

# Canyon Creek slips in nation's top fire priorities

By **GEORGE PLAVERN**  
East Oregonian



Firefighters work to contain the Canyon Creek Complex fire, Tuesday near John Day. Fire managers overwhelmed by massive wildfires blazing across the West are looking for help wherever they can find it and have called in 200 active-duty military troops to fight the flames.

## Crews brace for tough weather

Conditions appeared ripe Thursday for more explosive growth on the Canyon Creek Complex wildfire south of John Day, as firefighters dug in their heels to protect the tiny mountain town of Seneca — just five miles away from the fire lines.

A red flag warning went into effect for Thursday afternoon through Friday evening for the area, with wind gusts as high as 25-30 mph blowing out of the northwest.

Both days are expected to register a level 5 on the Haines Index, a meteorology tool used to gauge dry, unstable air in the atmosphere that could lead to erratic fire behavior. Level 5 indicates a medium potential for trouble.

Amanda Graning, incident meteorologist with the Canyon Creek Complex, said the forecast basically translates to extreme fire weather.

"Anytime you have strong, gusty winds, you'll be increasing the danger and potential for fire growth," Graning said.

The Canyon Creek Complex grew Wednesday night to 53,876 acres and 10 percent contained, with fire lines holding on the northwest flank. Crews will send additional resources to the fire's southern edge where they expect to see the most action, unless the winds suddenly change direction.

"You definitely still have a threat all around," Graning said. "Terrains could be variable. Especially in the valleys, you could have local effects."

country, and remains under a Preparedness Level 5 for wildfires, which is the highest level issued.

"We help prioritize and mobilize resources to (incidents) based on the need," said Christine Cozakos, spokeswoman with the Forest Service stationed at

the National Interagency Fire Center. "It's not random. There is some strategy in placing those fires in the order they are in."

Fire activity in the Northwest continues to escalate, Cozakos said, which has led to the current situation. But the situation is fluid and

reviewed daily.

"It's kind of a constant moving around of resources," she said.

Within the Northwest region, there is another inter-agency coordination center based in Portland that evaluates specific fires that are in particular need of help. As conditions change on a dime and scatter fires off in new directions, the main criteria boil down to public safety, followed by protecting homes and protecting other infrastructure, such as bridges and power lines.

Koshare Eagle, spokeswoman with the Northwest Interagency Coordination Center, said incident commanders send in a worksheet every day that details risks to firefighter safety, public safety and homes, among other resources. A second multi-agency team — this one made up of representatives from each agency that participates in fighting wildfires across Oregon and Washington — reviews the information and issues a bulletin of priorities.

The Canyon Creek Complex, which continues to threaten more than 700 structures, is now third on the list. But that doesn't mean it couldn't change quickly, Eagle said.

"It really is going to depend on fire activity on that fire, relative to fire activity and communities threatened on other fires in the area," she said.

Nor does it mean, just because the Okanogan Complex tops the list, it is first in line to receive everything. Cozakos said the center does its best to fill all orders for resources, though they are about as stretched as they can get.

Incident priorities for the Northwest posted daily online at [www.gacc.nifc.gov/nwcc/](http://www.gacc.nifc.gov/nwcc/)

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# State can provide little in the way of aid to fire victims

By **MATEUSZ PERKOWSKI**  
Capital Bureau

SALEM — Although Oregon Gov. Kate Brown said that the state will do everything it can to make sure victims of the Canyon Creek Complex fire have the tools, resources and knowledge they need to rebuild, the state can provide little in the way of direct aid.

Its only aid program for fire victims — the wildfire damage housing relief program — has strict income restrictions that will exclude all but the poorest of applicants.

Earlier this year, state lawmakers passed a bill that dedicated \$50,000 in financial assistance to very low-income residents who lose their primary residences to wildfire, with claims limited to \$5,000 per household.

To qualify for the program, a household's income must be 25 percent below the federal poverty level. For example, a household of four would have to earn \$18,188 or less per year to be eligible.

Organizations that serve needy Oregonians in the fire area expect that the criteria will likely prevent some homeowners from getting help from the program.

"There definitely are people within that income bracket, but there are more people that need help also," said Margaret Davidson, executive director of Community Connection of Northeast Oregon, an agency that serves Grant County.

When the organization learned of the program, "We thought, 'This is going to exclude a lot of people,'" she said.

The \$50,000 allocated to the program may not be sufficient if many homes are lost to wildfires in one year, Davidson said.

It is possible for Oregon Housing and Community Services, which administers the program, to shift money from other parts of its budget into the wildfire relief fund if necessary, said Rem Nivens, assistant director of public affairs for the agency.

As of Aug. 20, nobody affected by the Canyon Creek Complex fire has applied for assistance, he

said.

The program is aimed at closing the financial gap that low-income residents face when they suddenly need to relocate after a fire, said Scott Cooper, executive director of NeighborImpact, a non-profit that serves Central Oregon.

"It's \$5,000 max, so it's not going to rebuild your house. But at least it can help you figure out the next steps of your life after you've lost everything," he said.

The program will help those who would have "fallen through the cracks otherwise," Cooper said. "You're talking about people who could not afford to pay an insurance premium."

Rep. Mike McLane, R-Powell Butte, originally wanted to devote \$200,000 to the wildfire damage housing relief program but scaled back the amount after discussions with legislative leaders, said Kara Walker, his spokesperson.

The legislature's Emergency Board — which makes emergency funding decisions — may decide to increase the overall amount and ease the income requirements, she said. McLane is a member of the board, which meets next month.

It's also possible that assistance funding could be obtained through the Federal Emergency Management Agency if the wildfire is declared a federal disaster, said Cooper of NeighborImpact.

However, that's unlikely to happen unless an event displaces large numbers of people, Cooper said. "Wildfires don't usually rise to that level."

Melissa Navas, spokesperson for Brown, said state agencies will partner with institutions such as the American Red Cross to help residents who've lost homes.

"The governor is utilizing existing staff and structures within her office, such as Regional Solutions and Constituent Services, to foster collaboration between state agencies and local governments," Navas said in an email. "This will connect those affected by fires with resources and develop strategies to assist them."

# FIRE: Prairie City population little more than 900

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threatening homes. Residents on Ricco Ranch, Standard Creek and Dixie Creek were told to evacuate immediately, and Dixie Butte was put on a Level 2 evacuation notice, meaning they should prepare to flee at a moment's notice.

A spokeswoman with the Oregon Department of Forestry said she did not know exactly how many crews were diverted from Canyon Creek to Jerry's Draw, but did say the department sent some engines to help with initial attack.

Officials are investigating the cause of the fire, which they said wasn't started by lightning.

Prairie City is a town with a population a little more than 900 people. On Thursday, residents could be found loading their cars and waiting on their front porches for the latest evacuation updates.

Heidi Cearns said she heard from a neighbor her street was among those under a Level 2 evacuation. She rounded up her most important documents and told her five kids, ages 3 to 13, to be ready if they got the call to leave.

"For the most part, there's not much you can do," Cearns said. "It's just a waiting game."

Amanda Graning, incident meteorologist on the Canyon Creek Complex, said how winds will affect both fires is the "big money question."

Graning said at a community meeting Thursday afternoon at Grant Union High School that strong winds would blow west by northwest Friday, with gusts 30 to 35 mph. By Friday evening, however, they are expected to shift to the east. On Saturday, gusts are expected to ease to 10 mph.

Although the Canyon Creek Complex fire has grown daily by 3,000 to 5,000 acres, Wildfire Incident Commander Beth Lund

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— Heidi Cearns, evacuated Prairie resident

said the fire is 10 percent contained along the northwest line of the fire, close to Canyon City and John Day. Lund said it was possible that, by Friday morning, more would be contained.

"There is a lot of fire, but it is not building toward communities or homes," Lund said. "Fall Mountain was a concern. Vance Creek gave us troubles, but it all looks pretty good now."

The fire's south end is "starting to look better," although it ran up to the ridge lines behind Seneca Wednesday. Seneca is still under an evacuation Level 1 alert, meaning that residents are put on notice that they may eventually have to evacuate.

On Thursday, crews were able to hang onto the southwest corner, "and that's a big deal," Lund said. However, she expressed concern about the fire's rapid entry into a previously burned area called

Parrish Cabin and along Dog Creek and Pine Creek ridges.

Also being watched carefully is a youth camp south of the Canyon Creek complex line near Logan Valley. Oregon State Fire Marshal Jim Walker, who is the structural firefighting incident commander, said engines were sent to that area to protect the camp, where there are 25 structures.

Power poles should be going up soon, said Lara Petclerc-Stokes, spokeswoman for the Oregon Trail Electric Co-op.

Power restoration is beginning at milepost 6 in Canyon City and at the J Bar L Ranch. Additional poles will be arriving Friday and Saturday, she said.

Although there was a temporary loss of power on Fall Mountain Wednesday when OTEC had to de-energize the line, the power has been restored, Petclerc-Stokes said. Power is also back on Miller Mountain, she added.

Rumors of potential rolling blackouts are not true, Stokes said.

U.S. Highway 395 is expected to be open beginning Saturday morning, said Paul Woodward, district manager for the Oregon Department of Transporta-

tion. A pilot car will lead vehicles on the highway every hour. The opening will occur during daylight hours only for a while until signs are replaced, guardrails are repaired and hazards are removed, he said.



## Public Meeting in Milton-Freewater - Aug. 24

The Oregon Department of Transportation (ODOT) will host a Public Open House Meeting **August 24** to provide information and hear comments regarding the **Birch Creek Road Bridge Replacement Project**. The purpose of the meeting is to share project plans with the community, provide a project status update and make key project staff available for questions from interested parties. The meeting will be held **6 – 7:30 p.m.** at the **Milton-Freewater Public Library**. All interested parties are encouraged to attend.

The goal of the project is to replace the Umatilla County, single lane Walla Walla River bridge located along Birch Creek Road north of Milton-Freewater. This bridge, built in 1956, is functionally and structurally obsolete. The roadway has 90 degree curves leading into one end of the bridge which has caused some impacts to the structure. The abutments are also experiencing some scour. This has resulted in the load rating being lowered to 3 tons.

The new bridge will be built adjacent to the existing structure on a better alignment to improve safety. The new 34-foot-wide, 200-foot-long bridge will accommodate two-lane traffic. The existing bridge will remain in place during construction to minimize impacts to local road users. The project is scheduled to bid April 2016 with construction starting June 2016.

The open house will include representatives of Umatilla County and the ODOT Bridge design, Environmental and Right of Way staff, who will be available to present information on the project and answer questions.

### Historical significance of Birch Creek Road Bridge

The existing Walla Walla River, Birch Creek Road Bridge (#59C483) is a 110-foot long Pratt pony truss built in 1956 as part of a collection of welded steel bridges commissioned by Umatilla County in the 1950s and 1960s. The truss is the earliest remaining example of a fully welded steel truss in the state of Oregon. The bridge was evaluated by ODOT and reviewed by the Oregon State Historic Preservation Officer, and has been determined to be potentially eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places due to its structure type and construction technique. Because the bridge is a historic resource, removing it through the proposed project, without repurposing it, would result in an adverse effect finding per Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act and will trigger Section 4(f) of the Federal Transportation Act, which will require mitigation for the adverse impact. The history of the bridge will be described in greater detail at the open house, and ODOT will be seeking public comment on potential impacts and mitigation opportunities.

Questions about the project or the Open House Meeting can be directed to Ken Patterson, ODOT Project Leader at (541) 963-1365 or email [Kenneth.e.patterson@odot.state.or.us](mailto:Kenneth.e.patterson@odot.state.or.us)



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