

## FIRE: Training begins June 13

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schedule.

"If this trend doesn't change, we'll start to have discussions (about entering fire season) this week, I'm sure," he said.

For now, the fire danger remains low. The National Interagency Fire Center in Boise issued a report that says large fires will be more likely in July and August, "but at this point there is no reason to believe that the risk of them is above normal."

The ODF Northeast Oregon District is responsible for protecting nearly 2 million acres of private forestland in mostly Umatilla, Union, Baker and Wallowa counties. Hessel said they work cooperatively with other agencies and neighboring jurisdictions, including the U.S. Forest Service.

Brian Goff, fire staff officer on the Umatilla National Forest, said they received several good storms at higher elevations in May that have kept things in fairly good shape. Lightning did spark one small wildfire on the North Fork John Day Ranger District about seven miles from Granite, but it was contained.

Even with an average fire season, Goff said that doesn't mean there won't be any fires during the summer.

"It dries out in July and August, and we will have fires," he said. "People being fire safe is just always very important."

Multiple agencies will send their seasonal firefighters to a week-long fire school beginning June 13 in La Grande for training. ODF will also contract two single-engine air tankers for the district, as well as a Type 2 helicopter that will be stationed in Pendleton.

Meanwhile, members of Congress have their sights set on changing the way the federal government pays for fighting increasingly large and costly

wildfires. For the fourth straight year, the House has passed a bill known as the Resilient Federal Forests Act, which would allow the Federal Emergency Management Agency to transfer disaster funding to the Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management when they have exhausted their firefighting budgets.

As it stands, the agencies are forced to take additional funding for fighting wildfires from other non-fire programs — a practice known as "fire-borrowing." The Resilient Federal Forests Act would also expedite thinning projects up to 15,000 acres, if they are the result of collaboration.

Rep. Greg Walden, R-Oregon, has been a vocal supporter of the bill.

"Our rural forested communities have waited long enough," Walden said in a recent testimony. "They have choked on smoke summer after summer long enough. They've seen their watersheds get destroyed by catastrophic fire. It's time to fix the problem."

On the Senate side, Oregon Democrat Ron Wyden, along with Lisa Murkowski, R-Alaska, Maria Cantwell, D-Washington and Mike Crapo, R-Idaho, recently released draft legislation that also targets fire-borrowing and accelerating forest restoration.

"This draft legislation is not an end-all solution to the growing problem of fire borrowing from prevention and restoration funds but it's a step in the right direction," Wyden said.

Representatives for both Walden and Wyden said any differences between the bills will be addressed in a conference committee in order to reach a middle ground.

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## CLOUT: Umatilla Electric Co-op is the top private spender in Oregon lobbying

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Ways and Means.

Kevin Mealy, a spokesman for the Oregon Nurses Association, said during this time period the group advocated for legislation that ultimately increased school nurse staffing and "improved staffing" at hospitals. "The nurses have always been patients' most important advocates, and nurses don't think that stops at the patient's bedside," Mealy said.

The private sector entity that spent the most on lobbying over the last nine years was Umatilla Electric Cooperative in Hermiston, at \$2.7 million. The cooperative spent a much smaller amount — approximately \$170,000 — on political donations since 2006, mostly to political action committees that contribute to individual state lawmakers' campaigns.

Steve Meyers, member services administrator for the cooperative, declined to cite any specific legislation or outcome the cooperative hoped to achieve through its lobbying and political spending, and the state does not require entities to report that information.

"Umatilla Electric has long advocated for the interests of our 10,000 members and the surrounding region, on issues that include energy, salmon restoration, water conservation and rural economic development," Meyers wrote in an email. "UEC will continue to advocate for our members and constituents on these important issues."

Government agencies and associations were also among the top spenders on lobbying

**"Lobbyists are only as effective as the campaign contributions they can deliver."**

— Dan Meek, co-chair of Independent Party of Oregon

in recent years, but they cannot contribute to political campaigns.

Although some groups spend as much on lobbying as political donations, Dan Meek, a public interest attorney and co-chair of the Independent Party of Oregon, said he is more concerned about Oregon's lack of campaign contribution limits.

"Lobbying expenses and reporting is overshadowed by campaign contributions," Meek said. "I also think lobbyists are only as effective as the campaign contributions they can deliver."

Meek also downplayed the importance of the software company contributing \$20,000 to the governor's campaign. "Twenty thousand dollars would be significant in another state," Meek said. "In Oregon, it's trivial."

Liz Accola Meunier, a spokeswoman for Brown's gubernatorial campaign, wrote in an email that the governor's decision to speak at Vitu's office opening was unrelated to the software provider's campaign contribution.

Bill Cross, a lobbyist whose clients do not include the nurses, electric cooperative or software

company, disagreed with Meek's claim that delivering campaign contributions is a key measure of lobbyists' success.

"Some of us I think are good lobbyists and we don't have big PAC's," Cross said. "Money doesn't drive everything, but I recognize it is a big factor. But I don't think it's necessarily the role of a lobbyist and a measure of success as to how much he can generate. Because in some cases your clients — it's not going to be a realistic strategy they can use."

As it turns out, vehicle electronic registration and titling is just the start of the services Vitu hopes to eventually provide in Oregon. The software company already provides software that allows governments to track transactions from vehicle sales to salvage, "so basically the birth to death of a car," said John Brueggeman, Motor Vehicle Software Corporation's Vitu Division president.

The company lobbied in the last couple of years for legislation to allow the Oregon DMV to accept more electronic transactions in the future. "We had a bill last year and the year before cleaning up some of this stuff," Brueggeman said.

Brueggeman said the company has been lobbying Oregon lawmakers and officials in support of legislation that would allow the company to continue expanding the services it offers.

"As we're bringing these types of services into areas, a lot of times the law didn't foresee what technology made possible," Brueggeman said.

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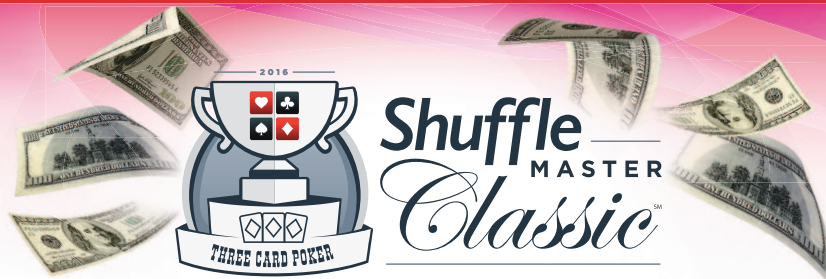
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