

# FIRES: 2018 had 3,689 fewer fires than average, but roughly 2 million more acres

Continued from 1A

days starting Oct. 1.

About 85 miles south in Madras, Craig Nichols, livestock and natural resources manager for the R2 Ranch, faces his own challenges following the fires of 2018. The ranch lost its entire 12,000-acre public grazing allotment to the Boxcar Fire in June. About 200 head of cattle were to be turned out on it with their calves for the winter.

"We won't be able to graze (that land) for at least one year, and probably two," Nichols said.

### Bigger, hotter

It is no secret wildfires are getting bigger and hotter across the West.

So far in 2018, 49,658 fires have burned more than 8.1 million acres, according to the National Interagency Fire Center in Boise, Idaho. The 10-year average from 2008 to 2017 is 53,347 fires totaling a little more than 6 million acres — meaning 2018 had 3,689 fewer fires than average, but roughly 2 million more acres burned.

Research shows fire seasons also start earlier and last longer. A study published in 2016 by the Sierra Nevada Research Institute at the University of California-Merced calculated Northwest fire seasons are now 93 days longer than they were three decades ago.

Meanwhile, firefighting costs for the U.S. Forest Service and Department of the Interior have skyrocketed, topping \$2 billion in three of the last four years, including a record \$3.1 billion this year.

Kathie Dello, associate director of the Oregon Climate Change Research Institute, said worsening drought conditions are in part to blame for the increasing severity of forest and rangeland fires.

"We've seen some really tough summers as a result of snow drought," Dello said. "We really do rely on that natural reservoir of our



Courtesy Molly Belshe

**Marty Belshe, a wheat farmer in Sherman County, uses a tractor and disc plow to create a defensible space around one of his fields in anticipation of the Substation Fire that burned 78,425 acres in July.**

snowpack, and we've built systems around that being there."

According to the U.S. Drought Monitor, all of Oregon is in some level of drought, including 33 percent in "extreme drought." In Washington, 92 percent of the state is in drought, along with 90 percent of Idaho and 85 percent of California.

Any relief from Mother Nature may be slow to come. The National Weather Service Climate Prediction Center is calling for an increased likelihood of more warm and dry weather over the next three months, possibly setting the stage for another torrid year in 2019.

"This is going to keep happening," Dello said. "We're stacking the deck

with more of these low snowpack years."

### "The new normal"

Barbara and Bill Hammel, who live on Fifteen Mile Road in The Dalles, said the Substation Fire came about 50 feet from their backyard. The couple lost 8,860 acres of cattle pasture and 83 percent of their wheat acres to the Substation and Long Hollow fires, which started just 20 days apart from one another.

"We had to start feeding almost two and a half tons of hay a day to the cattle at all the ranches," Barbara Hammel said. "That makes cutting the remainder of the grain a little slow when you have to take almost half a day to do the feeding, and then get on the combine to cut wheat."



George Plaven/Capital Press

**A vacant guest house burned down to its foundation in the Substation Fire on Gordon Ridge, where farmers Marty and Molly Belshe grow wheat.**

Grass Valley wheat farmer Darren Padgett spent a blustery morning seeding 700 acres in his GPS-guided tractor, pulling a 56-foot no-till drill to penetrate the stubble.

Padgett, a member of the Oregon Wheat Commission and secretary-treasurer of the U.S. Wheat Associates, lost just a sliver of cropland he mowed down with a disc plow to buffer his farm from the Jack Knife Fire in June. Like a lot of farmers in the area, he spent many days assisting firefighters and working to protect neighbors' property.

The Substation Fire, driven by furious winds, was unlike anything he had ever seen before.

"I've never seen such widespread devastation," Padgett said. "I guess that's the difference this year."

Summer is always hot and windy, Padgett said, but farmers have been especially overwhelmed this year. The Substation Fire started near The Dalles before it made a 25-mile run southeast to Grass Valley in just one day, putting firefighters on their heels.

"You didn't know where to go. It was moving so quick and so fast," Padgett said. "We had about two days with nobody harvesting. It's the only time I've ever seen the entire county shut down."

Padgett praised the USDA for acting quickly to approve cover crops and

emergency grazing, though he stressed the importance of timely rains to establish a cover crop on bare acres. Marty Belshe, who farms north of Padgett, said he is still not sure whether he will plant a cover crop on his burned fields.

The Belshes consider themselves lucky. Yes, they did lose roughly a third of their crop, but they know it could have been worse. One farmer, 64-year-old John Ruby of neighboring Wasco County, died in the Substation Fire trying to dig a firebreak.

It is common practice for farmers to look out for each other, drop what they are doing and pull together when a fire erupts, Belshe said, though he added that wheat is not worth anyone's life.

"We all need to keep a little perspective on what we are doing when we're out there fighting fire," he said.

That has become a political issue for a pair of Oregon state senators. Bill Hansell, Republican from Athena, and Elizabeth Steiner Hayward, Democrat from Portland, are teaming up on legislation to hold farmers harmless while fighting fires.

Hansell said Wasco County farmers told him they were concerned the state could crack down on them for helping each other fight fires. Steiner Hayward said they would model the proposal on Oregon's

Good Samaritan Law, which shields people from lawsuit if they give aid to others as long as the aid holds to CPR training or the like.

### Forest management

Northwest lawmakers, meanwhile, are taking aim at forest management policies they say will help reduce the size and severity of future wildfires.

U.S. Rep. Greg Walden sent a letter in July to Sens. Pat Roberts, R-Kan., and Debbie Stabenow, D-Mich., urging them to include provisions passed by the House in the 2018 Farm Bill. The proposals would make it easier for the Forest Service and BLM to cut down dead trees and replant forests after a fire, while encouraging collaborative forest projects.

"The provisions in the House-passed Farm Bill would bring needed change to the way we manage our forests to address the root cause of these fires," Walden said. "We can reduce red tape and streamline management practices to get more work done in the woods."

Congress missed its Sept. 30 deadline for passing the 2018 Farm Bill, though House Committee Chairman Michael Conaway, R-Texas, has made a commitment to passing the legislation before the end of the year.

Sen. Jeff Merkley, D-Ore., also introduced the Wildfire Resilient Communities Act on Sept. 26, which would direct \$1 billion toward forest fuels reduction and create a county stewardship fund to help pay for collaborative work with federal agencies.

Dylan Kruse, director of government affairs at Sustainable Northwest, a Portland-based nonprofit, said the need to invest in federal forests has never been more urgent.

"We can't afford to keep playing catchup," Kruse said. "This bill takes immediate action to address the massive management backlog on our forests, and expands bipartisan programs to prepare for the future."

# Saudis confirm Jamal Khashoggi was killed inside consulate

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates (AP) — Saudi Arabia acknowledged early Saturday that Saudi writer Jamal Khashoggi was killed in the Saudi Consulate in Istanbul in a fight, and said 18 Saudis were being held as suspects.

The overnight announcements in Saudi state media came more than two weeks after Khashoggi entered the Saudi consulate in Istanbul for paperwork required to marry his Turkish fiancée, and never came out. Saudi Arabia had rejected as baseless reports that Khashoggi was killed and dismembered inside the consulate, but had been facing growing pressure to explain what happened to him.

The overnight announce-

ment in Saudi State media also said a royal court adviser close to Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman was fired along with three leaders in the kingdom's intelligence services and other officials. Saudi King Salman also had a plan to restructure the kingdom's intelligence services.

The statement contradicts reports by pro-government media in Turkey, which have published surveillance video and other material suggesting Khashoggi was killed by an assassination squad with ties to Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman.

On Wednesday, the Turkish pro-government newspaper *Yeni Safak*, citing what it described as an audio recording of Khashoggi's slaying,

said the squad immediately accosted the journalist after he entered the consulate, cutting off his fingers and later decapitating him.

"Preliminary investigations carried out by the Public Prosecution Office into the disappearance of Saudi citizen Jamal bin Ahmad Khashoggi revealed that the discussions that took place between him and the persons who met him during his presence at the Saudi Consulate in Istanbul (led) to a brawl and a fist fight with the citizen, Jamal Khashoggi, which led to his death, may his soul rest in peace," the Saudi prosecutors' statement read.

The Saudi statements did not identify the 18 Saudis being held by authorities.

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