

Public complicates initial response to Reeves Creek Fire

By
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The Reeves Creek Fire is now 100 percent contained at 204 acres. It took a bit of time to get the job done due to steep, difficult terrain and challenges with vegetation.

"While fire activity died down by the end of last week, firefighters kept working on hot spots and remained vigilant in case wind coaxed the blaze back to life," said Oregon Department of Forestry Fire Prevention Specialist Brian Ballou.

When the fire first flared up in the early evening on Monday, July 28, many Valley residents dashed out to get a look at the blaze.

"Our response was delayed because we had trouble getting through all the traffic," said Illinois Valley Fire District Chief Dennis Hoke. "People need to use some common sense and stay out of our way."

"Many have an overwhelming temptation to get as close to the action as they can to take pictures and see what's going on, but we're asking the public to resist this urge," Ballou said. "And if you're on the road and see a fire truck coming behind you, pull over, because literally, with fast moving brush fires, seconds count."

The initial response to the blaze was fast and furious, with two helicopters and an air tanker dousing flames until daylight ran out. About 200 firefighters with six bulldozers worked through that first night to build firelines around the blaze, located south of Selma on Reeves Creek Road.

At the height of the fire, 250 firefighters, five wild-land fire suppression engines, six water tenders, six bulldozers and numerous helicopters and tankers were involved in

suppression efforts.

"One of the big issues was that even though the fire was on the east side of Reeves Creek road, the land on the west side of the road, in the canyon, was pre-heating, and the fire just took off and ran there," Hoke said. "And the fire threw embers 1500 feet ahead of the main fire, starting spot fires."

At one point the fire was declared 90 percent contained, but in an "unusual move" that number was revised back to 85 percent, according to Ballou. Chances for lightening and strong winds prompted that change.

By Thursday, July 31, the fire's size was also revised to 204 acres after bulldozers dug new fire-line along the west flank, closer to the fire's edge. Eleven fire suppression crews and eleven engines were still "grinding away" on all the hot spots within 300 feet of the fireline.

"It's work that requires strong legs and backs and it's slow going but essential. Part of firefighting is putting it out completely," Ballou said. "There were a number of areas inside the fire line that didn't burn. We were concerned that those areas could re-ignite."

"I want to send out a special acknowledgement to the IV Fire District volunteers who jumped into quick action to save homes," Hoke said.

Hoke also complimented volunteers from all the fire agencies for the "well-orchestrated" response that proved invaluable on the first night of the fire when homes were most threatened. Seven homes were within or near the fire's footprint while dozens more were located nearby, but none burned. While some residents were placed on alert, no evacuations became necessary.

"We had fantastic coordination between the IV Fire District, Rogue Valley Task Force, Rural Metro Fire, Grants Pass Fire and teams from Jackson County that all came together to

protect homes," Hoke said. "We even had rigs coming from Ashland. And of course, we really appreciate the contributions from ODF and the Forest Service, we couldn't have done it without them."

"That's the good news," Hoke said. "The bad news is that now many of these fire fighting units are committed to other fires, so if another bad fire breaks out in the Valley, we may not receive that level of response and resources."

This is why it's critical that people don't start any new fires, stay clear of fire fighting zones and focus on creating more defensible space on their own properties."

The Reeves Creek Fire, thought to be human-caused, had a point of origin near an old quarry, right on the side of the road. An investigation has been mounted and anyone with information is asked to contact ODF.



(Photo by Dan Mancuso, Illinois Valley News)

Two helicopters get water from Lake Selmac during the Reeves Creek Fire.

Extreme fire conditions usher in strict fire regulations

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The Industrial Fire Precaution Level was boosted to level 3 on Monday and these regulations affect the 1.8 million acres of state, private, county and Bureau of Land Management forestlands in Josephine and Jackson counties.

"Very dry conditions in Southwest Oregon's forests and wildlands, and the recent outbreak of large wildfires, makes it necessary to shut down all public use of power-driven and spark-emitting equipment on all ODF protected lands," said ODF Fire Prevention Specialist Brian Ballou.

Chainsaw use, weed-eaters, cutting, grinding and welding of metal are all prohibited; as is mowing of dried and cured grass with power-driven equipment, except for the mowing of green lawns, or the commercial culture and harvest of agricultural crops. The existing ban on all burn barrel and debris burning still stands and the use of fireworks, exploding targets, tracer ammunition or any bullet with a pyrotechnic charge in its base are also prohibited.

Smoking is prohibited while traveling, except in vehicles on improved roads; and use of motor vehicles, including motorcycles and all-terrain vehicles, is prohibited, except on improved roads.

All open fires are prohibited, including campfires, charcoal fires, cooking fires and warming fires, except at designated locations.

Anyone responsible for starting a fire, accidental or otherwise, may be liable for damages to neighboring properties and fire suppression costs that can rise into the millions, according to ODF officials.

"Inadequate rainfall the past few years, and now, sustained high temperatures have produced tinder-box dry fuels, creating conditions that can produce extreme fire behavior that's even more dangerous than usual," Ballou said.

Making matters worse, ODF reports that some of the largest fires in Southwest Oregon this season have been human-caused. While lightning starts up to 30 percent of all fires, people have started a staggering 70 percent of the wildfires in the region, with the leading cause being debris pile burning.

"Even during the most severe fire danger, we're still seeing illegal burning in backyards," Ballou said. "If people witness someone burning, call 911 immediately."

It is especially important, right now, for the public to take action to ensure their homes are defensible against wildfire; and while it is too late for homeowners to burn off excess brush, it's never too late to create more defensible space around homes.

"During wildfires we assess the homes nearby," said Illinois Valley Fire District Chief Dennis Hoke. "We perform 'structural

triage'. In other words, we look around to see whether a structure can be successfully defended and this determines if we'll put resources there to make a stand against encroaching wildfire."

"At the Reeves Creek Fire, some of the homes in the Wildpark area were categorized as red, which meant we wouldn't put any resources there to protect those homes from wildfire, because it was too risky," Hoke added. "We're not going to put our firefighters at risk to save residences when the occupants have done nothing to create a defensible space."

Hoke explained that a "red" home might have firewood piled against the house, trees touching or near the house, dried-out brush or significant amounts of ladder fuels in the immediate area of the structure. He said people should have at least 30 feet of defensible space around their homes. And, for homes on slopes, the amount of defensible space needed increases exponentially, depending on steepness of the slope.

Defensible space means roofs and rain gutters are kept free of needles and leaves and landscaping near homes is managed to reduce fire danger. It's recommended that people start with their house and work outward - removing fuel sources close to the house, including gas cans, chemicals, organic mulch, dried-out grass and weeds, needles on the ground, juniper bushes or any other flammable plants.

See Regulations on A-9

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