

# Lightning strike fires in Wallowa County quickly contained

By **Katy Nesbitt**  
For The Observer

While the West burns, Wallowa County fire crews have seen very little local action until this past week.

Thunderstorms rolled across Northeast Oregon the morning of Friday Aug. 17 putting down dozens of lightning strikes. Over the weekend thunder cells continued to cross the skies of Wallowa County, but so far, the largest fire was contained at less than 30 acres.

"On Forest Service ground we have had about 10 incidences," Mark Moeller, assistant fire manager for the Wallowa-Whitman North Zone in Joseph said.

The largest was held at a third of an acre, Moeller said. Three were in the Eagle Cap Wilderness and one in the Hells Canyon Wilderness in

Idaho. With hot, dry conditions, and the proximity to values at risk like private land, even the wilderness fires were quickly suppressed.

U.S. Forest Service and Oregon Department of Forestry crews work together closely on fires in Wallowa County and the closest engine or fire crew is dispatched to a report, despite the agency. Matt Howard, ODF Wallowa Unit forester, said a thunderstorm system that came through the region Sunday night into Monday morning had crews dispatched at midnight.

"The cell rolled through and we picked up our first fire at 12:55 a.m.," Howard said. "We had lightning from Smith Mountain to Rye Ridge — right through the center of the county."

Fuels on the ground were exceptionally dry, Howard said, and the storm came with very little rain. By 5:30 a.m. all crews were on duty. To supplement the ODF crews an Enterprise City Fire crew and the Fence Creek engine staffed by a private contract crew on the Imnaha River were also available for dispatch.

"By 9 a.m. we had seven fires staffed and contained," he said.

Lightning maps downloaded from special detection software helped mobilize crews promptly to potential fire starts. Landowners were able to locate and call in fires, and a helicopter based in La Grande spotted a few from the air once it was light enough to fly.

Finding the fires quickly aided crews' ability to put

out small fires of one-tenth of an acre or less, but in some cases steep terrain proved challenging.

"We had some tough locations like Courtney Creek off Day Ridge and Joseph Canyon," Howard said.

The Kimmel Fire between Minam and Rondowa along the Wallowa River was one of the fires on private land managed by Hancock Forest Management.

"The fire was in a really bad spot," Howard said. "Our crews arrived right about dark and it was about 10 acres."

Crews started fighting the fire around 10 p.m. Howard said by 2:30 a.m. the fire was in check with a hand line, a dozer line and a wet line surrounding the 29.6 acre perimeter.

"It was incredibly tough

— steep country, heavy fuels including logging slash and cured grass — pretty much one of the worst places to have a fire," Howard said.

With so little activity preceding this weekend's storms the local fire managers had ample resources. The Kimmel Fire had seven engines, three bulldozers, three water tenders and two helicopters to support the ground crews. Howard said a 10-person inmate crew from Two Rivers Correctional Institution in Hermiston came to help secure the fire line and five more inmate crews from South Fork Forest Camp in Tillamook will be on hand for about five days of heavy mop up.

Weather will help mop up efforts Howard said with temperatures in the mid to upper 80s, light winds and no predicted lightning. This weekend temperatures will cool and there is a hint of precipitation in the forecast for Sunday.

"I have my fingers crossed for that to happen," Howard said.

With so little fire in the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest, north zone crews have been sent off forest to help blazes around the West. A handful of local staff are filling overhead positions, Moeller said, and seven crew members from the north zone are on a forest-wide 20-person hand crew.

## Washington judge blocks kill order on wolf pack to save cattle

Efforts to kill members of the wolf pack preying on cattle in Washington's Ferry County announced Monday morning by Dept. of Fish and Wildlife

By **Matthew Daly**  
Associated Press

A judge in Washington has issued an emergency order blocking the state from killing members of a wolf pack that have been preying on cattle.

The Department of Fish and Wildlife had announced Monday morning that it would immediately begin efforts to kill members of the wolf pack who had been preying on cattle in Washington's northeastern Ferry County, near the Canadian border.

Members of the Togo wolf pack have preyed on cattle three times in the past 30 days and six times in the past 10 months, which exceeds the state's threshold to take action, the agency said.

But two environmental groups filed a lawsuit challenging that decision, and a Thurston County Superior Court judge on Monday afternoon issued an order to temporarily block the hunt. A hearing on the matter was set for Aug. 31.

In a news release, agency director Kelly Susewind said the department planned to shoot the wolves from helicopters or on the ground. "The evidence shows that non-lethal measures have not been successful, and the pack will continue preying on livestock unless we take action to change its behavior," Susewind said.

The agency uses a policy of incremental removal, killing one or a few wolves at a time.

The Center for Biological Diversity and Cascadia Wildlands immediately sued, contending the order to kill wolves failed to undergo an environmental analysis.

"It's outrageous that Washington wildlife officials want to kill more wolves from the state's small and recovering wolf population," said Amaroq Weiss of the Center for Biological Diversity.

"Washingtonians overwhelmingly want wolves recovered," she said. "This is not the Old West anymore." Since 2012, the state has killed 18 wolves, eradicating three entire wolf packs, the environmental groups said.

In the case of the Togo pack, the attacks on cattle started last November, with an injured calf. The rancher took numerous steps to deter wolves, including using lights and range riders, the agency said.

But three dead cows and two more injured calves were discovered in the next 10 months, including an injured calf found Saturday on a U.S. Forest Service grazing allotment in Ferry County.

"The injured calf had bite lacerations and bite puncture wounds to the outside lower left hindquarter, the left hamstring, the inside of the left hock and the groin area," the agency said. The wounds were consistent with a wolf attack, officials said.

The last estimate of Togo pack size was two adult wolves and an unknown number of pups, the agency said. The existence of the Togo pack, found near the U.S.-Canada border, was only confirmed in late 2017.

Wolves were wiped out in Washington early in the last century. They started to return from Canada and Idaho in the past 20 years. Washington confirmed its first

breeding pack in 2008.

The wolves are federally protected in the western two-thirds of the state and protected by law statewide.

The latest count of wolves, conducted last winter, found

a minimum of 122 wolves in 22 packs, with 14 successful breeding pairs. Most packs are in northeastern Washington, where there have been numerous conflicts with cattle producers.

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