

KFD enduring busiest summer in district history

BY MATT RAWLINGS
Of the Keizertimes

It has been a busy summer for Keizer Fire District (KFD) as the department has experienced a substantial increase in call volume.

Two years ago, KFD responded to more than 500 calls service in a month, which at the time was a district record. That record was shattered last month as the district went on 608 calls for service in July for an average of 19.6 calls per day.

The 608 service calls broke the record for most calls the district had responded to in a month — KFD staffs one battalion chief, one engine company and three medic units per day, all with 10-12 firefighters.

“It has been extremely busy,” KFD Division Chief of Operations Brian Butler said. “Everyone has been inside for a year, we have been told to not do anything and stay at home. Then everything opened up, and it just happened to be summer time. It has been a different summer because of those things, so we are trying to cope the best we can and try to maintain our staffing.”

KFD isn't alone in their call volume increase as Salem Fire Department and Marion County Fire District #1, along with KFD, have experienced a recent 25% surge over the last year in the amount of calls they have received and responded to.

“It is still the same things we have always gone on, just a larger amount. I don't know if that is because our population is moving, or the fact that people are working from home now. You can't blame it all on one thing or another. It's not COVID's fault, it's not the wild-fires' fault. It's just in general, all the fire service numbers across the nation. It's just increasing for everyone,” added KFD Deputy Fire Marshal Anne-Marie Storms.

While they may have their suspicions, both Butler and Storms admitted that the fire districts in the area haven't

been able to pinpoint the cause of why there is such a big surge in call volume in recent months — the vast majority of the calls are for medical service.

“Why it's busy, I don't know. We are just getting more calls,” Butler said.

Running over 19 calls per day has forced the district into long-range planning for the future as KFD is planning on

of the largest in state history.

Despite sending a multitude of firefighters out on conflagrations, Butler said that the main issue with day-to-day operations is less about staffing and more about call volume.

“As far as what affects Keizer, it is running this many calls in a 24-hour period. That is more impactful on our

someone else has a big fire, we need to go help them,” Cowan said. “When it comes to local fires, You want those to be fought by battle-hardened veterans. When you send someone to a fire like the Bootleg Fire, that is a lifetime, career fire that could be the biggest fire in Oregon history. Now we have people here in Keizer that fought the Bootleg Fire and have that kind of experience, and they bring that experience back with them.”

In regards to why Oregon is experiencing one of the worst fire seasons on record, Butler and Storms didn't mince their words.

“Until we take climate change seriously, it's going to be that way,” Butler said. “It is because of climate change. Things are hotter, things are drier... Things are changing, and until we make a serious effort to change things, it's going to keep being like this,” Butler said.

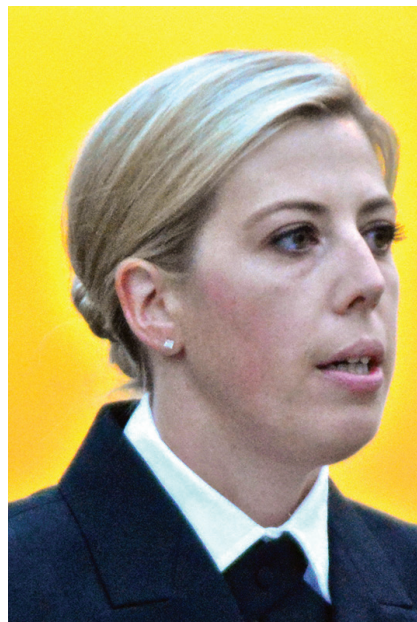
“It has nothing to do with fire agencies, it's about us as humans and how we managed our state for years and the lack of forestry management. We didn't touch our trees for years because of the spotted owl. And then we find a different excuse, followed by a different excuse. When you have all of that dead debris sitting under those trees not being cleared out, you are not allowing fire to burn like it does naturally,” Storms added.

Last summer, the Santiam Canyon wildfire decimated the rural areas of Mehama, Gates, Mill City, Detroit and Idanha. While a fire of that magnitude would be next to impossible in Keizer, Cowan said, with the way things are going, that he is expecting a major fire to take place in Keizer in the near future.

“It's only a matter of time. We will have a major fire in Keizer Rapids Park. We don't have a water supply in Keizer Rapids Park. And those are the kind of things we need to be prepared for and drill for,” Cowan said. “We don't see this going away.”

With the current state of affairs in Oregon, Cowan was thankful for the passing of Senate Bill 762, a wildfire preparedness and resiliency bill, which was signed by Governor Kate Brown last week. While the omnibus bill covers a multitude of different fire topics, one of the aspects Cowan was most excited about is that now, fire districts will receive more timely reimbursements when they go out on conflagrations.

“We spend money we didn't plan for when we go out of conflagrations.



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— ANNE-MARIE STORMS
Deputy Fire Marshal, KFD

renewing their local option levy at \$0.59 per \$1,000 of assessed property value in 2023. Cowan said that KFD needs more resources, people and trucks, and that the district has been having ongoing conversations about future funding.

“We need to have long-range projections for how to get to the next level, and then come back to the community and tell them where we are at, and what our plan is, and if they will help us fund it,” Keizer Fire Chief Jeff Cowan said.

Along with running an exorbitant amount of medical calls, KFD firefighters also had an incredibly busy month on conflagrations. The district sent out multiple crews to numerous fires throughout the state, including the Bootleg Fire in southern Oregon — one

firefighters. If I send three guys out on a conflagration, we are able to fill their spots with overtime ... I got three shifts and three guys off, so you are only looking at losing one guy per shift,” Butler said.

While they don't have any staff members out on conflagrations at the moment, Butler said that KFD has a crew prepared to go out as soon as possible.

“We are ready to be called at any minute. I have a crew on standby, ready to go at a moment's notice,” Butler said.

Even with the chaotic day-to-day operations, Cowan explained why he always wants to make providing wildfire assistance a priority.

“When we have a big fire, we want people to come help us, and when

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