

# Lawmakers want more resources for Oregon fire season

Analysis suggests above-average risk

By AUBREY WIEBER  
Oregon Capital Bureau

SALEM — Saturday marked the official start of Oregon's wildfire season, but without new resources, the state is only incrementally more prepared to combat fire this summer than in past years.

Over consecutive summers, fire ripped through iconic landscapes, endangered communities and choked towns with blankets of smoke. The state has already seen more than 1,000 acres burn this year.

In a winter where priorities abound, wildfire preparedness has not come out a winner.

"In this biennium, we need a lifeline for our communities," said state Rep. Pam Marsh, R-Ashland. Marsh's district was ablaze through much of the summer, with fire coming dangerously close to structures.

In addition to putting the community in danger, wildfires had massive economic impacts. The famous Oregon Shakespeare Festival had to cancel events, costing an estimated \$2 million.

Firefighters checked the wildfires, Marsh said, but the scorched town of Paradise, California, is a reminder that Ashland may not always be so lucky.

Marsh said that's why Gov. Kate Brown's proposed budget "set off" her constituents. It included resources to staff a wildfire council, which Brown created through executive action this winter, but that council won't have any impact until the fall at



Oregon Department of Forestry

Some state lawmakers want more resources to fight fires.

the earliest. Then, funding would still need to be acquired to carry out recommendations.

Brown proposed no additional funding to bolster the state's response to this summer's fires.

"It didn't have any immediate relief for the community," Marsh said. "What it had was a wildfire council. People were upset that there seemed to be long-term thinking but nothing to provide something for this season."

Despite a strong snowpack, a state analysis predicts another above-average fire season. It's what's referred to as "the new normal."

That's why Marsh is working to get \$6.8 million for wildfire mitigation and suppression before the 2019 legislative session ends. The package would give the

Oregon Department of Forestry more resources to fight fires, help communities implement smoke shelters to shield vulnerable people when heavy smoke billows into town and provide more resources to the front lines to stop fires from growing.

The plan is endorsed by several lawmakers, including Rep. Tiffany Mitchell, D-Astoria, and Rep. Brad Witt, D-Clatskanie.

It's a stopgap measure, Marsh said, but a much-needed one. Marsh supports Brown's wildfire council, which she hopes will push the state to a more proactive approach that includes better land management, prescribed burns and more resources.

"We are coming into this session having just experienced the two most expensive fire seasons in our state's history," Marsh said.

Last summer's season cost \$514 million.

Marsh is hoping to get the money in June through agency budgets rather than a bill.

## Signals from Brown

She has wide support, but she's lacking an endorsement from Brown. The governor has signaled to lawmakers that she wants the council to come up with recommendations first, then get money.

It's what Rep. Paul Evans, D-Monmouth, the chairman of the House Veterans and Emergency Preparedness Committee, called a "measure twice, cut once," approach.

Evans is also pushing a proposal. He introduced HB 3439, which seeks to simplify the state disaster response process. It would also make it easier to make

an emergency declaration. Evans wants dedicated personnel assigned to vulnerable fire areas so they can strike as soon as the sparks do.

"We made decisions through land use, and quite frankly market economics, that allowed for people to build in areas where there are great views," Evans said. "Unfortunately, places where there's a great view are also places fire wants to go to most."

At Brown's request, Evans isn't pursuing his legislation, but intends to bring the concept up next session.

"There were a lot of other issues that were on her table, and she wanted to give this appropriate time and study," Evans said. "It was a proposal that was new to her."

When asked about where her priorities lie, Brown said

the state is more prepared going into this season than last. She said the state is better aligned with the federal firefighting resources. Oregon will have access to new infrared technology to see through thick smoke.

But Brown said she wants to see more thinning and prescriptive burns on federal land, steps she can't directly act on.

"We are going to continue to advocate — I am going to continue to work with my governors, Republican and Democrat in the West — to continue to push for more resources on the local level," Brown said.

## Long-term changes

Brown's natural resources policy advisor, Jason Miner, said there are two National Guard battalions in Oregon trained for the season with a third coming. The Department of Forestry is training 600 seasonal firefighters, and has 230 more on the way.

Miner said the wildfire council would pursue long-term changes, as well. Marsh and Evans say constituents are uneasy after watching the state burn year after year.

"I don't want to get in the way of what the governor is trying to do with her council," Evans said. "That said, I'm very committed to reorganizing, in a rational way, our entire emergency management delivery system. What we have right now made sense 20 years ago. It doesn't make sense for tomorrow, and it really warrants our attention."

The Oregon Capital Bureau is a collaboration between EO Media Group, Pamplin Media Group and Salem Reporter.

## EO Media Group to purchase La Grande, Baker City papers

Company owns The Astorian

East Oregonian

SALEM — EO Media Group's presence in Oregon is set to get even stronger.

Pending court approval, the company will be adding two more newspapers to the fold with the expected additions of the La Grande Observer and the Baker City Herald, Heidi Wright, chief operating officer of EO Media Group, announced on Tuesday.

"We're excited to welcome the La Grande Observer and Baker City Herald into the EO Media Group family," Wright said. "Our family-held company has deep roots in Eastern Oregon since 1908."

The reported purchase price was \$775,000 for the two papers. Fourth-generation EO Media Group owner Kathryn Brown, of Pendleton, said she is excited about the purchase.

"My cousins and I are committed to keeping local journalism alive in the rural communities we serve," she said. "We look forward to providing credible and relevant news to Union and Baker counties for many years to come."

Wright said that if all



EO Media Group, the owner of The Astorian, has purchased two papers in Eastern Oregon.

goes well, the sale will be completed July 1.

Western Communications Inc. owns the two Eastern Oregon newspapers, along with the Bend Bulletin and a few other publications in Oregon and California. The corporation filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection in January. Lawyers for Western Communications told the bankruptcy court the plan was to sell property and buildings, according to court records, and in a hearing last week said all the newspapers had offers.

"A few weeks ago, the (EOMG) put in a bid to take over ownership of the papers in La Grande and Baker City," Wright said. "These towns are in close proxim-

ity to the company's other publications on the east side of Oregon, which makes this a great opportunity to strengthen news coverage for all of Eastern Oregon."

The bankruptcy court has the final say in accepting EOMG's offer. Wright said the expectation is the court is going to give the approval.

Western Communications previously filed for Chapter 11 protection in August 2011, following a three-year dispute with the Bank of America, the company's largest creditor at the

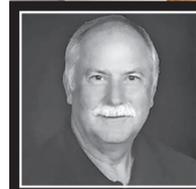
time. The company emerged from Chapter 11 protection in April 2012.

Earlier this year, the motor failed on the 53-year-old press that had long printed the La Grande Observer and the Baker City Herald. Since then, the two newspapers have been printed on the East Oregonian's press in Pendleton.

EO Media Group also owns The Astorian and the Seaside Signal, along with the Chinook Observer in Washington state.

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