Fire crews called in to fight chronic personnel shortage

■ The flames continue to run rampant across the **United States. The fires** have hit more than 5 million acres.

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

HELENA, Mont.- Fire crews called in more reinforcements Monday as they tried to overcome a chronic shortage of help in battling fires that continue to run rampant in the West.

Thousands of firefighters are already working to slow down blazes that have scorched more than 5 million acres this year.

But the help hasn't been enough in some areas.

"There are fires we only monitor because we don't have people" to fight them, said J.D. Coleman, fire information officer at the Northern **Rockies Coordination Center** in Missoula.

The National Interagency Fire Center in Idaho said an Army battalion from Kentucky would be sent to Montana late this week and Marines from North Carolina would follow within a few days.

"It's a way to provide some manpower when it's badly needed," Coleman said.

Meanwhile, a group of state and federal agencies recommended Monday that a 16county section of central Montana, from Wyoming to the Canadian border, be closed to all public use, such as camping, hiking and fishing. Residents would not be evac-

The recommendation is based on extreme fire danger in the area, the threat to public safety and the lack of resources to fight fires, said Ed Mathews, fire management officer for the state Department of Natural Resources and Conservation.

Gov. Marc Racicot said his decision on whether to accept the recommendation could come as early as Tuesday.

The governor last week shut access to state and private land in nine western Montana counties.

The National Interagency Fire Center said 87 fires were burning on 1.3 million acres

More than 700 firefighters are toiling between Helena and Bozeman on a fire that has wiped out 75,000 acres, destroyed buildings and left ranchers wondering whether their cattle survived.

'We do have livestock wandering throughout the fire,' said Graver Johnson, fire information officer at the Gallatin County emergency operations

"We're trying to help the ranchers find and relocate

In Wyoming, the south entrance to Yellowstone National Park reopened Monday after being closed since Thursday by a nearby wildfire.

In Idaho, the nation's largest wildfire continued to devour the Salmon-Challis National Forest.

The fire had consumed about 159,000 acres and was about one-third contained.

Almost 1,600 people were assigned to fight the blaze, as well as 16 helicopters and 58 fire engines.

Approximately 5,900 people were assigned to Idaho fires that have cost almost \$58 million to fight and consumed nearly 1 million acres this

Officials continued to fight a fire that had forced evacuation of the tiny mountain town of Atlanta.

Most residents were back in their homes Monday after cooler, calmer weather during the weekend let fire officials beat back the flames. Still, the fire was only 10 percent contained.

We could see the effects of this fire for years to come, said state Bureau of Disaster Services Director John Cline.

The end result could be mudslides this spring, or it could have an impact on rivers and streams."

Officials have guided a small orphaned bear cub to safety that had all four paws

burned in a forest. Wildlife officer Joe Jaquith put the cub into a cage at a veterinary clinic and drove the bear to be taken to a state shel-

"There are fires we only monitor because we don't have people" to fight them.

J.D. Coleman fire information officer

"I gave him an apple and a drink of water before we start-

ed," Jaquith said as he drove.
"He's doing great." Jaquith,
who rescued the animal Saturday, suspects fire killed the mother.

The rescue rekindled the story of Smokey Bear and the cub who symbolized the fireprevention mascot after being plucked from a fire in New Mexico 50 years ago.

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