

For-profit firefighters find work in Southern Oregon

By **EMILY CURETON**
Oregon Public Broadcasting

No one was home at a house deep in the woods of Josephine County. The people who live here had evacuated days ago along with hundreds of their neighbors. As flames from the Taylor Creek Fire got closer and closer, the firefighters showed up.

They came to prepare for the worst so that if the wind picked up, they'd be ready to dash down the driveway and save this house, even if the forest burned around it.

The firefighters protecting this house were structure protection specialists from 100 miles away, called in by the Oregon State Fire Marshal.

The firefighters who normally cover this neighborhood work at private companies. That means the people who know these steep hollows and their microclimates best don't have a formalized role in this emergency operation.

"When it comes to recognition within the state level fire service. We don't exist," said Phil Turnbull, the local chief of Rural/Metro, a national company filling public safety gaps across the West.

In Josephine County, Rural/Metro is the largest of two for-profit fire departments serving a geographic area more than twice the size of Portland. When wildland fire threatens homes covered by private crews, they're out there risking their lives right alongside public agencies and the contractors they bring in.

But without recognition through state law, Turnbull said this cooperation happens informally, almost "on the sly."

"Nobody is arguing that we don't have a responsibility or a contractual obligation to our customers. But here we have a fire threatening hundreds of homes, and three out of every 10 homes up there have not been paying for fire protection, at least to us," Turnbull said.

Rural/Metro is subscription based. The average



In this Monday, July 30, 2018, file photo, flames from the Taylor Creek are reflected in the Rogue River at the Hellgate Bridge near Grants Pass. The fire caused by a lightning storm caused people to be forced from their homes near Grants Pass. The firefighters protecting some of the houses were structure protection specialists from 100 miles away, called in by the Oregon State Fire Marshal.



In this Sunday, July 29, 2018 file photo, flames from a fire work their way through dense trees near Grants Pass.

member pays a few hundred dollars a year. And no, the firefighters don't let houses burn down if the owners don't subscribe. Turnbull said first responders don't pay attention to the funding mechanisms when they're dispatched by 911.

"(The person) will, however, receive a bill," he said.

For non-members, that bill could easily exceed \$10,000. This includes people who get help because of a car accident or medical emergency.

Turnbull described how he and some friends tried to start a public fire department in the early 1970s.

"We discovered very

quickly that there was no real community support for that whatsoever," he said.

Raising local property taxes was a nonstarter. But they still wanted to professionalize firefighting. At the time, the only option for structure protection was a small, mom-and-pop operation doing what it could with

outdated equipment.

"I remember a newspaper editorial saying, if trapped in a burning building in the county, say your prayers," he said.

Eventually, Turnbull and that first crew figured out how to convince people to pay for something new: by making home insurance rates drop if they supported a professional force. Just like taxes, the rates depend on property value.

It worked. He said they had a profitable company after a few years, and it was eventually acquired by a national chain. Now they maintain the same safety standards as public agencies.

But those standards are voluntary, Turnbull said. Therein lies one of the rubs, according to a guy who's spent his entire adult life firefighting in this community.

"I'm not even an advocate of fire protection should all be private, or it should all be public. That's irrelevant. That's funding mechanisms.

But it should work," he said. So does it work? Faced with that question, he paused. He praised his crews and his company. They put out fires admirably, he said.

But in the long run? "We're allowing it to work well enough," he said. "And we're trapped because you can't take a step backwards."

He said broad, community-wide planning isn't possible with 10,000 individual subscriptions.

Competition between fire departments can create more problems.

Josephine County Commissioner Lily Morgan said she's gotten calls from constituents unhappy about that.

"I have received complaints from citizens who chose the company they felt was best for their needs and yet they get a bill from the alternate one who got dispatched by 911 and they didn't feel that was fair," Morgan said.

Officials can't force a public department on voters, who have resoundingly shot down the idea more than once over the years.

"It's not that we don't care about each other, or that we aren't grateful for the help," Morgan said. "It's a community that does not believe in big government. They don't want more involvement of government in their lives."

Taking care of things yourself can get expensive. Peter Sedlow pays every month for a fire subscription with Rural/Metro.

"We've had that since we've been there. We've been there 30 years," he said.

Sedlow pays state taxes for wildland firefighters, but he still doesn't feel like his home could actually be defended, because it's surrounded by a thicket of pine trees.

"We'd love to get rid of those trees, and that's going to take more money than we've got," he said.

Sedlow and his wife recently evacuated ahead of the Taylor Creek Fire.

Drought puts burden on Oregon ranchers

By **GREG STILES**
Mail Tribune

EAGLE POINT — Livestock producers are feeling the effects of drought at an intensifying rate.

On the heels of two sparse rain years, pastures are drying up and herds might follow suit if the trend continues into next year.

Fourth-generation Eagle Point rancher Ron Anderson figures his fellow ranchers are in a world of hurt.

"We had no snowpack to speak of in comparison to what we used to," Anderson said. "So when the snow's gone, you know the runoff slows down. If you're in the right place, you still get some runoff. There are places in Oregon where once that snow is gone, they don't get nothing. If we don't get a wet winter, or a lot of snow this year, then we're really in for it. That could be a disaster."

Anderson said it is reminiscent of the climate shift in the late 1970s.

"If you're not in the right place, you can't irrigate," Anderson said. "You might only get one or two irrigations, well that don't grow any feed, so that makes it difficult. You take a dry year on dry-land farming, you might get nothing."

While herd sizes have remained stable over the past decade, they're much smaller than they were 40 years ago, Anderson said. At the same time, there are fewer acres devoted to hay and feed production.

With pastures drying up this summer, farmers and



Timothy Bullard/The Grants Pass Daily Courier via AP, File

In this July 15, 2014, file photo, rider Felicia Bias herds some of the 1,200 head of cattle at the Dinsdale Farms on Riverbanks Road near Grants Pass, Ore. Oregon livestock producers are feeling the effects of drought this year at an intensifying rate. On the heels of two sparse rain years, pastures are drying up and herds might follow suit if the trend continues into 2019.

ranchers resort to buying hay, more than likely from outside of the Rogue Valley.

"People will have to buy some hay to survive this drought," Anderson said. "The price is pretty high right now compared to last year ... good alfalfa will be \$200 and something a ton."

Anderson is among the cattlemen whose herds locally, then are moved across the state line in the winter.

"There's worse drought in California than there is here," Anderson said.

Last week, Jackson County livestock producers gained eligibility to apply for 2018 Livestock Forage Disaster Program benefits for small grain, native pasture and improved pasture.

The program provides compensation for producers who suffer grazing losses for covered livestock due to drought on privately owned or leased land, or fire on federally managed land.

"We're so far behind on

water that we won't catch up," said Phillip Morton, local executive director for the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Farm Service Agency, which administers the disaster relief program.

The lack of ready forage and high cost of hay could hit hard, Morton said.

"Local herds disappear," he said. "Producers can't afford to feed them, and it becomes cost-prohibitive to feed your herds, so folks start selling off cattle. We'll see less livestock in the county, and producers will get a setback in their herd development. Of course, if a lot of cattle start showing up on market, the natural thing is for prices to come down."

While the drought assistance is welcome to livestock owners, it's not a sure thing.

"The biggest complaint I hear is these guys meticulously fill out the forms and they never hear anything," said Applegate Valley farmer Warren Merz.

BLOOMIN' BLUES

Rabbitbrush cures what ails you, from toothaches to smallpox

By **BRUCE BARNES**
For the East Oregonian

Name: Gray Rabbitbrush
Scientific name: *Ericameria nauseosa* or *Chrysothamnus nauseosus*

Gray Rabbitbrush is a very common plant from southwest Canada to California, to Mexico and Texas. It is probably just as common as sagebrush, and from a distance the two plants look nearly alike. Both plants are a light-gray-green color, but rabbitbrush is smaller and rounded in shape, and sagebrush can be much larger and with an irregular shape. Rabbitbrush stems are coated with dull-white hairs along with thread-like, linear, gray-green leaves.

It takes a bit of staring at the plants as you whiz by on the highway (have someone else drive) until you notice that some of the rounded plants look definitely green instead of grayish. The green plants are called Green Rabbitbrush. If you stop and look closely, about the only difference between the two you'll see is that Green Rabbitbrush has larger and greener leaves. Both plants have the same size and shape, usually grow in the same habitat, and bloom about the same time. Several years ago, some botanists decided having one species green and the other one greenish-gray was just too simple so they gave Green Rabbitbrush a new scientific name, putting it in a different genus.

In late summer and early fall both rabbitbrush species are easy to spot. They are densely covered on the top



Photo by Bruce Barnes

Gray Rabbitbrush, *Ericameria nauseosa*/Chrysothamnus nauseosus

with a layer of bright yellow flowers. It is in the sunflower family, so it has its flowers borne in heads.

The source for the name "rabbitbrush" is anyone's guess — possibly rabbits ate it, or used its crowded stems to hide in. The stems and leaves often have glands that secrete a smelly resin, likely referring to the nauseous odor, hence "nauseosa."

Gray Rabbitbrush has had an exceptional variety of uses for many tribes across western North America. What is listed here is only a sampling to show the value of this plant. Some of these uses are true for only to one variety of the species. Medicinal uses include treatment for colds, toothaches, coughs, skin sores, smallpox, nightmares, tuberculosis, blisters, chest pain, gynecological ailments, diarrhea, stomach cramps, urinary aid, venereal disease, and bladder problems.

Some tribes used the plant as winter forage for horses, and a couple of tribes used the bark for chewing gum. Others made windbreaks from the bushes, and used the stems to make brushes and brooms.

The plant provides a volatile oil for fuel, and the stems were used to make arrows, to pierce their ears, and to weave baskets.

Seeds were ground for food, and the plant was mixed with cornmeal mush to eat. Many tribes also used the plant in ceremonies.

Where to find: This is the last article for the year, so here is a plant you can observe by the roadsides from now into October. It grows in dry mountain valleys and in dry, low elevations wherever sagebrush is likely to be, including along Interstate 84 from Cabbage Hill to The Dalles. The bright yellow flowers should start appearing about Round-Up time.