

# THE OBSERVER

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## 'It is important to reach out'

School district encouraging those impacted by movie to seek assistance

By **DICK MASON**  
The Observer

LA GRANDE — La Grande School District Superintendent George Mendoza is worried that the release of the movie "Joe Bell," which opened in theaters across the United States on Friday, July 23, will set back what for some has been an eight-year healing process.

This concern is why Mendoza is encouraging students, parents and staff impacted by the tragic story the movie tells to contact the La Grande School District for help if they need it.

"I feel that it is important to reach out," Mendoza said.

The film depicts the story of Jadin Bell, a La Grande High School sophomore who committed suicide in early 2013 after being bullied because he was gay. The movie also tells of how Jadin's father, Joe Bell, responded by starting a walk across the United States as a tribute to his son. Bell's walk ended tragically on Oct. 9, 2013, when he died after being struck by a semi-trailer while walking along a road in Colorado.

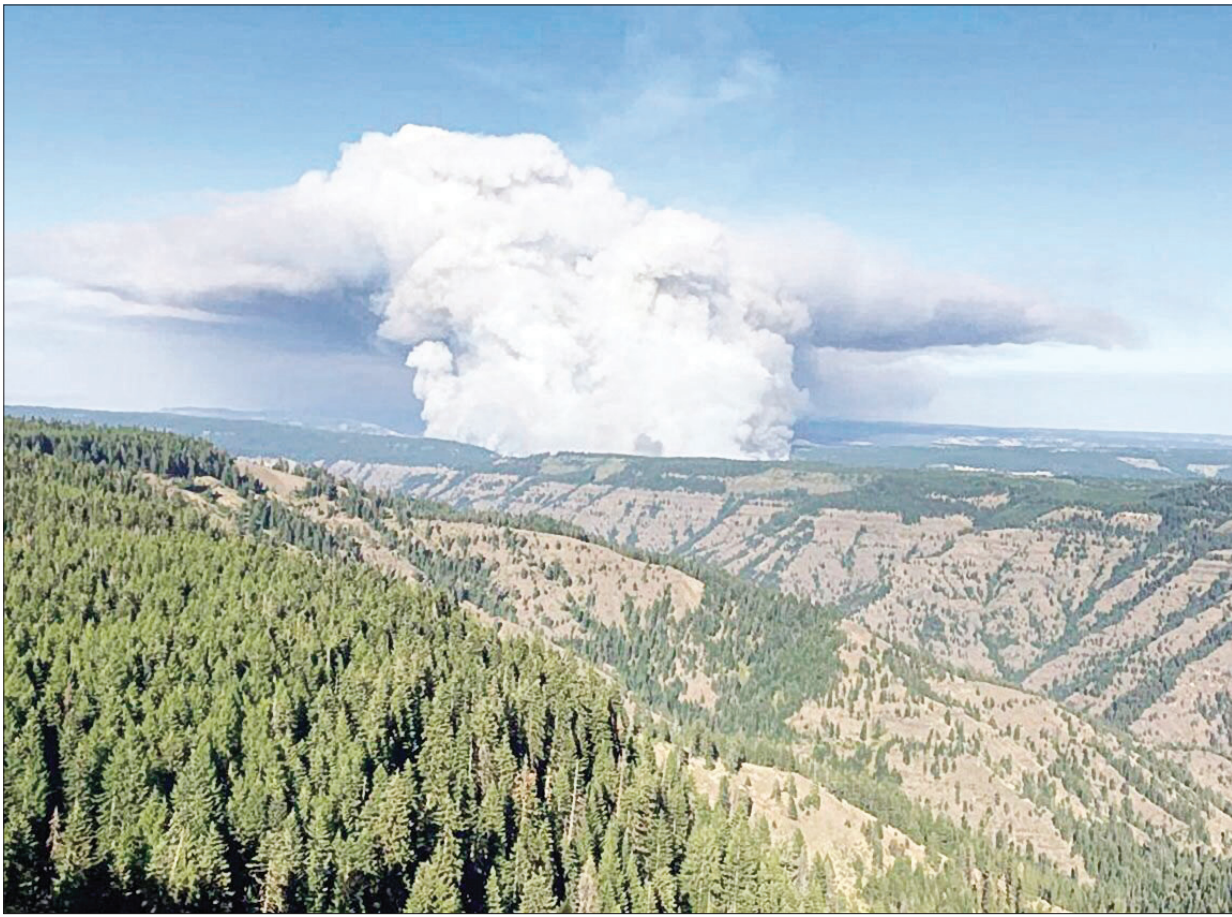
Mendoza said the movie is a reminder to many in the community of a great loss and he expects a number of people will find themselves needing love and support to help them cope.

The school district superintendent also said this is an important time to reflect on the full range of ways "we can support young people in our communities."

Lola Lathrop, the mother of Jadin Bell and the wife of Joe Bell, shares this sentiment.

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## NORTHEAST OREGON WILDFIRES



The Elbow Creek Fire burns on Friday, July 16, 2021, along the Grande Ronde River in northern Wallowa County. The blaze, which has burned about 23,000 acres, is the largest in Northeastern Oregon this summer.

Umatilla National Forest/Contributed Photo



Mendoza

# '90-day August'

Officials concerned that fire season, which started much earlier than usual, will persist throughout summer and even beyond

By **JAYSON JACOBY**  
Baker City Herald

BAKER CITY — Noel Livingston slides the cursor across the charts on his computer screen, and what he sees, lurking behind the zigzagging lines and the multiple colors, is trouble.

Wildfire trouble, to be specific. Livingston, who is the fire management officer for the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest, focuses on two lines in particular — a pair of lines for each of six regions on the forest, ranging from different types of forests to the grasslands of Hells Canyon.

One line, rendered appropriately in bright flame red, depicts the highest daily measurements, from 2010-19 on the Wallowa-Whitman, of a statistic known as the "energy release component."

A computer model considers the moisture level in wildfire fuels, as well as temperature and humidity, to project how much energy a fire would release — in effect, how rapidly flames would spread on a given day.

But it's the second line, a series of brown dots, that worries Livingston. Because that line represents current conditions, not those of past summers.

It tracks the daily energy release component readings for 2021. And for most of July, in each of those six regions, the brown dot line has been higher on the chart than the bright red line.

In some cases the brown dot was higher than the red line has ever been.

Which is to say, the energy release component has been breaking daily records with a regularity that's frightening for Livingston and other fire managers.

"That's what's got us on the edge of our chairs," Livingston said. "We've got a long summer ahead of us."

With the energy release component at record-setting levels, every fire has a higher-than-average



Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian

A bulldozer navigates Sloan Point Road on Thursday, July 22, 2021, while working the Elbow Creek Fire near Promise.

potential to turn into conflagration before firefighters arrive, Livingston said.

Crews have doused most blazes on the Wallowa-Whitman relatively rapidly, with a majority of the 36 blazes this season burning less than one acre.

But the statistics don't tell the entire tale, Livingston said.

"The fires that we are dealing with are showing a high resistance to control," he said. "We've been successful for the most part, but it's taking a lot more resources on initial attack to do so."

For instance, Livingston said some lightning-sparked blazes — the ignition source for about 80% of fires historically on the Wallowa-Whitman — that in a typical summer would pose no great challenge for one fire engine crew are this year requiring two or three crews.

Fortunately, Livingston said, almost all of the Wallowa-Whitman's firefighters are here and ready to fight local fires, rather

than assigned to fires elsewhere in the state or region.

"We're where we want to be in terms of resources on hand," he said.

Livingston said the Wallowa-Whitman has also bolstered its firefighting capability by having three bulldozers on contract as well as additional aircraft.

### Conditions create what looks like a '90-day August'

The recent record-high energy release components are disturbing not only based on the sheer numbers, Livingston said, but also the timing.

Starting in late June, when an historic heat wave descended on the Northwest, energy release components on parts of the Wallowa-Whitman didn't merely set daily records — they exceeded many previous daily highs for August.

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## Leading the fight against Bootleg

Northeastern Oregon native Joe Hessel heads effort to stop nation's largest wildfire

By **JAYSON JACOBY**  
Baker City Herald

BAKER CITY — Joe Hessel remembers when the Dooley Mountain Fire, which burned 20,000 acres south of Baker City over several days, was a "giant" blaze.

Nowadays he's coordinating the effort to stem a fire that burned more land than that every day.

For almost two weeks straight.

This yawning difference between what was typical

early in Hessel's career, and what is commonplace today, illustrates his longevity in a way perhaps more compelling than a couple of num-

bers can.

Certainly Hessel, who lives in Baker City and is in his 38th summer amidst the smoke and the flames, can attest to the changes time has wrought when it comes to fighting wildland fires in Oregon and across the West.

The Dooley Mountain Fire, sparked by lightning in late July 1989, was at the time the biggest blaze in Baker County in several decades.

It was also an abnormally large fire by Oregon standards.

But today, the acreage charred that distant summer would occupy a scarcely noticeable corner of the fire that has kept Hessel away from his Baker City home, and his La Grande office, for almost two weeks.

Hessel, 54, who is the Northeast District forester for the Oregon Department of Forestry, is one of three incident commanders for the Bootleg Fire, a lightning fire burning in Klamath and Lake counties in south-central Oregon.

At 409,611 acres as of Monday, July 26, it's the nation's biggest blaze, the one responsible for much of the smoke that has clogged Baker Valley at times this month.

The one that has spawned smoke plumes that look, from the vantage point of space satellites, similar to a cataclysmic volcanic eruption.

Hessel said his experience on the Bootleg Fire has led him to ponder, as he sometimes has over the past 32 years, the days when he worked on the Dooley Mountain Fire as a firefighter with the ODF.

"That was one of the first big fires I was involved in, and

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

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La Grande, Oregon

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THURSDAY

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