

Shutdown taking toll on wildfire preparations

A dozen senators say lives are at risk

By GILLIAN FLACCUS
Associated Press

PORTLAND — Just two months after a wildfire wiped out Paradise, California, officials are gearing up for this year's fire season and fear the government shutdown could make it even more difficult than one of the worst in history.

The winter months are critical for wildfire managers who use the break from the flames to prepare for the next onslaught, but much of that effort has ground to a halt on U.S. land because employees are furloughed. Firefighting training courses are being canceled from Tennessee to Oregon, piles of dead trees are untended in federal forests and controlled burns to thin dry vegetation aren't getting done.

Although the furloughs only affect federal employees, the collaborative nature of wildland firefighting means the pain of the four-week-long shutdown is having a ripple effect — from firefighters on the ground to federal contractors and top managers who control the firefighting strategy.

State and local crews who need training classes, for example, are scrambling without federal instructors. Conservation groups that work with the U.S. Forest Service to plan wildfire-prevention projects on federal lands are treading water. Annual retreats where local, state and federal firefighting agencies strategize are being called off.

The fire season starts as early as March in the southeastern United States, and by April, fires pop up in the Southwest. Last year's most devastating fire leveled the Northern California town of Paradise just before Thanksgiving, leaving just a few months to prepare between seasons.

"I think a lot of people don't understand that while there's not fire going on out there right now, there's a lot of really critical work going on for the fire season — and that's not getting done," said Michael DeGrosky, chief of the Fire Protection Bureau for the Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation.

It's especially important with climate change making wildfire seasons longer, deadlier and more destructive.

DeGrosky was supposed to be teaching a course this week for firefighters who want to qualify for the command staff of a fire



A firefighter battles a blaze in November along the Ronald Reagan Freeway in Simi Valley, Calif.

AP Photo/Ringo H.W. Chiu



Fire retardant is dropped on a burning hillside in Malibu, Calif., in November.

AP Photo/Jae C. Hong

management team. But the class was canceled without instructors from federal agencies.

Similar classes were called off in Oregon and Tennessee, and others face the same fate as the shutdown drags on. President Donald Trump and congressional Democrats are

at odds over funding for a border wall.

A dozen senators from Oregon, California, New Mexico, Washington, Colorado, Nevada, West Virginia and Michigan sent a letter this week to Trump warning that the shutdown would put lives at risk this coming fire season. Classes

necessary for fire incident managers, smokejumpers and hotshot crews are in jeopardy in the near future, the senators said.

Smokejumpers parachute into remote forests to battle blazes not inaccessible by firefighters on the ground and hotshot crews are small groups of

elite firefighters trained to battle the most ferocious flames.

The winter is also when seasonal firefighters apply for jobs, get the required drug tests and move to where they will train and work. In many cases, there's no one to answer the phone or process the applications, and some potential recruits may decide to work elsewhere to avoid the hassle.

"Even if the shutdown ends and we start hiring people, we will have missed the cream of the crop," DeGrosky said.

The U.S. Forest Service said in an email that the agency was committed to hiring for temporary and permanent firefighting positions and would continue critical training "to the extent feasible."

The first session of an apprenticeship program for wildland firefighters went ahead this week, Forest Service spokeswoman Katie O'Connor said.

"The agency is assessing and prioritizing the activities we are able to maintain while in shutdown status. We are unable to speculate on specific impacts while the government shutdown is ongoing and ever-changing," O'Connor said in a statement.

Conservationists and fire managers say there are other concerns.

Clearing and thinning projects and planned burns on federal land that could lessen fire danger by weeding out flammable debris also are largely on hold in California, Oregon and elsewhere. Private contractors say they have received letters telling them to stop the work.

There's already a backlog of such projects in federal forests in Oregon and Northern California, said Michael Wheelock, president of Grayback, a private contractor in Grants Pass, Oregon.

Intentional fires can only be set in a narrow winter window before temperatures and humidity falls — and that is rapidly closing, Wheelock said.

"Every week that goes by, it's going to start increasing the impact," he said.

Joyce McLean, who lost her and her husband's home in Paradise last November, supports Trump's push for a border wall but worries what will happen if firefighters aren't prepared for next time.

"I hope there are no more forest fires," said McLean, 74. "I wouldn't wish that on nobody."

Seaside: City Council unanimously agreed to pursue annexation

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Water rates would also be different. "There are certain costs we can't predict one way or another," Rahl said.

Police service for nonemergencies would shift from the county sheriff's office to the Seaside Police Department.

In December, the city asked property owners how they would feel if the city would "go down this path," Rahl said.

Owners of 35 of the lots responded. Comments received ranged from, "I think this is a great idea for all involved!" to, "I'm not interested in this at all." Others sought more information.

"Ultimately, from what we've heard so far, there's overwhelming support," Rahl said. "More than 70 percent have said they'd be in favor of this."

The City Council unanimously agreed to pursue annexation.

"It's been a goal since I've been on the council," City Councilor Steve Wright said. "I think it's the right thing to do, to see the unification of the entire area."

Three public hearings on the annexation are scheduled for the council's meetings on Jan. 28, Feb. 11 and Feb. 25.

Jellyfish: Moon jellyfish do not sting most people

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— or by-the-wind sailors that float on the water's surface and are propelled across the ocean thanks to a triangular sail — blow onto the beach and carpet the sand. They bleach white in the sun, send up a briny stink and are munched upon by foolhardy dogs.

In recent years, the North Coast has hosted unexpected creatures like pyrosomes. The little-studied rubbery, tube-shaped, semitranslucent colonies showed up en masse on beaches across Oregon, and especially around Cannon Beach and Ecola State Park, in 2017. More common in warmer waters, pyrosomes confounded researchers and clogged up commercial fishing gear.

Oregon researchers continue to study the role of jellyfish in marine food webs and their potential impact on coastal fishing.

Jellyfish may drift gracefully and dreamily when in water, but on land they are gelatinous blobs sometimes spiked with intricate colors. They are always a fascinating find for beachgoers and tempting to poke or even pick up.

The Haystack Rock Awareness Program noted that moon jellyfish do not sting most people, but jellies like the Pacific sea nettle do wash up and can still sting even after the animal is dead.

"So that's why we recommend not handling jellies unless you're 1,000% sure what it is," the organization wrote.



Jellyfish on the sand near Haystack Rock in Cannon Beach.

Colin Murphey/The Daily Astorian