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Good day to our valued subscriber Kathy Twidwell of Union

Ready for a firestorm

By Dick Mason, The Observer

It is relatively quiet now at the La Grande Air Tanker Base, a quiet that may be remembered as the calm before the storm.

The region served by the air tanker base — Northeast Oregon, Southeast Washington and Northern Idaho — has been free of major wildfires the past month.

“It has been much quieter than normal,” Griff Williams, manager of the La Grande Tanker Base, said on Sunday.

Fires that the La Grande Air Tanker Base has helped fight this summer include two this weekend, the 1,000-acre Little Rail Creek Fire 12 miles east of Pilot Rock and the Porcupine Fire near Fossil in Wheeler County.

On Saturday, six tanker flights from La Grande carrying retardant were sent to the Little Rail Creek Fire and two were sent to the Porcupine Fire. On Friday three small fires were ignited by lightning strikes in the Crawfish Lake area of Baker County but they did not require retardant drops.

The fire requiring the most retardant flights out of La Grande so far this summer was the Rattlesnake Creek Fire in Northern Idaho. Fifteen tankers were flown to the fire about a week ago.

Despite the relative lack of fire activity in its region, the crew at the base remains wary since it knows it may be a question of not if, but when, a major fire hits in the region due to hot temperatures and tinder-dry conditions.

“We know there is a good chance of a major fire. We just have not had a source of ignition,” Williams said.

Williams knows all too well what could be on



Cherise Kaechele / The Observer

Griff Williams, manager of the tanker base, stands next to the storage containers for the fire retardant. When the tankers need to be filled, the machines mix the retardant with the water.

the horizon, for memories of the summer of 2016 are still fresh in his mind. That summer, the 500-acre Weigh Station Fire broke out at about 1:45 p.m. July 30, 17 miles east of Pendleton.

The fire grew quickly but its expansion was curbed with the help of numerous drops of retardant from air tankers, all of which took off from La Grande. Williams said during the first eight hours of the fire, 50 fire retardant flights left his tanker base.

“It was hectic,” Williams said.

The situation was made even more frenzied by a two-hour power outage that struck Union County about an hour after the fire broke out. Williams said the power outage did not impact the air tanker base’s operations because of backup generators powered by gasoline.

The generators provided power for equipment including gas and fire retardant pumps. The retardant pumps push retardant into planes at a rate of 500 gallons a minute. Having pumps that work at high speeds is critical during a fire since

many large air tankers carry up to approximately 4,000 gallons of retardant and the smaller single-seat tankers carry 700 gallons.

The retardant the base’s crew loads on to planes is composed of water, ammonium polyphosphate and a gumming agent. The gumming agent thickens the retardant, preventing it from dissipating before it reaches the flames, said Katie Gray, a public information officer for the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest.

Gray said retardant is dropped not to extinguish a blaze but to give firefighters a better chance to move in closer to it because it reduces the height of the flames, which slows a fire’s progress.

“Many people think the more retardant you drop on a fire, the faster it is put out, but that is not the case,” she said. “(Fire retardant) provides the opportunity to slow the progress.”

Since it is critical to have immediate firefighter follow-up after dropping retardant, it is used pri-

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La Grande receives grant to help with housing crisis

City planner to begin working toward analysis

By Cherise Kaechele The Observer

With help from the state, the City of La Grande is taking a step toward solving its housing shortage.

City Planner Mike Boquist told the La Grande City Council earlier this month the city has received a grant that will allow it to conduct an analysis of the housing crisis. The grant was competitive but the amount of local agencies willing to help in this endeavor — the Department of Human Services, the organizers of the Warming Station, Community Connection and Northeast Oregon Housing Authority, to name a few — gave the city a boost.

“The Legislature recognized the housing crisis in the state,” Boquist told The Observer. “A housing crisis is where 25

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FBI agent found not guilty of lying about gunshots

By Steven Dubois The Associated Press

PORTLAND — A jury found an FBI agent not guilty Friday of obstructing an investigation into who fired two errant shots at a key figure in a group that seized an Oregon wildlife refuge in 2016.

W. Joseph Astarita, 41, displayed a slight smile when the jury returned its verdict after less than a day of deliberations. He left the courthouse without comment.

Astarita was charged with making false statements and obstruction of justice after telling investigators he did not fire the shots that missed Robert “LaVoy” Finicum.

His attorneys, Robert Cary and David Angeli, stressed to jurors that no eyewitnesses saw Astarita fire his weapon, and there was no ballistic evidence linking a bullet to his rifle.

“We are grateful to the men and women of the jury who saw through a case that should have never been brought,” the lawyers said in a joint statement. “Joe Astarita is innocent and it was our privilege and honor to represent him.”

Assistant U.S. Attorney Gary Sussman declined comment after the verdict.

The verdict marked another high-profile loss for prosecutors in cases related to the Bundy family, which opposes federal control of public lands.

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Local family recounts youth foreign exchange experience spanning decades

Valentine family has hosted more than 10 students since early '70s

By Audrey Love The Observer

Hosting a stranger in your home isn't everyone's idea of fun or adventure. Parenting is hard enough, but hosting a child who may not speak your language, was raised in an entirely different culture and likely is in the throes of puberty? Good luck.

The Valentine family, however, didn't need luck. They had the desire, and that was enough. Eric and Meg Valentine have hosted upward of 10 foreign exchange students over the years through the La Grande Rotary Club's Youth Exchange Program, which, along with their two sons, Matt and Michael, made for a full house.

“We both had that experience,” Meg said of studying abroad. “That helped us know how valuable (that experience) could be and we wanted to provide something similar for our boys.”

Both Eric and Meg now retired, participated in foreign exchange



Eric Valentine / Submitted photo

Meg Valentine (right) and her husband, Eric (not pictured), visited one of their former foreign exchange students, Disa (left), in her homeland of Iceland this summer.

programs in their youth through the International Youth Exchange Organization, formerly known as American Field Service. Eric, originally from Los Angeles, spent his senior year of high school in West Berlin, around 1959-1960 before the fall of the Berlin Wall. Meg, from Kansas City, Missouri, traveled to Denmark between her junior and senior years of high school.

After working in the Peace Corps in the South Pacific from

1968 to 1970, the Valentines took the long way home, traveling for seven months across Asia before eventually settling in La Grande and starting their family.

“We had planned to take our children abroad and for a variety of reasons we didn't, so we decided to bring the world to them,” said Eric of their desire to host exchange students. “This was a way of broadening their horizons and ours as well.”

The family hosted its first

student through Rotary around 1974, a girl from Costa Rica, when their youngest son, Michael, was only a year old. The rest, they say, is history.

The Valentines continued hosting students throughout the next two decades, including those from Denmark, Mexico, Japan, Iceland, New Zealand, Switzerland and China.

Host families typically host a student anywhere from a mini-

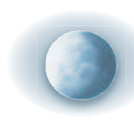
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WEATHER

Full forecast on the back of B section



Tonight 48 LOW Clear



Tuesday 92/53 Hazy sun and warm

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WEDNESDAY

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