

FIRE

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At the base, each member has a name tag on a thin magnetized strip stuck to a wall in the operations center. Of the nearly 40 firefighters, all but three have their incident commander qualification. Names are shuffled up and down the load list as fires are fought across the region.

Andrew Goshgarian's name was on the top of that list on Monday, Aug. 9. When a name is at the top, the next fire is theirs. They don't leave the station. Their bags are packed and ready for the call. Their boots stay on. They wait.

Kyle Johnson answered his phone in the operations center that afternoon. It was a fresh dispatch to a wildfire several miles south of La Grande. He shuffled over to the intercom at the Grande Ronde Rappel Base and spoke into the intercom.

"First load," he said clearly.

Moments prior, Lauren Mills was exercising in the base's gym. Mason "Eddie" Gustafson was plucking away at a guitar in the equipment bay. They were now scrambling into their firefighting gear. In 10 minutes or less, they'd need to be on a helicopter heading toward the fire.

Crew members quickly donned their helmets, flight suits and belly bags — sacks containing tools, equipment and personal effects. Gabby Casper, a firefighter not on the first load list, asked if anybody wanted a pocket burrito. Tulley Bloom sent a quick text to a loved one before heading out to the helicopter.

Casper then watched from the operations center, radio in hand, as the crew's Bell 205A-1 flew over the runway and toward the southern horizon.

When it reaches the fire, the chopper will make left-hand orbits, allowing the spotter and incident commander to plan from above, sizing up the fire and determining where to drop. When ready, the microphone booms are stowed and the team relies on hand signals. The first two firefighters drop at the same time. Then the next two prepare to drop.

Once every boot is on the ground, the firefighters immediately grab their tools and begin the unglamorous work of digging trenches and containment lines. It is slow, meticulous, arduous work. Often, the firefighters will sleep overnight near the fire.

They stay until the fire is out, which can sometimes mean sev-



Alex Wittwer/The Observer

Grande Ronde Rappelers sit in the passenger hold of a Bell 205A-1 helicopter during training on Wednesday, July 21, 2021.



Alex Wittwer/The Observer

Lightning strikes over a hay field near Island City on Thursday, Aug. 5, 2021. The thunderstorm was responsible for several fires over the weekend, including a fire near Spring Creek and Interstate 84.

eral days of work. They touch every inch of the fire zone. There's no room for error this season. A six-hour fire watch is held. If no fire crops up, the firefighters can declare the fire out. Only then can they leave — but the helicopter ride was a one-way ticket.

The firefighters trek out of the blaze covered in soot, carrying nearly 130 pounds of gear each. Each fire leaves its stains on the fabric of their Nomex clothing. They're picked up, returned to base, and their name returns to the bottom of the list.

And then they wait.

Marathon of a season

Nationally, resources remain spread thin as the fire season matures — already, 169 fires have started this year in Eastern

Oregon, according to the Blue Mountain Interagency Dispatch Center. The outlook is precarious.

"We already have record overtime hours," said Casper.

The rappel team in Eastern Oregon consists of two transport Bell 205A-1 helicopters, one Sikorsky CH-54B skycrane helicopter and 37 dedicated individuals whose instincts were trained to run toward danger.

According to Driskell, aerial fire assault vehicles are helpful to battling fires, but it takes the work of firefighters to completely ensure the fire is out.

"If you're just dropping water on something, you're not actually stopping it. You're slowing it down," Driskell said.

To ensure safety, rappel crews undergo at least four personal inspections prior to entering the

helicopter. As well, the team trains bimonthly, though on Wednesday, July 21, that training was interrupted by a wildfire reported northwest of Mount Emily in Union County.

It was a small fire burning less than an acre after overnight lightning ignited the delicate and dry brush on July 20.

The crew shifted mindsets from training to execution. Those heading to the fire grabbed their gear and began inspecting themselves and their comrades before boarding the helicopter.

Casper stood back and took a video of the departing helicopter on her phone.

"It's going to be a marathon of a season," she said. "It's already super wild."

'It just takes a spark'

"We've been experiencing August-like conditions since late June and we've been seeing record-breaking August conditions since the second week of July," said Noel Livingston, the fire management officer with the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest. "That's what's in front of us, and that's what has us on the edge of our chairs."

The United States entered into National Wildland Fire Preparedness Level 5 on July 14. It was the earliest start date in 12 years, and the second earliest in more than two decades. The preparedness levels are a metric measuring both fire activity and unallocated resources. At Level 5, it indicates

that most of the country's fire-fighting resources are tied up.

To track the potential for wild-fire events, forestry and wildfire experts use Energy Release Components to determine the fire risk of a certain region. The ERCs reflect the contribution of all live and dead fuels to potential fire intensity, according to the Northwest Interagency Coordination Center. The measured ECR levels of most of Northeastern Oregon had been breaking almost every record on the books by the end of July.

On Aug. 1, those numbers had dropped considerably — albeit due to the precipitation that came along with thunderstorms.

"It just takes a spark," said Peter Fargo, a public affairs officer with the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest. "It really is down to that level, now."

'The cavalry's not there if we needed to call them'

Resources such as firefighters, tankers and initial attack crews move around throughout Oregon over fire season — prior to thunderstorms, the area might receive bolstered forces through other firefighting groups such as the Redmond Smokejumpers.

But scrambling wildland firefighters across the state, however, means that less resources are available to fight other fires. With nearly 20,000 firefighters working fire lines across the nation, it's caused some concerns of shortages.

"The fires we're dealing with have a high resistance to control," Livingston said. "We're emptying the barn to pick these fires up."

Livingston continued by stating that Eastern Oregon was well-staffed via drawdown, which leaves critical initial attack resources in susceptible regions. In less explosive years, some forest fires are allowed to burn themselves out. This year, forestry officials aren't taking any chances.

"Things are just too dry for us. The cavalry's not there if we needed to call them," Livingston said.

The picture painted by the senior fire official is alarming — and confirms that this season is unlike any other experienced in Oregon's history of wildfires.

"Resources are stretched thin across the country," Fargo said. "At the same time, we need to keep our local resources here so they can respond to lightning strikes, and to campfires that go awry."

CENSUS

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dropping from 306 to 245.

In Baker City, the population from the census increased from 9,828 in 2010 to 10,099 in 2020. However, based on population estimates from 2010 to 2020, the population decreased by 0.2% from 2010 to 2019.

Pendleton's population grew from 16,612 in 2010 to 17,107 in the 2020 census. Based on population estimates, the city's population increased by 1% from 2010 to 2019.

According to Charles Rynerson, coordinator of the Oregon State Data Center at Portland State University, Oregon saw a large number of new residents from other states and other countries.

"In most Oregon counties there were more deaths than births, (and) that's only going to accelerate," he said. "In order to stave off loss, those counties will be expected to move more

people in than out."

Housing update

A number of cities, including La Grande, are under a housing shortage, which was reflected in the census results. The county ranked 24th in Oregon in housing unit vacancy rate, a tool used to measure the percentage of available housing. This measure calculates the percentage of vacant or unoccupied units in a region. The rate for the county is 7.5%, an increase of 1.4% since 2010.

According to La Grande City Manager Robert Strope, the census numbers will have little impact on the city's housing plans moving forward, but census numbers can impact population-based funding.

"We just finished a pretty comprehensive housing needs analysis and adopted a housing production strategy that looks specifically at La Grande and our needs," he said.

"The sampling that is done through the census isn't going to be nearly as helpful as the stuff we're doing in-house."

Neighboring counties

Two of Union County's adjoining neighbors, Umatilla and Wallowa counties, both saw identical increases of 5.5%. Umatilla County created a complete count committee in 2018 with the mission of ramping up efforts to acquire an accurate count in the census. Additionally, Umatilla County Commissioner George Murdock is one of six commissioners in the U.S. who serves on the National Association of Counties Census 2020 Working Group.

Morrow County experienced the largest population growth from 2010 to 2020 out of any county in Eastern Oregon, expanding 9.1% to 12,186. In Southern Oregon, Grant County was the only county in the state to experience a population decrease based on census data.

Census participation

In Union County, census participation efforts were delegated to individual cities. Strope noted that funding from the national level, such as the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021, can see changes based on population totals.

"A number of our funding sources are based on population, so it's really important to have an accurate rate of a population count as we can through the census," he said.

Each person in a county brings in \$3,200 per year in federal government payments, which illustrates the importance of responding to the census. According to the Census Bureau, the government funding based on the

census is directed toward roads, fire departments, health clinics and more.

"We very much encouraged people to do their census, it was a high priority for Union County," Beverage said.

The 2020 census was the first to be available online, but the pandemic still caused issues, according to Beverage. Obstacles also arose in North Powder and Union, where mail is delivered to post office boxes instead of direct mail. The census forms also were sent to households via email, but not all residents have internet access.

According to Rynerson, mailing issues in Eastern Oregon communities were a focus of emphasis during the 2020 census.

"In places where people get their mail at post offices, it was a big concern," Rynerson said. "Hopefully they were able to follow up with those households, but it was a concern."

Since the census is not mailed through post office boxes, the Census Bureau uses other methods such as dropping questionnaires at the doors of households in communities where people utilize the post office to get their mail.

"It was a little harder with the pandemic, not being able to knock on doors and that kind of thing," Beverage said. "It took a lot longer, but we put notices out and worked around it. The efforts were definitely hindered by COVID."

TEEN

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family after they lose three family members in such a short time is hard. It's even harder when it's preventable by getting a vaccine. Disinformation is Deadly!! Vaccines Save Lives!!

Fewer than half of Union County's adults are partially or fully vaccinated against COVID-19, the 11th lowest rate in Oregon, according to state data. State officials have said about 80% of July's deaths across the state were among people who were not vaccinated or not fully vaccinated, and

they have said vaccination is the best way to prevent severe disease, hospitalization and death.

Before Aug. 12, Oregon had reported only three COVID-19 victims younger than 20 out of more than 2,900 fatalities.

They are a 15-year-old Marion County boy who died in May, a 19-year-old Marion County man who died in December and a newborn boy from Umatilla County who died in January.

The Oregon Health Authority announced 22 new cases of COVID-19 in Union County on both Aug. 12 and 13. That total comes after the state announced 16

new cases on Aug. 11.

The new cases put the county at 1,905 known cases since the pandemic began last year.

The state reported seven new cases in Wallowa County on Aug. 12 and six new cases Aug. 13, raising its total to 286 cases during the pandemic. The county has had six deaths since the pandemic started, according to the state.

Union and Wallowa counties' total was part of 2,387 new confirmed and presumptive cases of COVID-19 across the state Thursday and 1,785 Friday, bringing the state total to 238,463 cases since the start of the pandemic.

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