

IN BRIEF

Knappa man arrested for shooting

Authorities are investigating a shooting Saturday in Knappa that left one person injured. Sheriff deputies were called to the scene at 2:13 a.m. and arrested Cody S. Roger, 31, of Knappa, for assault in the second degree, unlawful use of a weapon, felon in possession of a firearm, recklessly endangering and menacing. A 34 year-old man was taken to Columbia Memorial Hospital in Astoria with injuries.

Sheriff’s office warns of overdose risk from potent supply of heroin

The Clatsop County Sheriff’s Office said Monday that multiple overdoses have been associated with an especially potent supply of heroin that has been distributed on the North Coast. The sheriff’s office urges anyone who witnesses or experiences a drug overdose to call 911 for emergency medical intervention.

County to distribute free face masks

Clatsop County will distribute more free face masks to the public to help against the coronavirus. Drive-thru events will be held between 4 and 7 p.m. on Thursday at Elsie-Vinemaple Fire Station, Seaside Fire Station and the Astoria Aquatic Center. People can also pick up masks from 5 to 8 p.m. on Friday at Cannon Beach Elementary School. People are asked to stay in their cars during the drive-thru event, hold up fingers to show the number of masks needed and then roll down the window to receive the bag of masks.

State forest plan up for discussion

The public will have a chance to comment on a draft plan for how the state plans to manage forests on the west side of Oregon, including the Clatsop and Tillamook state forests. The Oregon Department of Forestry is hosting a webinar on the Western Oregon State Forest Management Plan on Wednesday beginning at 1 p.m. The state expects an informal discussion to follow from 3:30 to 4:30 p.m. The habitat conservation plan aims to balance economic, social and environmental benefits of more than 600,000 acres of state forestland. People interested in attending the webinar must RSVP. More information can be found at www.oregon.gov/ODF/AboutODF/Pages/HCP-initiative.aspx

Baxter steps down as Columbia Memorial medical officer

Dr. Kevin Baxter, Columbia Memorial Hospital’s chief medical officer, has stepped down from the position. Baxter could not be reached for comment. The hospital declined to comment on why he left. Baxter, who founded Baxter Family Medicine in 2003, joined the hospital as a primary caregiver in 2015. He was named chief medical officer in January. “The (chief medical officer) plays an important role at CMH,” said Nancee Long, a spokeswoman for the hospital. “The search for a replacement will begin immediately.” — *The Astorian*

DEATH

Sept. 11, 2020

MEANEY, Edward James, 72, of Gearhart and Portland, died in Seaside. Caldwell’s Luce-Layton Mortuary of Astoria is in charge of the arrangements.

MEMORIAL

Saturday, Sept. 19

PALMBERG, David Earl — Celebration of life from 3 to 5 p.m., Astoria Golf & Country Club, 33445 Sunset Beach Road in Warrenton.

PUBLIC MEETINGS

TUESDAY

Union Health District Board, 8 a.m., Seaside Civic and Convention Center, Riverside Room.
Port of Astoria, 4 p.m., workshop, (electronic meeting).
Sunset Empire Park and Recreation District Board of Directors, 5:15 p.m., 1225 Avenue A, Seaside.
Astoria Historic Landmarks Commission, 5:15 p.m., City Hall, 1095 Duane St.
Seaside Planning Commission, 6 p.m., work session, City Hall, 989 Broadway.
Seaside School District, 6 p.m., (electronic meeting).
Shoreline Sanitary District Board, 7 p.m., Gearhart Hertig Station, 33496 West Lake Lane, Warrenton.

WEDNESDAY

Seaside Tourism Advisory Committee, 3 p.m., City Hall, 989 Broadway.
Seaside Tree Board, 4 p.m., City Hall, 989 Broadway.
Sunset Empire Park and Recreation District Board, 4 p.m., workshop, 1225 Avenue A, Seaside.

THURSDAY

Astoria City Council, 1 p.m., work session, City Hall, 1095 Duane St.
Seaside Transportation Advisory Commission, 6 p.m., City Hall, 989 Broadway.

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The Riverside fire burns in the Mount Hood National Forest, seen from La Dee Flats near the Clackamas River.

Historic wildfires unusual but not unprecedented

By TED SICKINGER
The Oregonian

The most common word being used to describe Oregon’s ongoing wildfire cataclysm is “unprecedented.” That’s certainly the case in modern recorded history when it comes to the sheer number of conflagrations and megafires that erupted starting Labor Day. A powerful windstorm caused fires to race through Oregon’s typically more fire-resistant forests on the west side of the Cascades for 72 hours.

When the damage is eventually tallied, the number of structures lost and evacuees will dwarf any previous total in the history of the state by orders of magnitude. The number of acres burned over just a week is likely to surpass annual statewide totals from even the largest fire seasons of the past. And more tragically, the loss of life, as Gov. Kate Brown warned last week, may be the largest ever experienced.

Yet while last week’s hell-fire was unusual, it was not, in fact, unprecedented. The “east wind event” that conspired with existing drought conditions to blow up two low-level fires and other human-caused ignitions on Labor Day is rare but hardly unique, academics and fire experts say. The winds were the main culprit in making the catastrophic infernos as fast moving as they were.

Experts say those east winds are Oregon’s version of the dry, downslope Santa Ana winds that stoke big fires in California. They have long blamed them for some of the largest westside fires in modern Oregon history and say similar wind-driven megafires have shaped the entire ecosystem west of the Cascades over millennia.

Neither the wind event nor the fires were unpredictable. The windstorm and resulting fire danger were forecast days in advance, but with little appreciable effect.

Moreover, scientists have long pointed to the inverse relationship between fire frequency and severity on the west side — that is, fewer fires can mean more intense fires — and they warn that fire is moving west to the overgrown forests and population centers of the Willamette Valley and southwest Oregon in an age of global warming.

That recognition, however, has spurred little movement beyond the established battle lines that have characterized forestry debate in Oregon for decades. The prospect of widespread forest treatments in the complex ecosystems of the west side — establishing fire breaks and using thinning and prescribed burns to reduce the fuels that choke forest floors — is environmentally unthinkable to some, and impractical to



Rob Schumacher/Statesman Journal

Flames from the Beachie Creek fire destroyed the Oregon Department of Forestry North Cascade District Office in Lyons.

others.

That leaves Oregon facing the paradox of relying on full fire suppression. But leaping on every fire and putting it out immediately is the practice that helped create the problem in the first place.

Alternatively, Oregon can turn to other, easier measures. It could adopt policies requiring more frequent pre-emptive blackouts by utilities so that downed power lines do not spark fires. Or the state could force updated building codes, regulations on defensible space near structures, and incorporate wildfire risk in land-use planning and zoning.

But those policies won’t stop big fires and are contentious, too. And in a legislative session shortened by a Republican walkout over climate change legislation, none of them gained ground. Bills to expand forest treatments across the state, as well as legislation to modernize and bolster the Oregon Department of Forestry’s ability to put down wildfires quickly, went nowhere.

‘WE’RE SOBERED RIGHT NOW. BUT IN THE PAST WE’VE BEEN SOBERED AND I HAVEN’T SEEN US COME TOGETHER AROUND THE CAUSES WE HAVE TO ADDRESS.’

State Sen. Jeff Golden, D-Ashland, who chaired the Legislature’s Committee on Wildfire Preparedness and whose district encompasses some of the most catastrophically impacted communities in the state

It’s possible that the sheer scale of last week’s tragedy will reframe and accelerate the debate. But if so, the problems will compete with the coronavirus for a strapped state budget, with poor prospects for major new investments.

“We’re sobered right now,” said state Sen. Jeff Golden, D-Ashland, who chaired the Legislature’s Committee on Wildfire Preparedness and whose district encompasses some of the most catastrophically impacted communities in the state. “But in the past we’ve been sobered and I haven’t seen us come together around the causes we have to address.”

describing the close relationship between occurrences of severe easterly winds and large forest fires in northwest Oregon and southwest Washington.

“The history of forest conflagrations in the Northwest is, for the most part, a history of the simultaneous occurrence of small fires and severe east winds,” he wrote, going on to describe the exact weather pattern that took place on Labor Day. “Under these conditions fires run wild and fire-control men must be prepared for the worst.”

Daniel Donato, a natural resource scientist at Washington Department of Natural Resources, is currently studying the relationship between

east wind events and large fires. He says there’s ample precedent and it’s fair to say it’s characteristic of the landscape west of the Cascades.

He likens it to the recent awakening around the likelihood of a Cascadia Subduction Zone earthquake. “We get lulled into this sense that it doesn’t happen here. It’s a California problem. But it does happen here, with low frequency,” he said.

Dan Gavin is a geographer at the University of Oregon who studies the history and pattern of fires in wet forest types west of the Cascade Range. He says the best evidence of pre-European, west-side megafires comes from core samples of remaining old-growth trees in protected areas and tree-ring studies in stumps from 1980s clearcuts. Coupled with sediment studies, they show that big fires have been a constant presence on the landscape for at least 11,000 years, leaving uniformly aged stands of Douglas fir across western Oregon and Washington at intervals of 100 to 250 years.

In the hierarchy of factors that dictate how fast and far a fire will burn — fuels, topography and weather — wind speed and direction are key drivers. And since those fires have no obvious ignition source, he says, they were likely either “lightning hold-overs” or fires set by indigenous tribes along hunting routes that smoldered for days to weeks before a hot and persistent east wind kicked up, bellowing the fires and preventing the typical nighttime increase in relative humidity that comes with normal westerly marine flows.

That’s what happened on Labor Day. Two fires — Beachie Creek and Lionshead — had been burning for weeks in steep terrain. By late August, Beachie Creek was small enough that forestry officials reassigned scarce resources to other, higher-priority fires. However, high winds on the evening of Labor Day and the following morning pushed down drainages from the crest of the Cascades, gaining temperature as they drove toward the valley

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