

FIREFIGHTING: Forest Service briefed Sisters City Council

Continued from page 1

full of background information, explanatory data, and a clear road map of what happens, both locally and nationally, when a forest fire breaks out in Central Oregon.

They explained that the COFMS consists of four units covering land in Central Oregon: the Deschutes National Forest, the Ochoco National Forest, the Crooked River Grassland, and Prineville Bureau of Land Management (BLM). These units are managed cooperatively under combined leadership, with decision-makers from both the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) and the BLM.

Five planning units called divisions facilitate fire-suppression and fire-management activities throughout Central Oregon. Although the areas work together to complete projects and suppress fires, each division has its own fire management officer (FMO), assistant FMO, and staff. Sisters Ranger District is located in the Cascade Division.

COFMS also partners with the Oregon Department of Forestry (ODF) for fire protection, and has a central dispatching facility that serves as a communications hub for fire and fuel operations.

Amy Tinderholt, acting Sisters District Ranger, reported to Council that as of September 13, all containment lines on the Milli Fire are holding, crews have moved from the rodeo grounds to the Sisters Ranger District headquarters, mop-up is continuing, and burn-area repair work has begun. There are currently 59 personnel on the fire.

Tinderholt acknowledged all the losses suffered by the community as a result of the fire — economic losses for the business community due to reduced tourism, health impairment from smoke, and the loss of the special areas within the forest and wilderness.

James Osborne, Cascade Division FMO and USFS employee, explained that the large snowpack last winter, which melted off more quickly than usual, in May rather than June, resulted in extremely low snow water levels going into summer. The hot, dry summer with 90-plus-degree temperatures through August contributed to increased fire danger.

The forecast for June-August 2017 in Central Oregon had been for temperatures two to six degrees above normal. In August,

temperatures actually ranged six to eight degrees above normal. Precipitation forecasts issued April 30, 2017 predicted 25-50 percent of normal moisture; instead, the rainfall was much below that all along the Cascade crest.

The energy release component, which indicates how much energy would exist at the head of a fire, has been well above the maximum from an earlier record since mid-June, meaning the fire danger has been extremely high all summer.

Given all these conditions, when lightning struck on August 10, the result was the outbreak of a number of fires across Central Oregon. The Whychus Fire, burning in brush and timber about eight miles northeast of Sisters, burned 2,800 acres. It was ranked Number One for initial attack due to the threat to structures and lives, with Level 2 evacuation notices issued for Lower Bridge Road. Air tankers, dozers, and tenders were assigned to help battle the blaze.

The No. 2 and No. 3 priority fires also involved protecting structures and people. The Milli Fire at No. 4 was only at 40 acres, not threatening lives or buildings. There were no hotshot crews available to drop into the wilderness and

no air resources available.

Prior to August 10, national forests adjacent to the Deschutes National Forest, other COFMS divisions, and ODF were experiencing heavy initial attacks on numerous fires.

On August 10, the first lightning strikes hit the Cascade division, starting the Whychus Fire at 34 acres, and three other fires, each less than an acre. The Yucca Flats Fire was continuing to grow. Shared resources on a national level were heavily committed with 127 new fires, seven of which were large (six contained), and 24 of which were uncontained large fires. There was a lack of available personnel due to the national drawdown of resources.

The Yucca Flats Fire started on August 8 just outside the Warm Springs Indian Reservation on private land and quickly grew to 33 square miles, destroying two homes and threatening 70 more on the reservation. The fire burned through 40 acres of grass and dry timber before closing in on the reservation. A Level 2 evacuation notice was issued for the 70 homes. Air tankers were used to help battle the flames.

On August 11, a fire report was sent out to lookouts for



PHOTO BY GARY MILLER

The Milli Fire was discovered on August 12 and blew up on August 16, causing significant disruption to life in Sisters Country.

a possible fire in the Three Sisters Wilderness. Here in Central Oregon regional haze and smoke from a number of fires reduced visibility, making it impossible for fire lookouts to see any new fires. Aerial recon was requested for fire detection, but both fixed-wing and rotor-wing resources were in short supply due to the number of initial attacks. Hot shot and smokejumper personnel were committed on other fires. At the same time, mop-up was occurring on other fires on the Cascade Division, further reducing resources.

High winds had been forecast for August 11 but didn't materialize until the next day, causing the Whychus Fire to spot and burn an additional 1,996 acres, threatening

homes along Lower Bridge Road. Air resources were rerouted from other fires due to the risks to life and property.

August 12 was a high fire day with high temperatures. The Milli Fire became visible to an aerial recon plane. It spread quickly to the east due to strong winds, bumping into the Black Crater Fire scar left from 2006.

The strategy for fighting the fire from day one was full suppression, meaning utilizing all methods of suppression available. District Ranger Tinderholt approved smokejumpers, chainsaws, helicopters with bucket work, and fixed-wing retardant, but no aerial resources were

See **FIREFIGHTING** on page 19

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