

FIRE THREAT: California catastrophe serves as warning

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Sisters sent firefighters to Chico, California, as part of an Oregon State Fire Marshal mobilization for aid to beleaguered firefighters. He instructed Captain Robert Harrison to think about Sisters and to identify potential blind spots in the protection of the community.

Because what happened to Paradise could happen to Sisters.

Chief Johnson is careful not to be alarmist or to exaggerate the threat. He noted that the Camp Fire occurred in a devil’s brew of terrible conditions: Two percent humidity and a major wind event that pushed gusts to 70 miles per hour.

“Everything lined up perfectly,” he said.

Sisters should be as prepared as possible in case such an alignment ever occurs here.

“We’ve been fortunate that we’ve had wildfire, but we haven’t had a significant wind event with it,” Johnson said. “We have wildfire and we have wind events, but we’ve been fortunate not to have both at the same time.”

Sisters got a frightening glimpse last summer of what can happen when wind and fire combine in a blaze that breaks out close to or within a neighborhood. Two residences and six outbuildings burned in a fast-moving, wind-driven fire on the sage flats east of town August 11.

“That was a significant fire that was tough to catch,” Chief Johnson said.

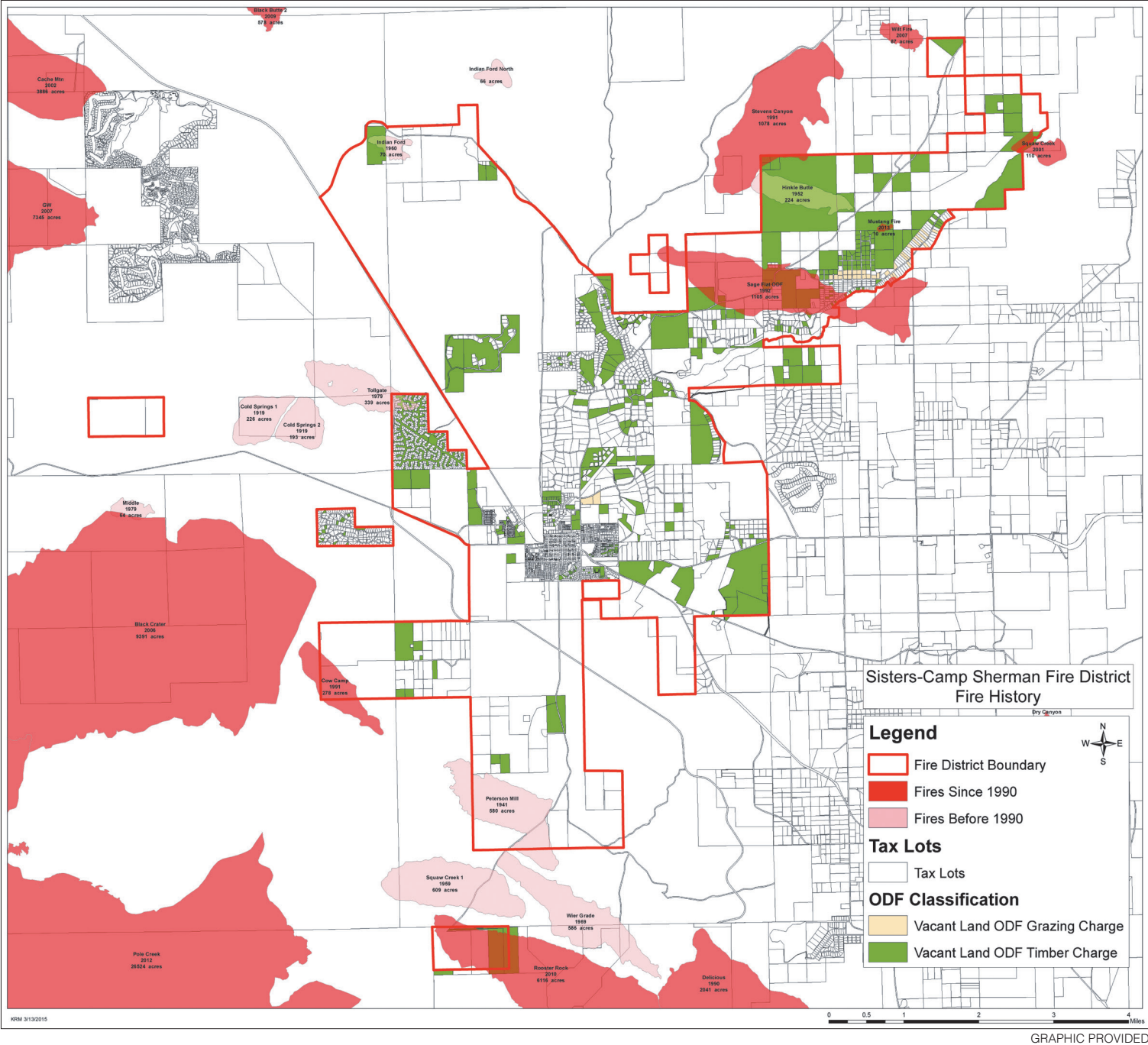
Were it not for the availability of air resources from the Redmond Air Base, the loss of property could have been considerably greater. And conditions on that difficult day were nothing like what they were like in California last week.

“That wind was half to 1/3 of what they were dealing with in California — and humidities were much higher,” Johnson said.

What can residents do to prepare in the event of a worst-case scenario, where a wind-driven fire bears down on their neighborhood with no time to prepare?

Chief Johnson recommends that citizens plan out a primary and a secondary evacuation route — and actually drive it so that they know exactly where they are going when it’s for real.

And he emphasizes the importance of registering your cell phone to receive Deschutes County Emergency Alerts — the



Firefighter Kirk Metzger created a map of the fire activity in Sisters from the 1990s to the present day. The threat of wind-driven fire is a real one for the City of Sisters and for outlying communities.

fastest and most efficient way to learn of impending disaster.

“I think that could be a blindspot for people,” Chief Johnson said.

Residents can register here: <https://www.deschutes.org/911/page/sign-deschutes-emergency-alerts>.

Prepare a “bug-out bag” that contains essentials like medicines, cash, and critical documents that you can grab on the fly when you have no time to prepare for evacuation. In a wind-driven incident like the one near Rabbitbrush Lane last summer or the firestorm that consumed Paradise, there is no time to pack — you have to flee immediately.

Chief Johnson said that the behavior of wildfire is changing, and that the experience of the past 30 years may not be an adequate road map for the next 30 years.

“The intensity in California is extreme, and it seems to be moving north,” he said. “To me, that’s a risk. I think we need to be ahead of it here.”

That means continuing fuels treatment where forest and our homes meet, and it means residents and commercial property owners alike need to stay on top of maintenance and the creation of defensible space. And it

may require code modifications to make housing more fire-resistant.

The nightmare scenario is when fire gets into a neighborhood or a town and turns from a wildland fire into a residential or urban conflagration.

“It’s embers that catch 50 or 100 homes on fire at once,” Johnson said. “There’s not enough resources anywhere — even in resource-rich California — there’s not enough resources to deal with that.”

And, while it would take a particularly bad set of circumstances for the nightmare

to become real, the vision of Paradise burning down is a sobering one for us in Sisters.

“We’ve got a few areas that are pretty high-risk,”

Chief Johnson acknowledged.

Taking individual and collective action to mitigate the risk — and to know what to do if the worst happens — is the best we can do.

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