Forest service may let wildfires burn

■ **OPPORTUNITY:** The mild season has allowed forest managers to test the "let it burn" policy

GRANTS PASS (AP) — A slow forest fire season in the Northwest allows the U.S. Forest Service to ease into its new policy of allowing fire back in the wilderness.

"It allowed us to get our feet wet," said Jim Brain, a protection specialist at Forest Service regional headquarters in Portland.

A wet winter and cool summer coincided with progress in developing the planning documents the Forest Service needs on hand before letting a fire take its course in a particular area.

The numbers show a startling drop in wildfire this year. In 1994, 2,373 fires burned a total of 281,375 acres of national forests in Oregon and Washington. So far this year, 1,089 fires have burned only 6,623 acres.

State and private forest lands in Oregon saw little fire, as well. Just 4,222 acres burned this year in a total of 924 fires, far below the typical level of 10,000 acres, said Brian Ballou of the Oregon Department of Forestry.

For several years, the Forest Service has known that a century of putting out forest fires actually has increased the danger of truly catastrophic burns, especially in the ponderosa pine forests of Eastern Oregon.

When fire is a frequent visitor, it generally burns cooler and cleans up the brush and fallen trees and branches on the forest floor. When fire is kept out, the amount of fuel builds up, so when a fire does start, it burns bigger and hotter.

Scientists also have found that without fire, the structure of the forest changes, leading to insect infestations that kill whole stands of trees. Thick young stands of fir grow up where towering pines once shaded open ground. The thick stands are susceptible to insect attacks and too dense for many birds and animals.

In Oregon, prescribed natural fires were allowed to burn this year on the Ochoco, Malheur, Umatilla and Wallowa-Whitman national forests, Brain said. All were naturally sparked by lightning. All were in wilderness areas, which are off-limits to logging. All were monitored rather than actively fought.

A case in point is the Mill Creek fire on the Ochoco National Forest outside Prineville.

A lightning strike hit in the Mill Creek Wilderness on Sept. 16. By the end of the day it had grown to 15 acres, burning in a ponderosa pine forest.

The next day, fire management officer Tim Rich convened his team for the "Go-No Go Process," and the pieces began to fall into place.

They had just finished writing their fire management action plan for the Mill Creek Wilderness, setting out guidelines for letting a fire burn. The weather was good. Fire danger level was manageable. It was late in the season, so even if the fire got away from them, chances were good it wouldn't do a lot of damage before fall rains fell.

So they decided the Mill Creek fire would be a prescribed natural fire.

Over the next week, the fire continued to grow, but not wildly. Fire crews built about two miles of hand line to keep it from spreading too far outside the wilderness. Rangers kept a close eye on it. But they didn't actively fight it. When it died down on its own, it had burned 1,300 acres, or 7 percent of the 17,400-acre wilderness.

"Within the Forest Service, we probably opened a new chapter in our approach to fire, and especially in pine types, where we now know we need to get fire back in the ecosystem," Rich said. "It is going to take a generation of attitude change toward fire, but this is definitely a giant leap forward."

It is tough to get used to letting fires burn after 100 years of putting them all out, said Rich.

"I liken it to a football game," he said. "We're so used to playing offense. We don't know how to play defense very well.

"The sooner we get on with reintroducing fire in these ecosystems, the less it will cost and the better it will be for the landscape and the wilderness in the long run."

Judge says nude dancers deserve minimum wage

(AP) — A judge's ruling puts the nude entertainment industry in Oregon on notice that exotic dancers deserve minimum wage and should not have to get by on tips alone, the state's Bureau of Labor and Industries said Wednesday.

Lane County Circuit Judge Gregory Foote has ruled that the dancers are employees and not independent contractors, meaning they are entitled to minimum wage.

He decided that two Eugene clubs owned by James A. Hansen must pay $45,000 to nine dancers who filed wage claims last year.

Assistant Attorney General Gretchen Gunn Merrill, who argued the women's case for the state Bureau of Labor and Industries, said the ruling should change the way 75 Oregon nude dancing establishments do business.

Dancers in most of the clubs are paid by tips alone.

She said Hansen paid dancers minimum wage until early 1992. The Bureau of Labor and Industries received its first complaints in April 1994. The case was settled after a two-day trial that concluded last Friday.

Hansen pledged to appeal the ruling "all the way to the Supreme Court if I have to." He said the wage claims and the state action were aimed at shutting down nude dancing clubs and collecting more taxes from dancers.

"It's going to hurt dancers immensely," Hansen said. "It's going to hurt the clubs that don't know how to deal with it."

The ruling takes effect later this week. It covers both Jiggles and The Alaska Bush Company in Eugene, both owned by Hansen.

State officials estimated that the ruling will cost a nude dancing club about $12,000 per week in wages alone, assuming the club pays minimum wage and employs 74 dancers per day in three-hour shifts.

Kitzhaber turns traffic cop, helps catch reckless driver

SALEM (AP) — Gov. John Kitzhaber has added traffic cop to his credentials.

He helped bust a motorist accused of reckless driving.

State police Lt. Bernie Giusto said Kitzhaber and his security officer, Trooper Greg Lockwood, were returning to the governor's mansion Tuesday night when they spotted an erratic driver.

Kitzhaber and Lockwood, who was driving the sedan, noticed a car quickly approaching from behind. The vehicle passed several cars, forcing some oncoming motorists onto the shoulder. Finally, the car passed the governor's sedan.

"At that point, the governor asked and directed that the vehicle be stopped," Giusto said. "He did that out of concern for other people and the fact that the guy was a danger."

Another trooper called to the scene issued a citation to Charles Evans Naylor, 37, charging him with driving recklessly.

Animals: Baby pets often grow into a big surprise

■ Continued from Page 7

iguanas aren't mean, they just weren't cared for properly. We've also had people put iguanas in bags and drop them off in front of the store, like kittens."

If an exotic pet is too much to handle, Howerton recommends putting an ad in the paper or calling various pet stores to see if they will take it.

"Whatever you do, don't stop caring for them," Howerton said. "Some people don't realize how big their pets can get so they get scared of them and don't want to handle them."

Squirmy, an iguana who belongs to Nick Kaye, a University post-baccalaurate biology student, is currently 3 feet long. Kaye, however, does realize that Squirmy will grow to be twice that in length.

Just what should be done with 6-foot iguana?

"Squirmy's a loner," Kaye said. "He doesn't mind being handled, but he'd just as rather not be. He just does his thing."

On sunny days, Kaye sets out a table in front of his house so Squirmy can bask in the sun. However, Kaye rarely takes Squirmy out in public, such as to the mall or around the neighborhood on a leash.

"I think some people have fear of a giant lizard," Kaye said. "Most people are very timid. They want to touch it but are afraid to."

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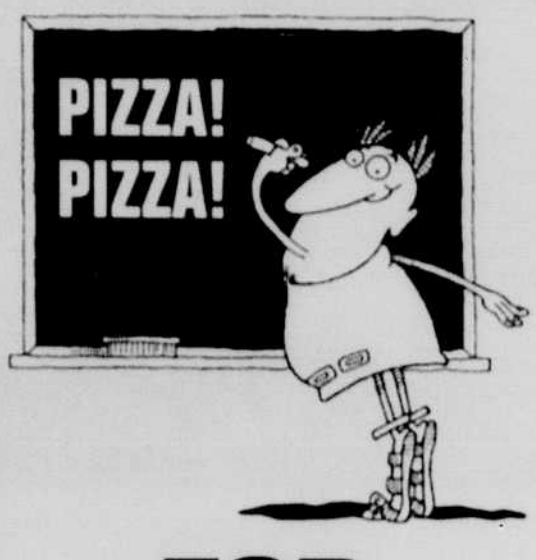

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