

# THE OBSERVER

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## Wildfire season starts early in Wallowa County

Two blazes burning in remote canyon country make it tough on firefighters

By KATY NESBITT  
For The Observer

ENTERPRISE — Before the state had the opportunity to declare fire season in North-eastern Oregon, two fires erupted late last week in the remote canyons of Wallowa County.

Early morning lightning storms Friday, June 4, started a handful of fires, two becoming large enough to call in smoke-jumpers and rappellers to access the Joseph Canyon and Dry Creek fires, burning on private land and the Nez Perce Tribe's Precious Lands.

The fire reportedly ignited on Bureau of Land Management lands, but soon crossed over into Washington state lands protected by the Oregon Department of Forestry.

Until June 6, the U.S. Forest

Service was overseeing the coordination of the Dry Creek Fire to the southeast of Joseph Canyon.

A spring drought has resulted in large, woody debris registering very low moisture, and live fuels, such as brush and shrubs, are extremely dry, adding ample fuel to the fire. According to Matt Howard, ODF deputy administrator, high winds shut down air operations June 5 when the Joseph Canyon Fire jumped Cottonwood Creek to the east and Joseph Creek to the west.

Adding to dry conditions

and high winds, the terrain is some of the most difficult in the Northwest.

"In my opinion it is in one of the toughest spots due to inaccessibility, steep terrain, remoteness and rattlesnakes," Howard said.

Although containment remains at 0% percent, fire spread was limited to 300 acres, for a total of 4,000 acres at the end of June 6. The fires are being battled mostly from the air, with crews on the ground scouting, checking for hot spots, burnout operations and assisting pilots with water and

retardant drops.

As of June 7, the fires transitioned from two Type 3 overhead teams to the Interagency Type 2 Northwest Team 7 led by Jason Loomis.

Brian Anderson, a district ranger for the Wallowa Mountains Office, greeted a group of 50 people assigned to the fires at the Wallowa County Fairgrounds' Cloverleaf Hall June 6. As his agency's representative on the fires, he said the goal was a full

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## Annual livestock show gears up

Full week set for Eastern Oregon Livestock Show

By DICK MASON  
The Observer

UNION — The pulse of the Eastern Oregon Livestock Show, which was hard to detect a year ago, will soon be off and racing.

The 114th EOLS is now kicking off a year after it was canceled in 2020 because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Lower infection rates are allowing the historic and popular event to move forward this week.

"We are so lucky that it appears Union County will be in the low-risk category," said Cassie Miller, second vice president of the EOLS Board.

The county's risk level at the time of the event determines the percentage of allowed occupancy.

EOLS festivities begin at 7 p.m. Tuesday, June 8, with the EOLS queen coronation. The event, open to the public, will be at the EOLS's clubhouse. The queen candidates are La Grande's Makenzie Polfer, 18, and North Powder's Kachira Phillips, 21. Polfer graduated from La Grande High School on June 5 and plans to pursue a career in the cattle industry after earning a college degree. Phillips is pursuing a career as a registered nurse.

Activities open to the public continue on June 10, when the EOLS carnival opens and the Ed

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## LA GRANDE HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION

# A year to never forget

LHS seniors graduate in person following pandemic school year

By DAVIS CARBAUGH  
The Observer

LA GRANDE — As La Grande High School senior Camryn Collman gave her valedictorian speech in front of a packed audience in the school's gymnasium, she noted the gathering was the first time the whole class had congregated together in more than a year, and it would likely be the last.

This bittersweet sentiment echoed throughout the commencement ceremony of the La Grande High School Class of 2021 Saturday, June 5.

Friends and families of the 143 graduates congregated to celebrate and honor a graduating class that endured the difficult circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic. Graduating seniors were allowed up to five tickets for potential attendees so the school could comply with state guidelines for indoor gatherings.

"I think it's important that in moments like this, you pause and think about what it took to get us to this point," La Grande High School Principal Brett Baxter said.

The seniors spent most of the year studying virtually, more than 150 days, and returned to in-person learning well into the academic year. While the pandemic did away with events



Alex Wittwer/The Observer

La Grande High graduates embrace Saturday, June 5, 2021, in front of the school following their commencement ceremony.

such as prom, attending football games and school assemblies, many noted the resiliency of this class during unprecedented times.

"There were many unexpected lessons learned during this time in patience, self-discipline and caring for the people around us in ways that we didn't need to before," said La Grande School Board Chair Robin Maille in her speech to the graduates.

Although the pandemic hin-

dered activities during this class's senior year, the future possibilities are limitless for a group of students who had to learn how to adapt. Of the 143 graduating seniors, 11 were honored as valedictorians for finishing every semester with a 4.0 GPA during their four years at La Grande High School.

Alisha Acireno was one of the valedictorians to speak, and she even spoke briefly in Japanese for her extended family in Japan.

"This school year has really

amplified my gratitude for the people around me," Acireno said.

### Close to home for La Grande superintendent

More than 50 seniors received some sort of scholarship for higher education following their graduation from high school.

"You're probably more ready than any graduates that have come before you," said La

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## Volunteers help clear Mount Emily trail system

Annual MERA Trail Work Day builds connector between two motorcycle trails

By CARLOS FUENTES  
The Observer

LA GRANDE — To Rick Bowen, the Mount Emily Recreation Area is more than just a trail system — it's his backyard.

Bowen first began riding dirt bikes in the area in 1968, 40 years before MERA was estab-

lished in 2008.

"It's sentimental. I grew up out here, we just spent our childhood out here," Bowen said. "I retired three years ago, bought a new motorcycle and I've just been loving it."

Bowen, who has already made a dozen trips to the area this spring alone, joined the Eastern Oregon All Terrain Vehicle Association on Saturday, June 5, for its annual Motorized Trail Work Day, along with a handful of

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Carlos Fuentes/The Observer

Eastern Oregon All Terrain Vehicle Association members Kyle Bowen, left, and Rick Bowen clear the path Saturday, June 5, 2021, for a new motorcycle connecting trail at the Mount Emily Recreation Area near La Grande.

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### WEATHER Full forecast on the back of B section

Tonight  
47 LOW  
Mostly cloudy

Wednesday  
65/47  
Cloudy

### CONTACT US

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Email story ideas to [news@lagrandeobserver.com](mailto:news@lagrandeobserver.com).  
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THURSDAY

MOTHER, DAUGHTER GRADUATING IN SAME YEAR

Online at [lagrandeobserver.com](http://lagrandeobserver.com)