

FIRES

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“We’ve been seeing August-like conditions since late June,” Livingston said. That prompted a term that Livingston has adopted, but was quick to credit to a colleague, Matt Hoehna, a unit forester at the Oregon Department of Forestry office in Pendleton. “Ninety-day August.”

In other words, fire managers who are accustomed to fire danger that peaks during August and lasts for perhaps a month or six weeks, in 2021, due to its abnormally early start, has the potential to extend for three months.

Or even more. Livingston said fire danger, as expressed by the energy release component, tends to be cumulative, because logs, limbs and live grasses and shrubs become drier as summer progresses and the weeks with little or no rainfall accumulate.

That’s the reason that in most parts of the Wallowa-Whitman, August has the highest average daily energy release component, even though July, in many years, has higher average temperatures.

Unless a major shift in the weather pattern brings much cooler temperatures and widespread rain to the region — and meteorologists aren’t forecasting anything like that — Livingston said he expects the energy release component will continue to run near, or above, the all-time daily records.

Forest restrictions may ease fire dangers

The prospect of a prolonged period of extreme fire danger is a primary reason that Wallowa-Whitman officials enacted



Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian

A firefighter assigned to battle the Elbow Creek Fire in northern Wallowa County walks toward the fire line on Thursday, July 22, 2021.



Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian

A hand-cut fire break crosses a canyon along the Switchfoot Drainage near Promise on Thursday, July 22, 2021, as fire crews attempt to rein in the Elbow Creek Fire.

the most stringent public use restrictions — Phase C — on July

16. In most summers over the past decade the Wallowa-Whitman

either never reached that level, or did so in August.

In 2020, for instance, another abnormally dry summer, the Wallowa-Whitman imposed Phase C on Sept. 12 — and reverted to the less-restrictive Phase B on Sept. 25.

The neighboring Umatilla National Forest, meanwhile, took the rare step of closing the entire 1.4-million-acre forest to public entry starting July 16.

According to a press release from the Umatilla, that decision was due not only to extreme fire danger, but also because three large fires were already burning on the forest.

Livingston said the current situation with active fires, which take up some of a national forest’s

firefighting capacity, is one factor in any discussion among forest officials about potentially closing the entire forest to the public.

Wallowa-Whitman officials aren’t having that discussion now, Livingston said.

But they are exquisitely aware that such a conversation could well be necessary before autumn.

Livingston said two key factors, when it comes to the possibility of closing a forest to the public, are whether forest officials are confident they have sufficient resources to deal with a new, rapidly growing fire, and how high the risk of human-caused fires is.

Livingston said the Wallowa-Whitman is well-prepared to deal with new fires now.

As for the risk of human-caused fires, all campfires are banned under Phase C, and Livingston said he has taken the unusual step of having fire engine crews, which usually don’t patrol in the evenings, visiting campgrounds and other popular recreation spots at night to check for illegal fires.

Over the past week, firefighters have reported eight illegal campfires on the Wallowa-Whitman.

“We’re trying to stay on top of that,” Livingston said.

One policy that has been postponed this summer on the Wallowa-Whitman is the practice of allowing some lightning-caused fires to burn naturally in the Eagle Cap Wilderness. Blazes in the 365,000-acre wilderness — Oregon’s largest — can benefit the land by reducing fuel loading.

In 2019 the Granite Gulch Fire burned more than 3,000 acres in the Eagle Cap, the largest such blaze since the Forest Service instituted the policy about 25 years ago.

“That’s not a risk we’re going to take this year,” Livingston said.



Bootleg Fire/Contributed Photo

A single-engine air tanker drops retardant in early July 2021 on the Bootleg Fire burning in Klamath and Lake counties.

HESSEL

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it left an impact on my mind,” Hessel said in a phone interview from the Bootleg Fire camp.

In 1989, its size — 20,000 acres — made the Dooley Mountain Fire an outlier.

It was a time when firefighters considered even a 500-acre fire a significant blaze.

But then Hessel, who started his firefighting career with ODF at age 16, compares Dooley Mountain to Bootleg.

“This fire grew an average of 30,000 acres for 13 days straight,” he said of the blaze that began July 6.

The Bootleg Fire is the sort of blaze that requires a group of specialists — what’s known as an “overhead team” or “incident management team” — to coordinate the efforts of hundreds or even thousands of people, as well as bulldozers and other equipment on the ground, and air tankers and helicopters above.

Almost 2,400 people are assigned to the Bootleg Fire.

Hessel, who heads one of the ODF’s three overhead teams, said they have been called out more often, and for longer periods, over the past several years.

He said it has become increas-

ingly difficult for agencies to find employees willing to potentially give up much of their summer, to forgo family vacations in favor of traveling hundreds of miles to work on a big blaze.

“We used to go out maybe only once in a summer,” Hessel said. “One of our teams was out five times last year.”

The Bootleg Fire is his team’s second assignment this summer. The first, also in Klamath County, was the Cutoff Fire in June.

Hessel, whose dad was a Forest Service smokejumper and manager of the firefighting air center in La Grande while he was growing up, said incident management teams typically are assigned to a fire for 14 days, with the potential to extend the stay to 21 days.

Team members then return home for a couple days. Hessel, who was sent to the Bootleg Fire on July 10, said he doubts he’ll return home before July 27.

After his time off, he said his team will be “back on the board” — meaning they’re available to be assigned to another fire.

And with most of Oregon enduring extreme fire danger, Hessel doesn’t expect to wait long for his next job.

“It’s become a recurring theme every summer,” he said.

MOVIE

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“I hope that the message this movie sends will make all of us more vigilant, and inclined to safeguard the well-being of young people who deserve the opportunity to thrive,” Lathrop said in a written statement.

She said that the bullying Jadin experienced could have happened anywhere and that people everywhere need to focus on this issue.

“This is where our schools and communities and our parents need to focus their attention because our young people are at risk,” Lathrop said. “Each of us needs to examine ourselves and begin making changes. We need to look at our own actions and consider how they affect others, instead of casting the first stone.”

Mendoza said LGBTQ2SIA+ students often experience discrimination, harassment and bias at schools and in their lives.

“These experiences can send students a message that they do not belong and can lead to depression and other mental health challenges,” the superintendent said in written statement.

He said this may lead to thoughts of suicide. Adult guidance, though, can go a long way toward preventing thoughts of self-harm from becoming attempts.

“As adults we have the responsibility to do everything in our power to ensure that young people in our lives are affirmed and supported for exactly who they are,” Mendoza said.

The superintendent said if a young person comes to an adult seeking understanding and support for a mental health issue the La Grande School District has resources to help them. He stressed that the school district also has resources to help any student who is in need of mental health support.

These resources include the school district’s School Based Health Center and coun-



Quantrell D. Colbert/ Roadside Attractions

This image provided by Roadside Attractions shows Reid Miller, left, portraying Jadin Bell, and Mark Wahlberg, portraying Bell’s father, in a scene from the film “Joe Bell.”

“As adults we have the responsibility to do everything in our power to ensure that young people in our lives are affirmed and supported for exactly who they are.”

George Mendoza, La Grande School District Superintendent

seling support offered through the school district’s day treatment program for students in kindergarten through eighth grade, which remains open this summer.

Mendoza also said anyone who has a concern can contact their school’s principal via email and they will call or have other counseling support staff call. More information on this service is available at www.lagrandeesd.org/cultureofcare.

Mendoza also said that to better understand what the school district has in place to support students who experience bullying or mental health trauma, people are encouraged to go to www.lagrandesd.org/

cultureofcare to review LGSD’s Bully Matrix & Reference Guide and its LGSD-Suicide Prevention/Intervention/Postvention plan.

Mendoza, who became the La Grande School District’s superintendent in 2017 after coming here from the Morrow County School District, said one of his ultimate objectives is to bring out the best in students by creating a safe and supportive environment with the help of the community.

“As we remember Jadin and Joe Bell, let us renew our commitment to ensure that every student is healthy, safe, engaged and affirmed so they can reach their full potential,” he said.

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