

Wildfire plan biggest land policy change in decades

‘Science-based’ approach designed to protect sagebrush steppe

By KEITH RIDLER
Associated Press

BOISE, Idaho — A year after Interior Secretary Sally Jewell shifted the national approach to fighting wildfires across a wide swath of sagebrush country in the West, her strategy is turning out to be one of the most significant federal land policy changes in some 80 years, public land experts, outdoor enthusiasts and scientists say.

The five-page order she issued last January directed federal resources for the first time to fight massive blazes in open sagebrush steppe habitat that supports cattle ranching, recreation and some 350 species of wildlife, including the imperiled sage grouse.

“It is one of the most imperiled

ecosystems in the United States,” said Janice Schneider, the Interior Department’s assistant secretary for Land and Minerals Management.

Firefighting officials say Jewell’s order led more of the nation’s firefighting resources to respond to blazes in Great Basin sagebrush steppe last year, when the U.S. experienced one of its worst wildfire seasons, with nearly 16,000 square miles burned. Experts say her strategy helped extinguish several smaller fires, though one giant blaze scorched sagebrush steppe in portions of Idaho and Oregon.

Many ranchers have embraced the order despite wariness and sometimes anger with federal oversight, displayed in the armed occupation of a federal wildlife preserve in Oregon. Ranchers backing Jewell’s order have formed Rangeland Fire

Protections Associations, teaming up with federal firefighters to stop small fires from exploding and charring forage needed by cattle.

“We know that a healthy ecosystem and healthy economy is inextricably linked,” said Schneider, who helped organize the collaboration between federal and state officials, scientists and ranchers to carry out the order.

It calls for a “science-based” approach to safeguard greater sage grouse while contending with fires that have been especially destructive in the Great Basin region of Idaho, Utah, Nevada, Oregon and California. The bird did not receive federal protections under the Endangered Species Act amid efforts to save it.

Many fire rehabilitation efforts have failed in previous decades

because federal officials planted the wrong species of the similar-looking sagebrush. Jewell’s plan aims to solve that problem by using local seeds or seeds from the correct species found at similar elevations and growing conditions.

The order led to the biggest change for sagebrush steppe since the Taylor Grazing Act of the 1930s, which sought to stop overgrazing on public lands, said U.S. Geological Survey research ecologist Matt Germino, who specializes in sagebrush ecosystems.

“The initiatives that are underway — preserving the good habitat and restoring the bad habitat — that’s unprecedented,” he said.

One large sagebrush fire formed in southwestern Idaho and eastern Oregon last summer, consuming some 436 square miles, fueled mainly by invasive cheatgrass. Jewell’s order includes plans to fight cheatgrass and restoration

work for burned sagebrush areas, and \$67 million is being spent to rehabilitate the burned area.

“You can see what they’re doing on the Soda Fire right now and the commitment of resources in order to get the job done,” said Idaho Gov. C.L. “Butch” Otter, a Republican who often bashes federal decision makers but supports Jewell’s order.

Heading into last year’s wildfire season, it wasn’t clear how an order from the Interior Department would play out with the U.S. Forest Service, which is within a different department and responsible for protecting national forests. It also has the most firefighters and contracts all the large air tankers.

But “they were a partner all the way,” said Ron Dunton, assistant director of the Office of Fire and Aviation with Interior’s Bureau of Land Management, the agency that oversees most of the nation’s sagebrush country.



AP Photo/Elaine Thompson

Eric Gullickson, front left, an avalanche instructor with the Northwest Avalanche Center, leads teenagers on an avalanche awareness field trip at Mount Baker, Wash.

Avalanche experts target safety message at younger crowd

By PHUONG LE
Associated Press

MOUNT BAKER, Wash. — Walker Smith has been skiing in-bounds at resorts since he was young, but lately the Seattle teen has become more interested “in getting tracks where no one else has really gone.”

He knows backcountry travel comes with avalanche risks, he said. So under a brilliant blue sky one Saturday, he and a dozen teens hiked out into the snowy landscape outside the boundaries of Mount Baker ski resort to learn how to identify avalanche terrain and spot warning signs.

“It’s not 100 percent safe in the backcountry so you have to know about all the dangers,” said Smith, 17, a member of the Mountaineers Adventure Club, a Seattle-based teen program that partnered with Northwest Avalanche Center to organize the avalanche awareness field trip.

As more young adults head out of bounds to ski, snowboard or hike in the winter, experts are targeting their message about avalanche safety to an even younger audience. They’re trying to

reach kids early — in middle or high school, sometimes even in elementary school — to build their knowledge about snow and avalanches.

“They’re young, they’re impressionable. They don’t have a pattern of bad behavior yet. By spending more time on youth, we feel like we can make a difference in changing behavior,” said Scott Schell, program director of the Northwest Avalanche Center, a Seattle-based non-profit and federal government partnership.

The center, which issues weather forecasts and avalanche warnings, also offers about 200 free or low-cost education classes each winter to church groups, schools, shops and other organizations. About one-third are now geared toward teens or young adults.

“We feel that working with younger people is the way to affect behavior down the line,” since they’re likely to be lifelong users of the outdoors, Schell said. “We tell them that most of the time it’s safe and sometimes it’s not. Learning when it’s safe and when it’s dangerous is one of the key takeaways.”

At least 14 people have been killed in slides so far this

season; the three most recent deaths happened Sunday in Washington and Wyoming. This month has been the deadliest January for slides in nearly 20 years, according to the Colorado Avalanche Information Center, the central archive for avalanche accidents in the country. On an average, 27 people die in avalanches across the U.S. each year. The center doesn’t track age of all fatalities, but avalanche deaths typically involve men between 20 and 45, the center said.

After a 2003 avalanche killed three young men in Utah, the Utah Avalanche Center created a free avalanche awareness program for middle and high school students. The hour-long program includes a high-energy video that helps them understand how to have fun in the mountains while avoiding avalanches.

Better gear, more media coverage and rising lift tickets at resorts have made the backcountry more accessible and appealing to a wider range of people.

A lot of the kids may not go into the backcountry, but the idea is that “when someone talks them into getting into the backcountry 15 years

from now, they’ll have this knowledge that they’ve stored away,” said Paul Diegel, executive director of the Utah Avalanche Center.

More than 200,000 students in Utah have been exposed to the “Know Before You Go” program over the last decade. And the program has spread to other states.

In Jackson, Wyoming, the American Avalanche Institute, which targeted high schoolers, has expanded its program to middle schools as well. It runs several free avalanche programs for kids 10 to 18, which is funding by the Steve Romeo Memorial Fund.

Lessons are shorter with more hands-on activities; the goal is repetition and learning progresses through the age groups. “We try and send our younger, hipper instructors who are easier to relate to,” said Sarah Carpenter, co-owner and teacher at the American Avalanche Institute.

The message to younger age groups is to stay in bounds and avoid the backcountry, Carpenter said. But with older teens, “our goal is not to preach abstinence. As the kids get older, they’re going to go into the backcountry.”

BRIEFLY

Lawsuit against fantasy sports sites

PORTLAND (AP) — An Oregon resident has filed a class-action lawsuit against two daily fantasy sports sites, claiming the businesses are operating illegal online sports betting.

The Oregonian reports that Polk County resident Brandon Peck filed the suit in federal court in Portland Monday. He filed it on behalf of himself and more than 100 Oregon players who lost money in the past three years while placing bets through DraftKings and FanDuel.

The lawsuit asks the court to halt the sites’ operations and have each business pay players back double the amount they lost.

More than 30 class-action suits against daily fantasy sports websites have been filed in more than 10 states.

The companies have argued that fantasy sports aren’t gambling but a game of skill. That exempts them from a federal law prohibiting online gambling.

Family plans memorial for Marine

SALEM (AP) — An Oregon family has scheduled a memorial service for a Marine who died in a helicopter crash in Hawaii.

The Statesman Journal reports that Lance Cpl. Ty Hart was one of 12 U.S. Marines who died when two helicopters crashed during training exercises in Hawaii on Jan. 14.

His family announced Monday that they will hold a memorial service for Hart on Saturday at Stayton High School where he graduated and was a student-athlete.

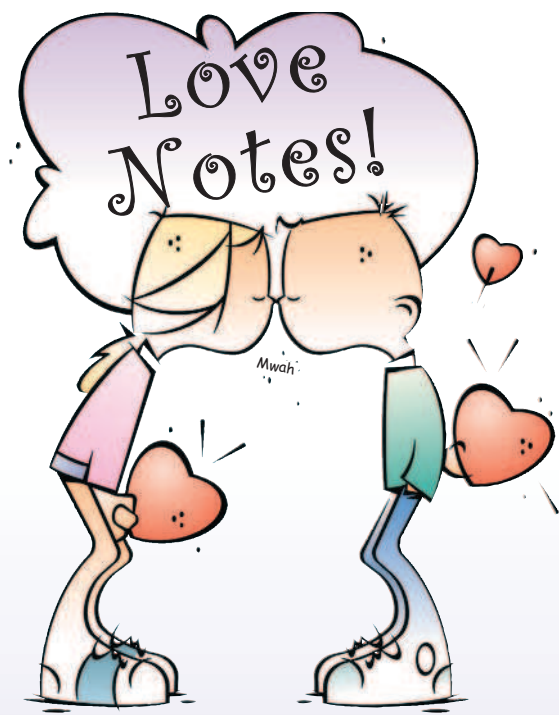
Gov. Kate Brown ordered all flags at public institutions to be flown at half-staff on the day of Hart’s memorial service. The public is invited to attend the service.

Minimum wage law to Supreme Court

SEATTLE (AP) — The International Franchise Association is appealing Seattle’s \$15 minimum wage law that it claims discriminates against franchise owners.

The Seattle Times reports the association said Monday it has asked the U.S. Supreme Court to review the case after losing an appeal before a federal court panel last fall.

The city’s minimum wage ordinance requires enterprises with more than 500 employees to implement the \$15 per hour wage faster than companies with fewer workers.



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Adversaries in anti-union measure unite against AG

By PARIS ACHEN
Capital Bureau

SALEM — Two adversaries in a ballot initiative to strip public sector unions of the power to collect fees from employees who opt out of union membership are united on one front: They’re unhappy with the Attorney General’s ballot title for the 2016 measure.

The initiative’s chief petitioner, Jill Gibson, a Portland-area attorney, and initiative opponents Oregon Education Association and SEUI Local 503 have petitioned the Oregon Supreme Court to review the title.

Gibson said the description that would appear on the ballot fails to disclose the two benefits of the measure.

Employees who opt out of the union would no longer have to pay fees. The union, in turn, would no longer be required

to represent non-members in collective bargaining. Instead, non-members would earn merit pay from their employer instead of receiving the pay and benefits outlined in the union’s employment agreement.

The description says a “yes” vote would prevent a public employer from “basing non-union employee compensation on union contract,” allow “compensation differences” and require union fees only if they “benefit from representation.”

A “no” vote would retain laws “allowing contracts that specify all bargaining unit public employees’ compensation, require non-member payments” and continue prohibition against compensation encouraging or discouraging union membership.

Union leaders argue that the description fails to communicate the fundamental

change the measure would make to collective bargaining in the state.

The title “fails to tell voters that the proposal requires different compensation and other employment terms for union and non-union members,” union leaders wrote in their petition.

The union leaders say that change would effectively allow discriminations by “setting employment terms for the purpose of encouraging or discouraging union membership.”

It’s unclear when the Oregon Supreme Court will decide the dispute. Gibson said she still has plenty of time to collect the some 88,000 signatures she needs to get the initiative on the ballot before the July 8 deadline.

The U.S. Supreme Court is expected to rule in June on a case argued earlier this month that also challenges

mandatory fees, as well as the way they’re collected.

The court heard oral arguments Jan. 11 in a case brought by a group of 10 California teachers who say the mandatory fees trample on free-speech rights of workers who oppose union causes.

Labor union officials refer to mandatory fees as “fair share” fees because the money pays for the cost of collective bargaining and pursuing grievances. While dues might cover the cost of some of the union’s political activities, “fair share” fees are restricted to paying for collective bargaining, grievances and other non-political services.

“The court could declare that employees can’t be forced to pay money to a union in which case part of my measure would be moot,” Gibson said.

Some states already have passed laws that prohibit mandatory union fees.