse by global warming, in combination with huge timber densities, experts warned, would indicate a high probability of super fires.

The super fire era began at Los Alamos in early May 2000 when a match struck to grass on Cerro Grande Peak for a prescribed burn quickly escaped and—driven by unexpected winds—hit timber long ripe for disaster. First, Cerro Grande took one long, shockingly high-speed, high-intensity run through miles of heavy, thick timber; then it teetered at the edge of the Atomic City for 3 days, before moving through town during a major wind event. It burned hundreds of structures in the town proper and scorched the nation's premier nuclear weapons lab, where vast stores of nuclear and chemical materials are kept. Townspeople fled in a massive evacuation, even as a fire—that some said sounded like helicopters hovering near—moved into town. The fire eventually grew to 43,000 acres, three times the size of the "huge" La Mesa Fire.

Perhaps it is time for us—particularly our leaders—to acknowledge that the Southwest of the future might not be as hospitable as that which we have known.

Cerro Grande was nicknamed the "Millennium Fire," because it was the first big fire of the millennium and because it was the first of the long-prophesized super fires. Of note, it grew to its spectacular 47,000-plus acres in several days, but as of this writing the Las Conchas, barely 48-hours old, already exceeds 100,000 acres and is still growing!

And, Cerro Grande has been dwarfed by other subsequent fires:

* The Missionary Ridge Fire, in 2002, in the San Juan Mountains east of Durango, Colorado burned 73,145 acres and spawned fire tornadoes—in the dry lake bed at Vallecito Reservoir—so powerful that they tossed cars, boats and RVs parked there for safety against the fire about like toys.

* The Hayman Fire, in Colorado, in 2002 burned 138,114 acres.

* The Rodeo-Chediski Fire, actually the merging of two fires in Arizona burned 468,638 acres.

* This year's Wallow Fire, so far at an estimated half-million acres and likely to smolder until winter snows extinguish the last ember.

* And, the Las Conchas—still a new monster loose in the forest—its size and destiny still to be determined.

Perhaps it is time for us—particularly our leaders—to acknowledge that the Southwest of the future might not be as hospitable as that which we have known. Perhaps it is time to ask just how much more evidence we need before we at least discuss the possibility that the current drought and associated super fires might be linked to a global warming phenomenon that requires us to do more than pretend global warming isn't happening!

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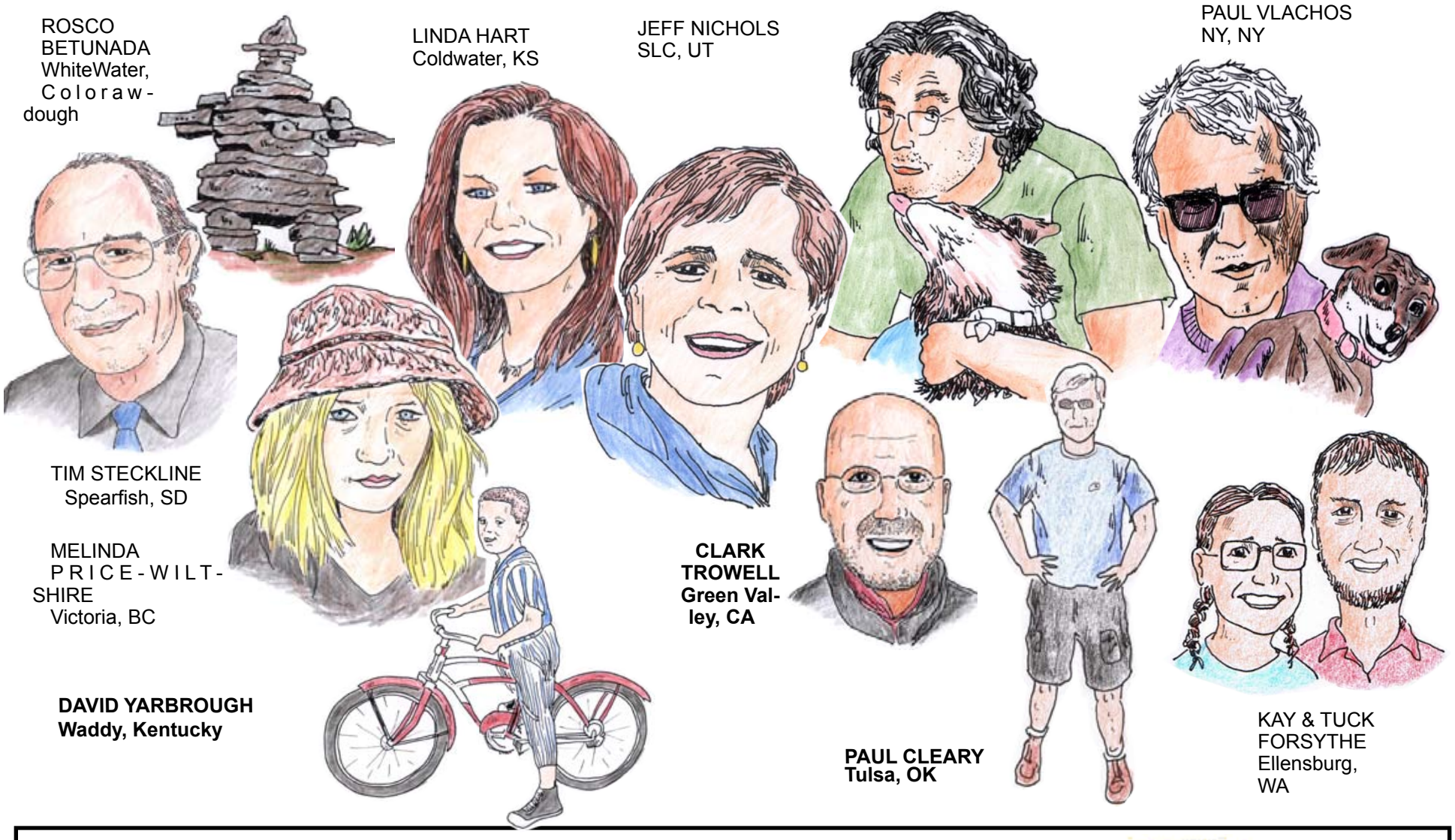

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