

Vision partners prepare for fire season

By Janel Ruehl
Correspondent

A large portion of the “Resiliency” focus area of the Sisters Country Vision is focused on fire danger, preparedness, and mitigation strategies. As Sisters Country gears up for an unusual fire season in the midst of COVID-19, vision partners are also celebrating the progress made over the past year on several of these strategies.

Preparing for fire season looks notably different this year. In Sisters Country, five separate agencies respond to wildfire incidents: USFS, ODF, and the local fire districts of Sisters-Camp Sherman, Black Butte Ranch, and Cloverdale. These agencies are closely collaborating to decide on operational policies this year. Most wildland fire refresher training was completed online due to COVID-19. In fire camps, a new model will be tested this year. Called “Module as One,” units will work, eat, sleep and travel together like a family, greatly reducing the number of other fire personnel they come in contact with.

“Efforts will be taken to not mix crews from different agencies or units to limit spread of the virus if someone becomes sick,” said Sisters-Camp Sherman Fire Chief Roger Johnson. Fire camps will require expanded check-in procedures that include medical evaluations for all personnel. Where possible, fire management staff may work remotely instead of being onsite and all-staff briefings are likely to occur virtually or in small groups.

In addition to these new health precautions, the Pacific Northwest Region of the USFS suspended spring prescribed burning this year due

to COVID-related factors. However, District Ranger Ian Reid estimates the overall impact of this decision is relatively small.

“In the big picture, the agency and its partners have done significant work over the last several decades to increase fire resiliency and reduce wildfire risk around Sisters. We are actively assessing our fall prescribed burning program and have not yet made a decision what that will look like,” says Reid.

Community groups have stepped up preparedness this year. The Tollgate HOA received a grant to remove about 20 dead trees from common areas. Several board members and their families spent 80 hours raking and removing 120 yards of pine needles from the common areas this spring.

“The virus has caused a lot of people to get out and get engaged in cleaning up their properties,” said Tollgate HOA Manager Leah Tolle.

Deschutes County was the recipient of a grant from the Department of Land Conservation this year. Among other goals, the grant will fund public outreach to collect feedback on the recommendations of the County’s Wildfire Mitigation Advisory Committee (WMAC). This ad-hoc committee met in late 2019 and early 2020 to review and recommend potential changes to land use and building codes that would support wildfire mitigation strategies. Although the project is on hold due to COVID-19, the county is reviewing options to inform the public of the WMAC’s recommendations and receive comments on next steps.

Sisters City Council has already started to consider how the city can incorporate

recommendations into local codes. At the May 13 meeting, council members considered the following recommendations:

- Spatially define the wildland-urban interface and adopt the advanced Oregon Wildfire Risk Explorer.
- Update defensible space requirements and adopt new state building code.
- Update wildfire planning goals and policies.
- Implement mitigation measures on critical infrastructure.

This spring Deschutes County also scored a big win with a major expansion of the Fire Free program, which offers free disposal of yard debris to encourage residents to create and maintain defensible space around their homes. In the past the program was limited to a single weekend. This year, Fire Free was open from May 9 to May 24. Project Wildfire Coordinator Boone Zimmerlee says the Fire Free expansion doubled the amount of debris collected.

In addition to Fire Free and public education programs, Project Wildfire also coordinates the Firewise USA program in Deschutes County. Two new communities achieved certification this year: Indian Ford Ranch and Sage Meadows. Zimmerlee confirmed that Deschutes County community action grants will be available this year.

For more information visit: www.sisterscountryvision.org, www.projectwildfire.org, and www.deschutes.org/wildfirecommittee.

Sisters salutes...

Rachel N. Smith wrote:

Driving home from my café job, I passed a little family standing with a sign asking for help. They were stranded travelers from Texas and spoke very little English. The previous day, I had seen them in the same place and stopped to share my tips on the way home. I pulled in next to the veterinary clinic to share again.

As I walked up, their eyes brightened, three beautiful girls and their parents. The youngest sat on a bucket looking miserably bored. I found out they spoke Italian, and were trying to make their way home after a broken transmission cleaned them out of \$2,000. They were trying to get help with gas money and for a hotel that night for a safe place to rest. And, they said, in the two days they stood there, NOBODY had stopped but me! All of a sudden, the shared tips that seemed so much to me seemed paltry.

Being a bit of an introvert, I don’t know many folks in community or church circles that could help. So I went to Fika, for I knew the kindness that Renee extends so generously might help me find help for them. We stood together scratching our heads and not coming up with any solutions right off, but having faith we could help somehow. As I turned to leave, she reached into her till and handed me several bills for them. And we agreed “There’s always prayer!”

After that, I contacted the

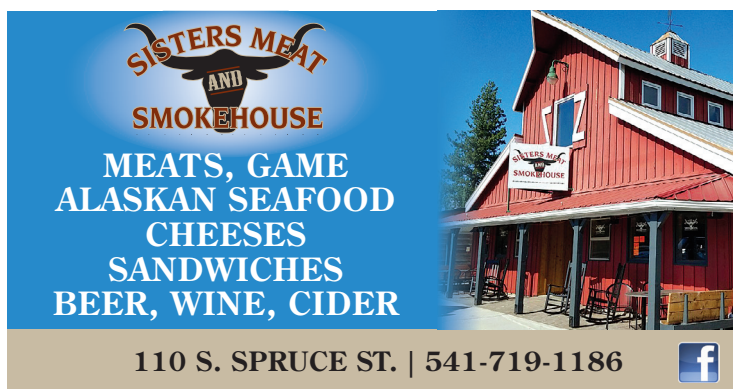
police for help in connecting to local resources and started checking with local hotels. The first was booked to the gills. When I arrived at the Sisters Inn and Suites, the new managers Gary and Hannah exchanged a glance and immediately decided to help. For a very minimal amount, they said they could help a stranded motorist and found a room for them.

Deputy Brian Morse called then with more leads to follow, and came down to meet the family when I went back to share the great news. When I lead them back to the hotel, Niko (the father) used most of his vocabulary in an unbroken stream of “Thank you! Thank you! Thank you!”

But truly he was speaking language of the heart.

Deputy Morse relayed the message that he and the Central Oregon Police Chaplain would come back in the morning and bring them some help for gas money.

As I drove home, I thought about what this showed me about our community. In context of police protests, Black Lives Matter and animosity towards immigrants and people of color, this is what it looks like. Four beautiful brown women and a good-hearted Italian speaking man found their way home into my heart that day, along with the people who stepped up to help. In these chaotic times, we are each other’s safety. United we live. And there but for the Grace of God go I.



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