



Nancy McCarthy/Special to The Daily Astorian
Smoke filled the air throughout John Day during the Canyon Creek Complex fire, which reached within 1 mile of the town. For several days the fire closed U.S. Highway 395, which begins in downtown John Day, where a roadblock was established.

AS OREGON’S WILDFIRES SPREAD, SO DID THE COMPASSION

Canyon Creek Complex fire was one of the most destructive in state history

By **NANCY MCCARTHY**
Special to The Daily Astorian

I have always enjoyed Cannon Beach’s combination of green forest and expansive ocean, but never more so than upon my recent return from John Day, where firefighters are still working to put out the Canyon Creek Complex fire.

Cooler temperatures, a bit of rain and even some snow in the higher elevations have reduced the threat of a fire that has burned 110,442 acres — about 173 square miles — since Aug. 12.

At one time, more than 1,000 firefighters from throughout the Northwest were assigned to the fire, and two incident commanders — one to protect structures and one to fight the wildland fire raging through the Malheur National Forest and beyond — were in charge.

In my 48 years as a newspaper reporter, bureau chief and editor, I have covered myriad beats. But I’ve never covered a wildland fire, and, for some strange reason, I always wanted to.

It took a stint as interim editor of the Blue Mountain Eagle to fulfill that desire. But, as they say, be careful what you wish for.

Dry, rolling hills

John Day, at the intersection of U.S. highways 26 and 395 in Eastern Oregon, has roughly the same population as Cannon Beach. But, while Cannon Beach is surrounded by nearly always rain-moist forests of fir, spruce and hemlock trees on its eastern edge and the Pacific Ocean on the west, John Day, in the high desert, is surrounded by dry, rolling hills, mostly bare, except for a few bushes and grasses.

The nearby 1.7-million-acre Malheur National Forest, containing grasslands, juniper, sage and pine trees, among other species, is home to the Strawberry Mountain Wildemess, a 68,700-acre area that was the scene of much of the fire.

Thunder and lightning woke me in the early morning hours of Aug. 12. Lightning in Eastern Oregon isn’t like what we see here on the coast. The sky is lit as bright as daylight as the distinct, jagged lightning bolts charge the earth, one after another.

Following the lightning show, the citywide siren rang out, alerting local volunteer firefighters that they were needed.

I had been in John Day for two weeks already, filling a temporary position as editor of the Eagle until a permanent editor came on board. The small staff had just finished covering the Grant County Fair and rodeo at the fairgrounds, two blocks from the newspaper office. The paper’s only full-time reporter then took a week’s vacation, where she traveled to a family reunion here on the North Coast.



George Plaven/EO Media Group
Clinton Shaver, with the Molalla Rural Fire District, watches as a tree goes up in flames on the Canyon Creek Complex south of John Day.

On the afternoon of Wednesday, Aug. 12, two lightning-caused fires, said to be only 5 to 10 acres in size, were reported about 4 miles south of John Day. But 24 hours later, those fires, which had been 7 miles apart, had gobbled up more than 500 acres and had crossed U.S. 395.

Residents of the area, known as Canyon City, were told to be ready to evacuate. Of the five staff members at the newspaper that day, three had to leave to check on relatives in the evacuation zone or to pack their own homes and be ready to leave on a moment’s notice.

‘Get out of there now’

I texted the news to a friend in Cannon Beach. She told me to get out of there now. I wrote back: “A reporter doesn’t run from danger, a reporter runs to danger.” Besides, there were only two of us left. Cheryl, an administrative assistant and part-time reporter, spent the next several days and nights posting to the Eagle’s Facebook page, which proved to be a lifeline for the sparsely populated area (the entire population of Grant County is 7,000). We received over 200,000 hits the first week or so. I continued to contact the U.S. Forest Service for fire updates.

By that Friday evening, the fire, rushing through the canyon, swallowed 22,000 acres and destroyed 39 homes.

Smoke filled the air in John Day and the surrounding communities. I could smell smoke in my office, where all the doors and windows were closed. At 1 p.m. Saturday, I took a photo of downtown John Day; it was as dark as dusk.

Every morning until I left on Sept. 2, I would awake at 6 a.m. to a bright pink sun. For a moment, I would look at the haze and think it was coastal fog. Then, after taking a deep breath, I would remember it was smoke.

The fairgrounds filled with firefighters’ tents. Fire rigs from all over the region parked on the nearby streets. Firefighters arrived after their 12- or 16-hour shifts while other firefighters left for their next round of grueling work on the rugged, unforgiving terrain.

On the Monday after the fire broke out, people started coming to the Eagle office. Just like the North Coast, where everyone is either related, works with, volunteers with or knows everyone else, the John Day area is connected, too.

Lost everything

Those who stopped by had lost everything, or they knew people who had. They told stories. A couple in their 80s lost the home they lived in for 53 years. A crying man sat in my office, telling me how his house had been saved because his neighbor had put a sprinkler on it, but the neighbor’s cabin had been destroyed.

An hour later, that neighbor sat with Angel Carpenter, the Eagle’s reporter who had just returned from vacation, telling her how he wouldn’t be alive if a friend hadn’t alerted him to the evacuation notice.

The Grant County sheriff called the fire scene an “apocalypse.”

We interviewed dozens of people throughout the next three weeks, attended several community meetings and put out three “fire editions.” Reporters from the East Oregonian and the Capital Press — other newspapers owned by EO Media Group — supplemented our reporting staff.

While we “outsiders” could supply the “boots on the ground” and turn out stories ranging from how the firefighters were fed to how the forests should have been better managed, we lacked basic knowledge about the area’s geography and residents. That’s where the newspaper’s close-knit staff, who either grew up in the community or who had lived there many years, was so helpful.

They could show us on a map what community the latest evacuation notice covered and tell us who might have a house or ranch there or why the potential destruction of a beloved campground was so significant. Places like Pine Creek, Dog

Creek, Berry Creek and Long Creek became familiar.

However, the East Oregonian reporter, who works out of Pendleton three-and-a-half hours away, was confused by the localities within the devastated canyon. “There are too many creeks here,” he complained.

Donations fill pavilion

Meanwhile, residents in the local community and throughout Oregon, Washington state and Idaho donated enough items for those who had been affected by the fire to fill a large pavilion at the fairgrounds, and a former school building had to be opened to take the overflow. Trucks arrived almost daily with donations for community members, hay for their livestock and food for their pets. Contributions to a local credit union fund have topped \$158,000.

Firefighters weren’t forgotten, either: Thank-you signs covered every telephone pole and fence throughout John Day and Canyon City. Four buses and two trucks arrived from Sandy with supplies donated from 19 cities.

For more than three weeks, we were constantly on alert. If we weren’t wakened by the town siren, which went off in the middle of the night several times, we were interrupted during the work day with a new evacuation alert for an area that, until then, hadn’t been threatened.

The fire came within a quarter mile of the publisher’s house, and she and her family were evacuated for several days. Two staff members live in Prairie City, 13 miles east of John Day, which also was threatened several times; they were on notice to be ready to leave at any time, but, thankfully didn’t have to, unlike their neighbors on the other side of the highway, who formed a caravan on the highway out of town early one Saturday morning.

Covering the fire was both exhilarating and exhausting. The fire has been called one of the worst in Oregon history, due mostly to the number of homes destroyed (43 in total), which, as I understand it, is more than any lost in an Oregon fire since the early 1900s. While there were a few injuries, no lives were lost.

Lately, I’ve made it a point to walk on the beach and breathe in the ocean air. I welcome the rain that has fallen. It’s good to see green trees all around me. I try not to imagine what it would be like if a wildfire that size caught hold here. We’ve had at least two near-misses near Arch Cape in the past year.

But if that disaster did occur, I can only expect that we on the North Coast would respond as those in John Day did: with as much compassion as a community in crisis can muster.

Nancy McCarthy is the former editor of the Cannon Beach Gazette and the Seaside Signal.

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