

Keep your campfire from starting a wildfire

Sitting around a campfire is one of the special times we all enjoy, but campfires are also a major cause of wildfires. May is Wildfire Awareness Month, and the Pacific Northwest Coordination Group urges campers to follow these basic outdoor safety tips:

- Know before you go: Before going camping, always contact the forest district, agency or landowner first to learn if there are any current campfire restrictions where you plan to recreate.

- Have water and fire tools on site:

Bring a shovel and a bucket of water to extinguish any escaped embers. When you are ready to leave, drown all embers with water, stir the coals, and drown again. Repeat until the fire is *dead* out. If it is too hot to touch, it is too hot to leave.

- Select the right spot: Where campfires are allowed, choose a site with an existing ring. Fire pits in established campgrounds are the best spots. If you choose to build a campfire, avoid building it near your tent, structures, vehicles, shrubs or trees, and be aware of low-hanging branches overhead. Clear the site down to bare soil, at least five feet on all sides, and circle it with rocks. Store unused firewood a good distance from the fire.

- Keep your campfire small:

A campfire is less likely to escape control if it is kept small. A large fire may cast hot embers long distances. Add firewood in small amounts as existing material is consumed.

- Attend your campfire at all times:

A campfire left unattended for even a few minutes can grow into a costly, damaging wildfire. Stay with your campfire from start to finish until it is dead out, as required by law. That ensures any escaped sparks or embers can be extinguished quickly.

- Consider alternatives to a campfire this summer:

Portable camp stoves are a safer option to campfires at any time of year. Areas that prohibit campfires outside maintained campgrounds with established fire pits often allow camp stoves.

- Never use gasoline or other accelerants:

Don't use flammable or combustible liquids, such as gasoline, propane or lighter fluid, to start or increase your campfire.

- Burn *only* local wood: Hauling your firewood

to a remote campground can potentially transport invasive species. Instead, buy it where you'll burn it or gather wood on site where permitted. State regulations prohibit the open burning of any other material that creates dense, toxic smoke or noxious odors. Burning paper and cardboard can also easily fly up to start new fires.

Escaped campfires can be costly. State and federal law require the proper clearing, building, attending and extinguishing of open fires at any time of year. While citations and fines may apply, the biggest potential cost for an escaped campfire is firefighting costs. These can range from a few hundred to tens of thousands of dollars or more.

Dispersed camping raises concerns

By Jim Cornelius
Editor in Chief

Campgrounds remained closed over Memorial Day weekend, due to COVID-19 restrictions. But that didn't mean campers stayed home — they simply came to Sisters and set up camp dispersed out across the national forest.

And that raised concerns from local residents about trash left in the woods, trees cut down, and campfires left smoldering.

Dispersed camping is allowed in the forest, and it occurs every year. But Sisters District Ranger Ian Reid acknowledged that the ongoing closure of campgrounds made for more of the phenomenon, particularly in the popular Metolius Basin.

Reid said that campgrounds are starting to come online. Perry South and Monte Campground in the Metolius Basin opened May

29. As more campgrounds open, dispersed camping is expected to fall off.

Reid also said that his staff is trying to balance the need to minimize contact with the public to meet COVID-19 prevention protocols while still maintaining a presence in the forest. They are, however, on full alert for fires.

"We are staffed seven days (a week) with our fire resources and we are patrolling for campfires," he told *The Nugget*. "We found one (smoldering) last week."

There is no current restriction on campfires, but that will likely change soon as fire season gets into full swing.

"We're evaluating that on a day-to-day, week-to-week basis," Reid said.

Reid noted that cutting standing dead trees is actually allowed, except for sensitive areas like riparian zones, as long as the trees are smaller than 24 inches in diameter and

are within 150 feet of a road. "Cutting green trees is prohibited," he said. "It always is."

Reid acknowledged locals' concern about sanitation with hordes of campers disperse through the woods.

"We do patrol for sanitary conditions and we can cite for that," Reid said.

Campers are expected to dump effluent outside the forest at approved dumpsites.

The Forest Service is also enforcing its 14-day stay limit for dispersed camping.

As state parks and national forest campgrounds reopen, campers are expected to return to those spots, although some citizens have expressed concerns that dispersed camping might become a habit. In all cases, campers are asked to behave responsibly, leave their site clean and their fires dead out, and treat the forest and the community around it with respect.

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