

Smooth wildfire evacuation in Blue Mountains

By JOSH BENHAM
La Grande Observer

For La Grande's Cami Bean and Milton-Freewater's Andrea Muma, the moment of truth came at 7:30 p.m. Saturday.

Bean and Muma were among a large contingent camping at Westminster Woods Camp and Conference Center, a campground owned and operated by the First Presbyterian Church in Pendleton, about a quarter-mile from Emigrant Springs State Heritage Area. Bean said during the day Saturday, news began spreading about the Weigh Station Fire that was just miles away.

"We'd had several people coming up for the day saying there was a fire and telling us about it," Bean said. "My husband called (the Oregon Department of Forestry) to find out how far away (the fire) was. They told us there

was no imminent threat at this time."

Muma, who was planning on staying until Sunday, said the group monitored the blaze throughout the day and remained in contact with authorities.

The situation became more serious in the evening when the Umatilla County Sheriff's Office informed the campers at 6 p.m. that people in the area needed to be ready to leave within 10 minutes notice. An hour and a half later, the guesswork was over.

"(Park rangers) drove in around 7:30 and said we had 10 minutes to leave," Muma said. "Most people were already prepared. We knew all day it was a possibility."

Muma rang a dinner bell near the campground's kitchen building to alert everyone. Bean said she and her husband were the last two to leave the premises in order to make sure everyone got

out. "We left a lot of stuff—we left my tents up there—and just got what was important and took off and met back in La Grande," she said.

Muma, who said she's been close to forest fires before, said she wasn't too worried but several people were very stressed. Bean said the scene was semi-chaotic initially.

"Everyone was scared. People were terrified," she said. "I was trying to tell people to trust the process. They'll get everyone out."

Despite the nerves, Bean said the evacuation went as smooth as one could hope. She said smoke could be seen, but it wasn't overwhelming. The only time she saw much in the way of a flame was a glow later on in the evening when they were leaving. Muma and Bean both said the leaders in the camp giving updates, along with

the response from authorities, helped make it a relatively painless evacuation.

"(The evacuation) went really well," Bean said. "People were making sure everyone was OK. (Emergency personnel) were on top of it. They didn't want us to bail out of there unnecessarily, and it wasn't like we could see flames. (But) I am glad they were better safe than sorry."

While most of the group drove to La Grande to meet back up, Muma decided to just go home. But with the interstate shut down, she had to take highways 82 and 204 to get home.

"It was a long, crowded drive," she said. "All the traffic was bumper to bumper in both directions."

Bean said by Sunday evening, campers who had left behind tents and other possessions were allowed to retrieve them.

FAIR: Three different eating contests this year

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looking forward to the experience.

"There's a lot of similarities in all fairs," he said. "But having five nights of headline entertainment is something different for me."

Slone said probably the most noticeable differences people will see between last year's fair and this year's is moving the Latino Night performances to a more prominent slot, from Wednesday night to Friday night. The Latino Night bands — this year's headliner is hit duranguense band Montez de Durango — tend to inspire more dancing than on other nights, so there will also be plenty of space cleared around the stage for that.

"At the end of the work week they can let their hair down a little bit, so to speak," Slone said.

There also will be eating contests sponsored by Fiesta Foods spread throughout the week. On Wednesday at 5 p.m., after the BBQ contest, there will be a pie-eating contest on the Coke Stage. On Thursday at 7 is a mango-eating contest, on Friday at 7 is the jalapeño-eating contest.

Last year's fair turnout was one of its largest, and Slone said he expects another big turnout for the 101st Umatilla County Fair.

The extended weather forecast predicts high temperatures between 85 and 98 degrees through the week, with low wind and no precipitation.

TAX: Meeting Friday to consider making changes

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The Legislature "may appropriate revenues generated by the measure in any way it chooses," the opinion stated.

Davis wrote in an email that based on the opinion, the draft language is "both factually incorrect and also misleading to the public."

In all likelihood, most, if not all of the money, would be used for the intended purposes, said Rep. Peter Buckley, D-Ashland, one of the Legislature's chief budget writers. Education is the state's largest budget line, and the costs of health care programs are anticipated to climb next year, Buckley said.

"If lawmakers want to spend the money elsewhere, they would have to change the law," said Katherine Driessen, an Our Oregon spokeswoman. "Speculation about whether they will or they won't is just that. Given the dire funding crisis our critical services are facing, we expect they will be hard-pressed to change the law to spend the money on anything other than our schools, health care, and senior services."

Lawmakers also contend that PERS is part of the budgets for K-12, health care and senior services, and some of the revenue from Measure 97 could be used to help offset \$885 million in projected cost increases to the state's public pension program.

"It could be used for reserves or PERS, if it's needed to," said Buckley, who co-chairs the committee with Sen. Richard Devlin, D-Tualatin.

"I could put a certain amount into K-12 and say I'm not covering the PERS funds then the school districts don't have that much in additional resources because they do have cover the PERS costs, so it isn't like there is a barrier between these two," Devlin said.

Lawmakers also want to

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have the flexibility to repurpose revenue in the event of an economic downturn or other financial crisis, in order to avert layoffs or cuts in basic services, Buckley said.

"You're going to get this from both sides," Devlin said of the battle over IP 28. "One side is going to say the Legislature can do whatever they want with this so then you shouldn't approve the measure. The other side is going to say: Voter, you're going to get everything you ever wanted if you vote for the measure."

At least two others have echoed Davis's request for a change to the language in the voters' pamphlet: Gregory Chaimov, a former legislative counsel and attorney for the

opposition campaign Defeat the Tax on Oregon Sales, and John Tapogna of ECONorthwest.

The draft language "would lead a voter to believe that Measure 97 revenue would be earmarked exclusively for pre-K-12, health care and senior services, and that the revenue would supplement, and would not supplant, current spending on those services. For legal and technical reasons, that's unlikely to be the case," Tapogna wrote.

Melissa Unger, political director for SEIU Local 503, said the voters' pamphlet should reflect how the measure requires the revenue to be used.

"Clearly stating that the

measure requires funds to these four specific areas is a key component to the measure and should be included and clearly stated," Unger wrote.

Two committees responsible for writing the financial impact statement and explanatory statement in the voters' pamphlet are scheduled to meet Friday and Monday to consider the public comments and whether to make changes.

"Section 3 of the measure very clearly spells out where the money will go, and that's early education, k-12 education, senior services, and healthcare," Driessen said. "We expect the committee will agree with us on that because that would clearly be the law once Measure 97 passes."

MOON: Hopes to unveil new lander design in September

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Getting the OK — not technically a license but a determination that it would do no harm and the company can go ahead — "is a milestone and it is not implausible that they will succeed," said retired space policy expert John Logsdon of George Washington University.

The company is also competing with several other groups for the Google Lunar X Prize. The \$20 million prize will go to the first private firm to get a lander to the moon that can then move a bit. But Richards said that's not the main way the firm hopes to make money.

Richards said the first flight has five customers, including a company that is selling the opportunity to take people's ashes to the moon. His parents' ashes will be on the flight. He said

they used to sing the song "Fly Me To The Moon" to him "and I'm going to." The company uses a Diana Krall recording of the song for its telephone hold music.

However, Richards said his firm hasn't finished building the lander and hopes to unveil a new design in September, which he said is "about the size of R2-D2" from Star Wars and will be propelled by environmentally friendly hydrogen peroxide.

The plan is to fly on a rocket built by Rocket Lab, which has yet to launch a ship. If that doesn't work the FAA approval is done in a way that they could just hire another firm, like SpaceX, Richards said.

The governments of U.S., China and the former Soviet Union have landed rovers on Mars, with the Chinese Jade Rabbit rover just retiring. No human has stepped on the moon since 1972.

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