

**FIRES**

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Previously, news and media organizations often have had to rely on press releases and submitted photos from government agencies. Often, coverage would come in the form of photos of road closures and barricades, or from distant landscapes of the hellish glow from a wildfire. A prior bill that would have changed the laws regarding wildfire access died in committee during the 2021 session.

The language of the bill gives incident commanders the final discretion to bar news media from access to wildfires or natural disas-



Ben Loneragan/East Oregonian, File  
**A firefighter assigned to battle the Elbow Creek Fire in northern Wal-lowa County walks toward the fire line on Thursday, July 22, 2021.**

ters, as well as the ability to deny access to fires without an escort. If granted access, it is at their own risk and without promise of rescue.

That media escort, at times, can prove a hindrance to getting the stories from the front lines of the fire.

East Oregonian photo-

journalist and visuals editor Ben Loneragan knows from firsthand experience how public information officers can err on the side of caution and prevent those front-line stories from being told.

In the summer of 2021, Loneragan was on assign-ment to get photos of the

Elbow Creek Fire in Wal-lowa County.

"On that fire, I had an escort, and we went in their vehicle, and they took us to all the areas of the fire that they deem safe to have us in," Loneragan said. "And we ran into



Loneragan

some issues with that. We never made it to any spot where there was active fire-fighting. The only access we were given was to the peripherals. They drove us around and we never saw a crew on a fire line over there. In one case, they drove us to where some hot shots were staging, but they had already left, so the access we were given was very restricted."

*"My aye vote was representative of transparency. I think we need to make sure the media has access to those types of generational situations, both for informing the public as to what's going on in their state, and also to capture history. For me, it's a pretty simple aye vote."*

— Rep. Greg Smith, R-Heppner

The bill would go a long way toward fostering good will between media orga-nizations and emergency services, and ensuring it is done safely.

Media personnel would be required to provide their own personal protective equipment, such as fire-proof clothing and breathing equipment, and would be expected to complete the same basic wildfire fighting

training that firefighters go through. The law would apply only to public land.

"I'm shocked that we had limitations," Smith said. "I just assumed those oppor-tunities did exist, and so it feels like we're correcting a wrong here."

The bill will go on to the Senate for consideration, though a hearing had not yet been scheduled as of Friday, Feb. 18.

**CRASHES**

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Carter said. The airbags, seat belts and crumple zones protected the family.

"We're all pretty much fine," Marjorie said.

The Hyatts were part of a series of crashes that began around noon near milepost 230, stretched 1.75 miles and involved more than 170 vehicles, according to press releases from the Oregon Department of Transpor-tation and Oregon State Police. OSP on Feb. 22 reported 17 patients were transported from the crash scene to hospitals and an additional two were trans-ported after they arrived at Pendleton Convention Center, which served as a reunification hub for people in the crash.

**First responders arrive amid continuing collisions**

Oregon State Police, local law enforcement, fire and medics from agencies throughout Umatilla and Union counties responded to the crashes, along with help from Walla Walla County in Washington. Pendleton Fire Chief Jim Critchley said the wrecks stretched for at least a mile. The Hyatts described the emergency response as impressive.

Responding officers were notified of additional crashes while they were arriving, and then once on scene, they could hear collisions occur-ring behind them, according to a press release from the OSP. The Hyatts heard those crashes, too.

"Bam, bam, bam," Carter Hyatt said. "They just kept hitting."

Marjorie said the sounds were unnerving. The Hyatts stayed in their vehicle, even without heat, for protection.

Capt. Merle Laci with the La Grande Fire Depart-ment said two ambulances and one rescue rig were on scene from Union County, with crews from Union and Island City fire departments



Carter Hyatt/Contributed Photo  
**Jacob Hyatt of Yelm, Washington, stands near his family's Nissan Pathfinder Monday afternoon, Feb. 21, 2022, following its crash into this trailer on the westbound side of Interstate 84 near milepost 230. The Pathfinder was one of more than 100 vehicles Oregon State Police reported that were involved in a series of collisions in the area starting at about noon.**

on standby. The La Grande Fire Department sent eight personnel to the scene.

As of 3:35 p.m. Feb. 21, rescue vehicles and ambulances from the La Grande Fire Department had returned to the station, according to Laci. La Grande Fire Department confirmed they transported three individuals from the scene to Grande Ronde Hospital.

Nick Oatley, spokes-person with Umatilla County Fire District No. 1, said the Hermiston-based fire department also responded, sending three ambulances to the scene. Good Shepherd Medical Center, Hermiston, reported it did not receive any crash victims.

**Hospitals at the ready**

Elaine LaRochelle, inci-dent commander at Grande Ronde Hospital, La Grande, activated the hospital's inci-dent command system at 2 p.m., according to a press release from Mardi Ford, public information officer.

"We are preparing to sup-port any patients sent our way with emergency ser-vices and medical care," Ford said in the release. "We do not have any news on dis-tribution of patients to be

sent our way. However, we are prepared to assist in this emergency. We are cooper-ating fully with all regional partners, including our media contacts, to do what we can to keep everyone informed. Our primary mis-sion, however, is to provide emergency services and medical care to patients in need. Once we know more, we will issue an update."

Emily Smith, director of communications for St. Anthony Hospital, Pend-leton, reported that as of 3 p.m. the hospital had received six patients from the crash.

"The patients' statuses are unknown at this time," she reported, "and no infor-mation on ages, etc., is avail-able to the media at this time."

Smith also explained how St. Anthony responds to this kind of crisis.

"When we receive word of an incident like this, the hospital activates Code D, or disaster response," according to Smith. "Avail-able staff (off-duty) are called and asked to come in based on current personnel needs as well as staffing for the next shift. Patients are seen in the Emergency Department as well as other care areas of the hospital as

appropriate for their level of injury. We have an exten-sive disaster plan that is drilled with local emergency response teams to ensure we are prepared for situations like this when they arise."

**Interstate reopens sooner than expected**

The mass crash shut down the westbound and eastbound lanes of the freeway in Eastern Oregon. Eastbound was closed Feb. 21 between Exit 216, 6 miles east of Pendleton, and Exit 265 at La Grande, while westbound was closed between Exit 374 at Ontario and Exit 216.

The Oregon Depart-ment of Transportation reported the eastbound lanes reopened about 12:30 a.m. Tuesday, Feb. 22. The west-bound side remained closed until about 6 a.m.

"Good coordination with all responding crews, including law enforcement, fire stations, emergency responders, ODOT and over a half dozen tow compa-nies helped clear the route enough to open the freeway several hours ahead of ear-lier estimates," according to the press release from ODOT.

Disabled vehicles were removed from the road with

**MORE INFORMATION**

The Umatilla County Emer-gency Operations Center was activated for the Feb. 21 crash. Several agencies worked together to coordinate the response to this large-scale incident:  
Oregon State Police  
Umatilla County Sheriff's Office  
Umatilla County Emergency Management  
Pendleton Fire  
Umatilla County Fire District One  
Pilot Rock Fire  
East Umatilla County Fire and Rescue  
CTUIR Fire and Ambulance  
CTUIR Emergency Management  
La Grande Fire and Ambulance  
Oregon Department of Transportation  
Additional medic units from Union and Walla Walla counties  
Along with a half dozen tow companies

mountain, they said they had to cross the median to the eastbound lanes. Mar-jorie banged her knee on the fence, but firefighters were right there to help. And she said the Oregon State Police trooper who had checked on them earlier assisted them onto the bus.

The buses took groups to the Pendleton Con-vention Center. The facili-ty's manager, Pat Beard, said the center was holding events that day but it opened rooms for the people in the crash and provided what hospitality it could while they waited for rides from family or friends or made arrangements for other accommodations.

The center also served as something of a base of oper-ations for law enforcement, Umatilla County Public Health and more. Beard praised the coordination he witnessed among the dif-ferent groups.

The Hyatts were among the last from the crash to still be at the convention center that evening. Bags of chips and other snacks lined the long tables of the large room they were in. A family member was on the way to help the Hyatts get home, they said, probably around 7 that night.

Their smashed Nissan, as far as they knew, still was at the site of the crash. Carter said all their lug-gage was in the car, so he anticipated having to make a trip back to gather their belongings.

The Hyatts said they had never experienced anything like this emergency, and they did not want to be in another. But their concerns were for others.

"I hope everyone gets out," Marjorie said.

**Pendleton Convention Center provides respite**

The Hyatts said emer-gency personnel checked on them often, and they appre-ciated that. And many of the other travelers stranded in the crash helped one another, they said, offering water and making sure people were OK.

"There were people, reg-ular people," Marjorie Hyatt said. "All that was really nice."

When school buses arrived to carry the Hyatts and so many more off the

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**POWER**

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Monday, Feb. 14, four were dismissed and one case resulted in a default judgment since the landowner in question failed to appear.

In the case of Idaho Power Company vs. John and Connie Williams, the court ruled that Idaho Power and its agents, employees and contractors may enter the property to conduct the surveys.

Two cases were granted a continuance, while four

of the cases were set over to retain counsel. The land-owners are set to partici-pate in hearings scheduled around the end of March.

According to Jim Kreider, one of the founders of the Stop B2H Coalition, those opposed requested the extensions in order to seek out legal assistance in their respec-tive cases.

"Our general advice to everybody is to ask for an extension and then consult with an attorney and con-sider your options," he said. Kreider noted that with

the nearly identical peti-tions filed by Idaho Power to residents across Eastern Oregon, the coalition is seeking to find legal repre-sentation that can cover the bulk of the cases.

While several land-owners chose to have the petitions dismissed and allow access onto their property, about half in Union County are con-tinuing to push on. According to Kreider, the court costs associated with the contested power line proposal is causing a hurdle for some.

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