

NEWS

BY JESLYN LEMKE



FIREFIGHTERS DEPLOY TO FIGHT THE JONES FIRE NEAR LOWELL, AMID A SMOKY HAZE

PHOTO COURTESY INCIWEB

FIRE LINES

Firefighters travel far to battle flames close to Eugene

Firefighter Mike Simon III has slept in a tent on the beach of the Dexter Reservoir in Lowell since Aug. 16. His exhausted brother, nephew and cousins also sleep in nearby tents each night.

These family members are with a 20-member crew of Alaskan Natives who took three rural plane flights to travel from their tiny fishing village of Hooper Bay, Alaska, to Eugene to fight the Jones Fire, which is burning about 10 miles outside Lowell in the Willamette National Forest.

Lowell is about 20 miles from Eugene-Springfield, so the smoke from this 5,000-acre plus wildfire has made its way to the city.

More than 600 firefighters like Simon are sleeping on the shores of the reservoir, waking at 5 am every morning to start a 12- to 14-hour shift. Lowell's Lundy Elementary School and the reservoir's marina on are completely occupied by fire staff, managed by the Oregon Department of Forestry (ODF).

Each morning the town's main grocery store, Bridge Town Market, is crowded by fire vehicles and fire staff buying gas and last-minute snacks before they head to the fire lines. This town of 1,000 has warmly welcomed the massive influx of firefighters with food donations, letters of

support and a lot of waving as crews head out to the forest, incident commander Mike Ciraulo says.

On Aug. 17, Simon, his cousin Leonard Bell and the rest of the crew were working to quickly wrap an entire outbuilding with foil at the Clark Creek Campground, in the expected path of the Jones Fire. The metal layer protects the wood building from catching fire should embers fall on the wooden roof.

"We've got duct tape, staples, ladders, some foil and we're pretty much wrapping the house layer by layer to make sure the wind doesn't blow it ... I know the roof is sort of thin. We are trying our best to not go through the roof so we sent our lightest guy onto the roof to help us," Simon says.

A soft-spoken Alaskan who works as a part-time electrician back in Hooper Bay, Simon says he's fought more than 80 fires in Washington, Idaho and California alongside his brothers and cousins. He'll bring home about \$3,000 to his wife and children for his two weeks of work on the Jones Fire. His crew typically fights two to four fires per summer.

More than 50 locals from Lowell and Fall Creek crowded into the tiny Lowell Fire Hall on Aug. 17 to hear a news briefing from the ODF and staff of Willamette National Forest. Their skies have been smoky and polluted for days now.

Residents wanted to know about the danger of the fire reaching the town. They were told there was little risk; Lowell is 10 miles from fire lines. They asked when the fire staff would open up Forest Service Road 18 and were told it would not be until late September.

And they wanted to know whether ODF personnel would be out of the town's elementary school building by the time the school year starts. The answer to that was yes.

"We turned around 30 people who came into fire camp already today," Marcus Kauffman, ODF public relations officer, told *EW*. "We turned around probably 50 people at the roadblock on the Forest Service Road 18 [Fall Creek Road]. Most of those people are pretty understanding. We changed their plans and they can't go to their favorite swimming hole." The fire jumped the road on Aug. 20.

Kauffman added that the Jones Fire is mainly burning south, toward Fall Creek Road and the Fall Creek Reservoir.

"There's a trail, a creek and a road. That's pretty solid [as a containment barrier for the fire]. But it's burning to the south," Kauffman says.

Tara Jones's house is a mere six miles from the edge of the Jones Fire. She and her partner, Bert Rekker, came to the town hall in Lowell to see if and when they would need to evacuate. Jones's house is on the banks of the Fall Creek Reservoir. Smoky wind blows in every night off the lake.

"We have to sleep with the windows closed. In the morning, it's smoky; then it starts to dissipate. You can smell it and taste it," Jones says.

Jones and her partner, their dog and a goat will all evacuate their six acres of land should the fire reach Fall Creek Reservoir.

As of Aug. 23, the Jones Fire is one of three major wildfires burning in the Willamette National Forest, including the Whitewater Fire near Mount Jefferson (8,500 acres) and the Rebel Fire (2,691 acres).

Several other small fires are burning as well. The Milli Fire in the Deschutes National Forest (12,457 acres) is burning west of Sisters, and in southern Oregon the Chetco Bar Fire in the Kalmiopsis Wilderness has burned almost 100,000 acres.

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