

Growing wildfire costs get governor's attention

State spent \$102 million on large fires this year

By **CLAIRE WITHYCOMBE**
Oregon Capital Bureau

SALEM — Oregonians saw \$62 million in private grazing and timberland go up in flames this fire season.

Such seasons continue to grow worse, longer and more expensive in the state, posing more threats to life and property.

Gov. Kate Brown has proposed a special council to take a new look at how the state fights fires and pays for that work.

The state Forestry Department reported to legislators recently that large fires cost the agency \$102 million this year.

The federal government will cover much of that, and private landowners chip in some, but the high price tag still creates a budgeting frenzy as the state waits for federal reimbursement.

Brown's proposed council is likely to look at whether the state is staffing fires efficiently.

Every summer, desk-bound Forestry Department employees like accountants and human resources staff can be taken off their regular duties to help on fire crews.



A firefighting air tanker drops a load of fire retardant into a draw in Harrington Canyon on August 17, 2018 as a large wildfire burned out of control Friday southwest of Pilot Rock.

Staff photo by E.J. Harris

That is called a "militia model." Other states, like California, have a dedicated firefighting agency.

As fire seasons grow longer, militia-style firefighting could actually cost the state more by taking employees off key, but non-fire, functions of the department for months at a time.

The governor's council is likely to include officials from Oregon's tribes, state and federal forest agencies, environmental groups and landowners. Forest prac-

tices likely won't be part of council's review but could become a consideration.

Brown also wants the state to hire a consultant to analyze budgeting for fires. Oregon's byzantine array of reimbursements, borrowing and insurance burdens the state's general fund.

From 2008 to 2012, annual fire costs in the state hovered at \$20 million or less, according to state data.

Costs spiked to \$122 million in 2013, as fires in the Rogue Valley persisted.

While expenses haven't reached that point again, they continue to stay above pre-2012 levels.

The Forestry Department had to bump up its borrowing from the state treasury to pay this year's bills while waiting for the federal money.

"Payments to contractors and vendors must be made ... on a timely basis," state analysts wrote in a recent report on the 2018 fire season. "Many people and businesses assisting with fighting

FROM 2008 TO 2012, ANNUAL FIRE COSTS IN THE STATE HOVERED AT \$20 MILLION OR LESS

large fires are self-employed or own small businesses and cannot wait to be paid until the department receives reimbursements."

And fire-induced cash flow issues aren't limited to the Forestry Department. The Oregon State Police feels the impact too.

The state fire marshal's office, part of the state police, incurred about \$32 million in unbudgeted expenses in 2017 and 2018 due to wildfires, according to legislative documents.

When fires threaten peo-

ple and homes, the governor can call on the fire marshal to dispatch local firefighters to action and cover their costs. This year, about 1,000 firefighters protected 7,600 Oregon homes that were threatened by fires.

The federal government will cover about two-thirds of those costs, but not before next summer, when the state's two-year budget ends.

The cost of fighting all wildfires, including federally-managed fires, is estimated to be about \$500 million this year.

Reporter Claire Withycombe: cwithycombe@eomediagroup.com or 971-304-4148. Withycombe is a reporter for the East Oregonian working for the Oregon Capital Bureau, a collaboration of EO Media Group, Pamplin Media Group, and Salem Reporter.

BRIEFLY

St. John's announces advent services

HERMISTON — The public is invited to celebrate the final services of the advent season at St. John's Episcopal Church, 665 E. Gladys Ave., Hermiston.

The fourth Sunday of advent is Dec. 23 at 9 a.m. with a service of lessons telling the story of Israel and the Nativity. It also includes music and will conclude with the eucharist.

Also, the first service of Christmas is Monday, Dec. 24 at 7 p.m., followed by mass at 7:30 p.m.

For more information, contact Rev. Chuck Barnes at 541-567-6674 or chuckb@eotnet.net.

Redeemer church sets kids Christmas pageant

PENDLETON — Area families are invited to bring their kids so they can participate in a Christmas program at Episcopal

Church of the Redeemer.

The annual Children's Christmas Pageant is Monday, Dec. 24 — Christmas Eve — from 4-5 p.m. The church is located at 241 S.E. Second St., Pendleton.

Children are needed for roles, including a mouse, sheep, donkey or camel. In addition, there are parts for angels and shepherds and magi. With no audition or rehearsal, anyone can participate.

Rev. Charlotte Wells invites people to come and celebrate Jesus' birthday with the Redeemer church family. For more information, contact Wells at 541-276-3809 or rector.pendletonepiscopal@gmail.com.

Boardman police run sting, catch child luring suspect at Portland airport

By **PHIL WRIGHT**
East Oregonian

The Boardman Police Department ran a sting to catch an Indiana luring suspect at the Portland International Airport and prevent him from meeting a local girl.

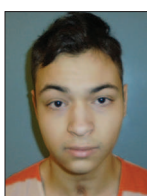
Kai Christopher Larkins, 20, of Ashgrove, Indiana, faces an initial felony charge of first-degree online corruption of a child in Morrow County, according to state court records.

Boardman police Lt. Loren Dieter said the case began when a mother reported she was concerned with her juvenile daughter's

online conversation with a man. Police Sgt. Mark Pratt investigated and saw red flags, Dieter said.

The two police supervisors used "pretext" text messages to chat with Larkins, Dieter said. They found out Larkins bought an airline ticket and was flying into the Portland International Airport.

Boardman police contacted the Port of Portland Police Department, which handles policing at the airport. Dieter and Pratt went to the airport Wednesday, and Dieter said one of the port police detectives stayed



Larkins

with them so they could get through security checkpoints and contact Larkins as he came off the plane.

"He was definitely not expecting us," Dieter said. "He was very surprised."

They questioned and arrested Larkins and hauled him to the Umatilla County Jail, Pendleton. Court records show he faced arraignment on the lone count Thursday morning. The court has not set subsequent dates in the case.

The charge of online corruption of a child is a class B felony and requires a defen-

dant to solicit a child for sex and take a "substantial step toward physically meeting with and encountering the child." Dieter said flying halfway across the United States to meet the girl qualified as "a pretty substantial step."

He also said these cases often come to light only after the offender harms the victim. Getting in on the front end to prevent that, he said, felt good.

The criminal investigation into Larkins continues. Dieter said there is digital data to sift through to make sure the case is airtight and find if Larkins has done this before.

COMING EVENTS

FRIDAY, DEC. 21 STORY AND CRAFT TIME, 2 p.m., Echo Public Library, 20 S. Bonanza, Echo. (541-376-8411)

VFW BINGO, 6 p.m., Hermiston VFW, 45 W. Cherry St., Hermiston. Doors open at 6 p.m., games begin at 7 p.m. Everyone welcome. (541-278-6219)

MOVIE EVENT, 7:15 p.m., SAGE Center, 101 Olson Road, Boardman. Enjoy "How the Grinch Stole Christmas." The Grinch will visit 30 minutes prior to the movie showing. \$3 admission includes a bag of popcorn. Bottled water and concessions available for purchase. Plays again at 2:15 p.m. on Saturday. (Stefanie Swindler 541-481-7243) Saturday, December 22

PANCAKES WITH SANTA, 9-11:30 a.m., Hermiston Com-

munity Center, 415 S. Highway 395, Hermiston. Enjoy a holiday breakfast including pancakes, sausage and toppings for decoration. Tickets required, seating limited.

FREE FOR ALL, 9:30-10:15 a.m., Pendleton Center for the Arts, 214 N. Main St., Pendleton. Free art classes for children up to age 12. Children under 8 should be accompanied by an adult. (Roberta Lavadour 541-278-9201)

YARN CLUB, 10 a.m.-12 p.m., Hermiston Public Library, 235 E. Gladys Ave., Hermiston. (541-567-2882)

HIP & HANDMADE, 11 a.m.-12 p.m., Pendleton Center for the Arts, 214 N. Main St., Pendleton. Free drop-in project class for adults. (Roberta Lavadour 541-278-9201)

SUNDAY, DEC. 23 SPECIAL NEEDS OPEN GYM, 12:30-1 p.m., Pendleton Recreation Center, 510 S.W. Dorion Ave., Pendleton. Free for special needs children and families. (Casey Brown 541-276-8100)

MONDAY, DEC. 24 WALKING FOR WELLNESS, 8:30-9:30 a.m., Pendleton Recreation Center, 510 S.W. Dorion Ave., Pendleton. Get some exercise even when the weather is bad. Free. (Casey Brown 541-276-8100)

PRESCHOOL STORY TIME, 10:30 a.m., Athena Public Library, 418 E. Main St.,

Athena. For ages birth to 6. (541-566-2470)

PENDLETON SENIOR MEAL SERVICE, 12-1 p.m., Pendleton Senior Center, 510 S.W. 10th St., Pendleton. Costs \$3.50 or \$6 for those under 60. Pool, puzzles, crafts, snacks, Second Time Around thrift store 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. For Meals On Wheels, call 541-276-1926. (Tori Bowman 541-276-5073)

ART STUDIO, 4-5:30 p.m., Pendleton Center for the Arts, 214 N. Main St., Pendleton. Free class for ages 7-12 to develop skills and encourage art exploration. (Roberta Lavadour 541-278-9201)

CHRISTMAS EVE SERVICE, 6-7:30 p.m., First Christian Church, 518 S. Main St., Milton-Freewater. (Janet Collins 541-938-3854)



Pendleton First United Methodist Church
352 SE 2nd St. • Pendleton, Oregon

Annual Christmas Cantata

During Sunday Worship
December 23rd. • 9am
Everyone Welcome

Check us out on Facebook:

<https://www.facebook.com/FUMCPendleton>

(541) 276-2616

Saagers Shoe Shop

WINTER CLEARANCE SALE

Starts Wednesday December 26th 8 a.m.
Store closed 12/22 - 12/25 to prepare for sale

SAVE 50%-70% off

Women's apparel!

& UP TO 50% off

Men/Women's Shoes!

Boots, flats, casuals, booties, clogs, athletic, trail shoes and boots, dress shoes, performance comfort, hiking boots and more!

Huge selection of the finest comfort brands and top rated performance footwear.

Mon - Sat: 8 AM - 6 PM • Sun: 12 PM - 4 PM
613 N. Main St., Milton-Freewater, OR
www.saagershoeshop.com • 541-938-5162

Happy Holidays

- From -

Pediatric Specialists of Pendleton, LLC

Sara Rickman, MD • Rhonda Wyland, MD
Lynn Lieuallen, FNP • Teri Rosselle, FNP

Mon.-Thur. 8 am- 6 pm, • Fri. 8 am-12 pm,
Sat. 9 am - 12 pm (school year)
2461 SW Perkins Ave • Pendleton, OR 97801 • 541-276-0250

The Pendleton Chamber of Commerce Presents

Black & White

and Pendleton All Over

63rd Annual First Citizens Banquet & Business Excellence Awards
January 18, 2019
Wildhorse Resort & Casino

NOMINATIONS ARE OPEN!

Due to the Chamber by 5 pm December 28th
Nomination Forms Online at
pendletonchamber.com
or at the Chamber Office at 501 South Main Street

Sponsored by
CHI St. Anthony Hospital
Kind Leaf Pendleton • Pacific Power
Energy Trust of Oregon • Eastern Oregon Rental & Sales