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Merkley touts wildfire bill

Wildfire-Resilient Communities Act aims to reduce the risk of out-of-control fires

By KATY NESBITT
For the East Oregonian

BEND — With a Deschutes National Forest prescribed burn project as a backdrop, Sen. Jeff Merkley, D-Oregon, announced Wednesday his Wildfire-Resilient Communities Act to reduce the risk of large fires that endanger property, wildlife and watersheds.

Merkley addressed members of the press, in person and via a live video stream on Facebook, at the West Bend prescribed burn unit where 284 acres were burned at the end of April. Merkley touted timber harvest, thinning and prescribed fires as ways to reduce the risk of out-of-control wildfires that can quickly consume entire neighborhoods when fuel conditions, wind and fire starts combine.

The senator said his bill would pump a billion dollars into fuels treatment projects across the country.

“With a guaranteed increase of a billion dollars a year in fuels reduction and new authorities and incentives for communities to work to improve the resilience of their forests, we can stop catastrophic wildfires from becoming a staple of western summers,” Merkley said.

Merkley was joined by forest, wildfire and local leaders. John Allen, forest supervisor for the Deschutes National Forest, said it is too early to predict the fire season, but prescribed fire is an example of how forest managers intend to protect values at risk.

“The West Bend prescribed burn project is essential in our eyes and a natural part of ecosystems,” Allen said. “Bringing fire back makes a healthy forest more resilient for long-term conditions.”

Allen credited the Deschutes Forest Collaborative, an assembly of forest managers, private citizens, industry and environmentalists who meet regularly to discuss forest management.

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Moving on, moving UP



Umatilla celebrates students' post-high school plans



Staff photos by Kathy Aney

Almost 70 high school seniors signed symbolic letters of intent for colleges or other post-secondary plans on Wednesday at Umatilla High School. Above left, Adrian Corta and Julian Gutierrez announce their post-secondary choice as Blue Mountain Community College during Signing Day on Wednesday at Umatilla High School. Above right, Hope Cameron announces her college choice as Oregon Tech during Signing Day.

By JADE MCDOWELL
East Oregonian

As high school seniors get ready to write the next chapter of their life, Umatilla High School is celebrating those who are committed to furthering their education in some form.

“Any plan is a great plan, as long as you made it happen,” superintendent Heidi Sipe told students on Wednesday.

Students were gathered in the gym for a talent show followed by the school’s “college signing” day. Graduating seniors with post-high school plans were cheered on by underclassmen and teachers as they introduced themselves one by one and declared their commitment to a school, trade or other option. Afterward they signed “letters of intent,” mimicking a ritual often performed by athletes committing to play a sport at the college level.

Counselor Dee Lorence told students post-secondary education wasn’t limited to a university — it could also mean community college, the military, a trade school or apprenticeship. She said this year 69 of the school’s 90 graduating seniors had some sort of plan in place for increasing their skills beyond a high school diploma.

A few students were recognized individually for their plans to play a sport at a college level or enlist in the National Guard. Emanuel

“THEY’RE DEFINITELY PUSHING US IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION, PUSHING US TO SUCCEED.”

Andrew Wilson, who plans to attend Western Oregon University.

Tejada was recognized as the winner of the Ronald Reagan Leadership medal, awarded to a student who “exemplifies drive, humility and service before self.”

Tejada is planning to attend Oregon State University. He said after the ceremony that he plans to study civil engineering.

“I like the mathematics and the science that goes into it,” he said.

He was debating between Oregon Technical Institute and OSU, but ended up choosing OSU because his brother attends there. He said he was looking forward to both the social and academic aspects of college.

Roughly half of the students who shared their plans Wednesday are bound for Blue Mountain Community College. Cece Cardenas-Perez said she chose the local school because it is “affordable and closer to home.”

She wants to pursue some sort of career in the medical field — she hasn’t quite figured out what yet — and attending community college before transferring to a university later will allow her to save money.

Alexandrea Ford, who is plan-

ning to study at BMCC to become a sonogram technician, said when seniors talked about their post-secondary plans they often talked about trying to walk onto a sports team in college, or “what their living situation is going to be and how they can afford it.”

“It’s really expensive,” she said of going the university route. “We live in a small area and not a lot of parents can afford to send their kids to school.”

Alana Wilson knows about that. She watched her son Andrew Wilson participate in the signing ceremony Wednesday by declaring his intention to attend Western Oregon University.

She said government financial aid comes about \$10,000 a semester short, leaving Andrew to pay for the rest through a job and support from his parents.

“There’s a pretty big difference there that we have to make up,” she said.

Andrew is planning to pursue a master’s degree so that he can teach high school physics. He said

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Crowd opposes charter proposals

Umatilla County Commissioners also object to potential changes

By PHIL WRIGHT
East Oregonian

The group recommending changes to Umatilla County’s government felt pushback Wednesday evening against its proposals. The opponents sang a song of, “If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it.”

The eight-member charter review committee presented its findings and three potential ballot measures to the board of commissioners during a work session at the county courthouse, Pendleton. The simplest measure would change the law enforcement department to the sheriff’s office and rather than spelling out most of the duties of the sheriff refer instead to Oregon law.

Elections also change. Per the proposal, if no more than two candidates file, there would be no May primary election and the candidates would advance to the November general. If more than two run, the two who win the most votes in the primary face off in the general.

The biggest proposal changes the county from three full-time commissioners to five part-timers who would be responsible for hiring the county counsel and a county manager. That also drew the most resistance.

Commissioner Bill Elferring said the lack of a full-time commissioner is a concern.

“Some have tried this the other way, and it hasn’t worked very well,” he said.

Commissioner John Shaffer hitched on, pointing out that Clatsop County is considering nixing its manager and volunteer board for full-time commissioners.

Charter review members strove to defend the position, arguing the size of the county and the size of the county’s budget demands a professional at the helm. Michele Grable, the charter committee chair, and other members argued commissioners should focus their time on policy, county advocacy and strategy and not the “nitty-gritty” of management. Grable recalled one night when Commissioner George Murdock oversaw the problem of a leak in the district attorney’s office on the third floor of the courthouse. She said commissioners have better things to do with their time.

Some old habits are hard to break, Murdock said in his defense, but there was a greater issue.

“I have an uncomfortable feeling we are rushing to judgement,” he said. “I’m still at a point I want to ask questions.”

One of those, he continued, was about how a manager would affect the public’s access to commissioners. Yet he also said having he and his

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