

FIRES

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Road, Powwatka Road, and the 500/501 Road up to the 763 Road. Those notices, as of the morning of July 16, were still in place.

Roy Flat and the 603 Road are at a Level 1 “Get Ready” notice.

Watching the fire nervously from the Flora-Troy Road about 5 miles from Troy, Travis Beach heeded the warnings July 15 to be prepared to evacuate.

“We’re ready to go. We’re nervous,” he said. “We have our stuff packed and ready to go.”

He was there talking with friends Donald and Kathy Casper, who with their son drove pickups from Wallowa to help.

“We came out to lend a hand to our friends,” Kathy Casper said. “We have several friends here in Flora that might need their equipment moved. They didn’t have enough people to



Bill Bradshaw/Wallowa County Chieftain

Smoke churns up from the Elbow Creek Fire west of Troy as seen from the Flora-Troy road on Thursday evening, July 15, 2021.

move their equipment so we were coming out to help.”

Jim Henson, who was watching a little farther up the road, was ready to go.

“We’re as packed as we can be. Put valuables in a go bag and park the equipment in a fallow field that’s

been plowed. There’s the house and outbuildings, the hay and crops in the fields we can’t do much about.”

“Unfortunately, for our friends and clients in Troy and on Eden Bench, it doesn’t look so promising,” Kathy Casper said. “Travis

(Beach) has a beautiful home down the hill.”

Area residents had their guesses as to the cause of the blaze.

“From what they’re saying it was a sleeper from the lightning storm a week ago that just smoldered and

then took off, or it’s man-caused,” Beach said. “I can’t speculate.”

Henson agreed the sleeper was possible, but had other ideas.

“It’s probably a man-caused fire,” he said. “I don’t know what else it could be. It’s right there on the river.”

As for whether the blaze will reach his property, Henson said, “It’s 50-50. It is what it is.”

Smoky skies over the valley

The Elbow Creek Fire is contributing to the smoky conditions in the Grande Ronde Valley, but it is not a major factor according to Marilyn Lohmann, a forecaster for the National Weather Service office in Pendleton.

“The majority of the smoke is from the Bootleg Fire,” said Lohmann, referring to the 241,000-acre fire in Southwestern Oregon, one of the largest

in the nation.

She said La Grande is expected to receive wind from the southwest this weekend, which means significantly more smoke from the Bootleg Fire may be arriving.

“You probably will have a smoky weekend,” Lohmann said.

La Grande had smoky conditions the morning of July 16, but its air quality rating, according to AirNow.gov, was in the good category at 11. This may have been because of the altitude of the smoke, explained Rob Brooks, a meteorologist with the National Weather Service in Pendleton.

“Just because you have smoke aloft does not mean you have it on the surface,” Brooks said.

He said July 16 that wind conditions are not expected to push smoke toward the floor of the Grande Ronde Valley over the weekend, but, he added, “That could change, however.”

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National Forest. The 20-person crews are not considered initial attack resources — instead they focus on providing service to regional and national incidents that require large-scale containment efforts.

The La Grande Interagency Hotshot Crew was one of 15 crews attempting to extinguish the Lick Creek Fire that began on July 7. The lightning-sparked fire as of July 16 extends over 60,000 acres in the Pomeroy Ranger District of Southwestern Washington and is 30% contained.

More than 600 total personnel are involved in the efforts to contain the Lick Creek Fire. InciWeb, an interagency all-risk incident information management system, estimates the fire will be fully contained by



Pete Caster/Lewiston Tribune

Wildland firefighters watch and take video with their cellphones as a plane drops fire retardant on Harlow Ridge above the Lick Creek Fire, burning southwest of Asotin, Washington, Monday, July 12, 2021.

Sept. 1. Timber, grass and litter are the main sources of fuel for the wildfire.

Green Ridge Fire covers 500 acres

The Union Interagency Hotshot Crew aided the

containment efforts at the Green Ridge Fire, burning approximately 30 miles east of Walla Walla and only about 20 miles southwest of the Lick Creek Fire. The Union hotshots were one of 10 crews working on the fire and part of the 237 total

personnel at the site.

The Green Ridge Fire as of July 15 was 15% contained and encompassed more than 500 acres. Similar to the Lick Creek Fire, the wildfire in Green Ridge was ignited by a lightning strike on July 7 and is experiencing increased fire behavior due to the dry conditions. InciWeb predicts the fire will be contained by Aug. 31, with efforts currently aimed at creating a control line to the east.

Recovery time short for firefighters

Following the brief rest period, both Union County hotshot crews will be relocated to new 14-day assignments. Each team completes upward of 20 fire assignments per fire season, involving about 80 days of service.

The National Interagency Hotshot Crews agency and the Pacific

Northwest regional office will determine the next assignment for the two crews based on areas with the most need. According to Probert, it is likely that both teams will remain working on wildfires in Oregon and Washington until more relief is supplied and the overall acreage of wildfires decreases in the region.

Local dispatch helps coordinate efforts

The Northwest Interagency Incident Management Team 9 is another crew dispatched out of the Blue Mountain Interagency Dispatch Center and contributing to the regional wildfire containment effort. The 58-person team is centered in La Grande, but its members come from a variety of other areas.

Team 9 is currently helping to extinguish the Jack Fire near Jack Creek along Highway 138 East in

Southwestern Oregon. The wildfire was first reported on July 5 and as of July 16 had extended to more than 15,000 acres. The fire was 25% contained July 16 and InciWeb predicts the wildfire to be contained by Aug. 15.

Incident Commander Type 2 Brian Goff leads the team as regional crews come in for backup support. Like the hotshot crews, the Northwest Interagency Incident Management Team 9 operates on 14-day assignments in areas that need the most assistance.

The Blue Mountain Interagency Dispatch Center also dispatches several Washington fire engines in the Umatilla National Forest that are assisting at the Bootleg Fire in Southern Oregon. The largest burning wildfire in the nation on July 16, the Bootleg Fire has extended over 235,000 acres. The fire is 7% contained and nearly 2,000 personnel are working the blaze.

MINAM

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chunk in Union County along Highway 82 near the old hairpin curve is also included.

The acquisition, according to ODFW East Region Manager Nick Myatt, is to be done in two phases. Phase I makes up just over 4,600 acres and includes the northern portion of the buy. ODFW, if it gets the OK to move forward, hopes to finalize the purchase by December 2021.

Phase II makes up the remaining land, which encompasses nearly 11,000 acres, and would close sometime in 2023, Myatt said.

Myatt explained that the property, which is considered a place with ample fishing and hunting opportunities, entails seven different strategy habitats the ODFW has interest in pre-

serving. Additionally, it contains a dozen “observed strategy species” in the area and four state or federally listed species of fish — Spring Chinook, Steelhead, Bull Trout and Pacific Lamprey.

“What’s great about this property is there is a lot of opportunity for non-consumptive use as well,” he said. “One of the things we’re excited about is the potential to restore the historic Minam River Trail.”

He said there is also an opportunity for habitat restoration and improvement.

A Forest Legacy Program grant the group hopes to receive would cover the lion’s share of the funding: \$9.7 million, all of which is currently planned to help cover Phase II of the acquisition.

The Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation is slated to cover more than \$5.1 million, including \$1.65 million of the initial purchase. ODFW’s Pittman-Rob-

ertson funds will be utilized for \$3.1 million in Phase I. Fundraising by the Oregon Hunters Association would cover the remaining \$750,000 of the budgeted cost.

Approximately 30 people listened into the July 13 meeting and were largely supportive of the plan.

“It’s nice to see this coming into state ownership,” Wallowa County Commissioner John Hillock said. “We’re desperately trying to get Wallowa County back to being a working landscape.”

Vic Coggins said he supports the plan “100%.”

“I don’t know of any other land acquisition that we could do that would be as important,” he said, calling the area a “super important wildlife corridor.” “Big game, upland birds and wildlife. That’s the lowest elevation in the Minam unit. ... I can’t say enough about the importance of this area.”

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