

Agencies boost efforts to stop wildland firefighter suicides

By KEITH RIDLER
Associated Press

BOISE, Idaho — Shane Del Grosso spent some 30 summers crossing smoke-shrouded mountains and forests to fight increasingly devastating wildfires in the U.S. West.

Toward the end, his skills and experience propelled him to lead a federal multi-agency team that responded to large-scale national disasters. On some days he directed a thousand firefighters and helped coordinate aircraft attacks on massive blazes.

But then came the long off-season lacking the shared-risk camaraderie. Isolation closed in, his family said, along with marital problems that can be exacerbated by first-responder jobs that require missed family events and birthdays.

Del Grosso, 50, killed himself May 9, 2016, not long before the start of another wildfire season.

"I always thought that you'd see it coming, but I guess you don't," said his best friend, Noel Matson, who worked and fought wildfires out of the same U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service office in Huron, South Dakota, as Del Grosso. "It was maybe that male bravado firefighter thing where you don't talk about what's bothering you."

Federal officials at the National Interagency Fire



Bill Arsenault of the Idaho Falls Fire Department looks at memorial stones at the Wildland Firefighters Monument at the National Interagency Fire Center in Boise, Idaho. Federal officials at the NIFC are bolstering mental health resources for wildland firefighters following an apparent increase in suicides.

Center in Boise have started making efforts to change that mindset after noticing an increase in wildland firefighter suicides in recent years.

"It's not a profession where people want to reach out for help because they are the help," said Jessica Gardetto, a fire center spokeswoman and former wildland firefighter. "The federal agencies have realized, whether it's suicidal tendencies or just overall mental health, it's a resource that needs to be available — even out on the fire lines."

No figures on wildland firefighter suicides are avail-

able because federal agencies often track only fatalities that occur during work hours, and families don't always release a cause of death.

But Gardetto said the wildland firefighting community is small, "and word spreads quickly." Anecdotal reports suggest many of the suicides are happening outside the wildfire season. A month ago, she said, a U.S. Forest Service firefighter based in the U.S. Southwest killed himself. And she said several suicides occurred in Idaho in 2017. One of those was a Boise-based U.S. Bureau of Land

Management smokejumper, a firefighter who jumps from airplanes.

Reasons for the rise are unclear, though some cite longer and tougher wildfire seasons and an increase in the number of wildland firefighters who previously served in the military and were already dealing with post-traumatic stress.

In the past several years, the National Interagency Fire Center has bolstered a program that teaches coping skills and offers one-on-one crisis intervention to firefighters dealing with trauma and

other issues. Federal agencies also have increased efforts to make firefighters aware that help is available.

It's unclear what kind of help Del Grosso was receiving. His family learned after his death that he'd been diagnosed with PTSD.

"Obviously he couldn't escape whatever demons were haunting him. And that breaks your heart," said his older sister, Stacey Chaney.

Throughout Del Grosso's career with different agencies, his family tracked news reports hoping to get a glimpse of him at work. It was easier after he rose through the ranks to become an incident commander, a job in which he often spoke at news conferences.

He also sent thousands of wildland firefighters into burning forests, and they trusted him to get them out again.

"He relished his role as incident commander," said Matson, Del Grosso's friend and colleague. "He worked well with people and knew just about every position, and everybody respected that."

Friends and family say Hurricane Katrina might have taken the most out of Del Grosso.

He told them it was the worst disaster he'd ever been assigned, but left out the details. Nearly 2,000 people died in the 2005 hurricane

and its aftermath, and parts of New Orleans were destroyed.

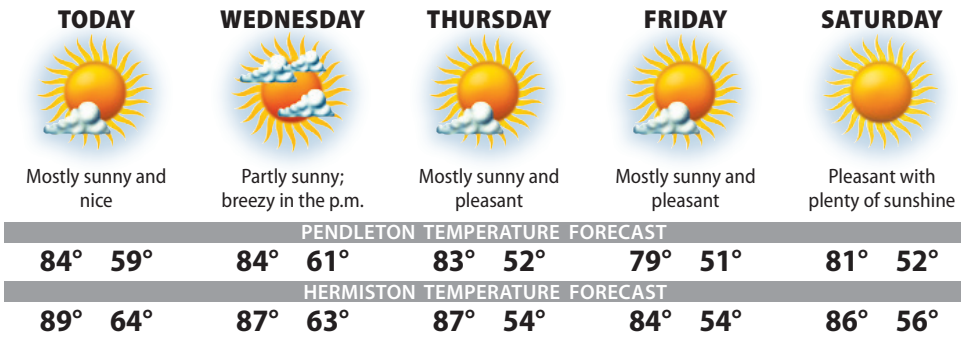
"I think that's where a lot of his problems started," said his mother, Sharalyn Del Grosso. "Seeing all that death, all that loss, all that death and dying. There were so many people that needed so much, and he couldn't do it. That need of wanting to fix it, to do more, to make it better."

Del Grosso is one of the highest-ranking firefighters to have his name placed on a memorial stone at the Wildland Firefighters Monument at the federally managed fire center in Idaho. The monument honors some 400 firefighters killed by flames, falling trees, vehicle mishaps, airplane crashes and heart attacks.

That Del Grosso's name was included is recognition of some of the challenges wildland firefighters face away from fire lines, said Bill Arsenault, a wildland firefighter and paramedic with the Idaho Falls Fire Department in southeastern Idaho.

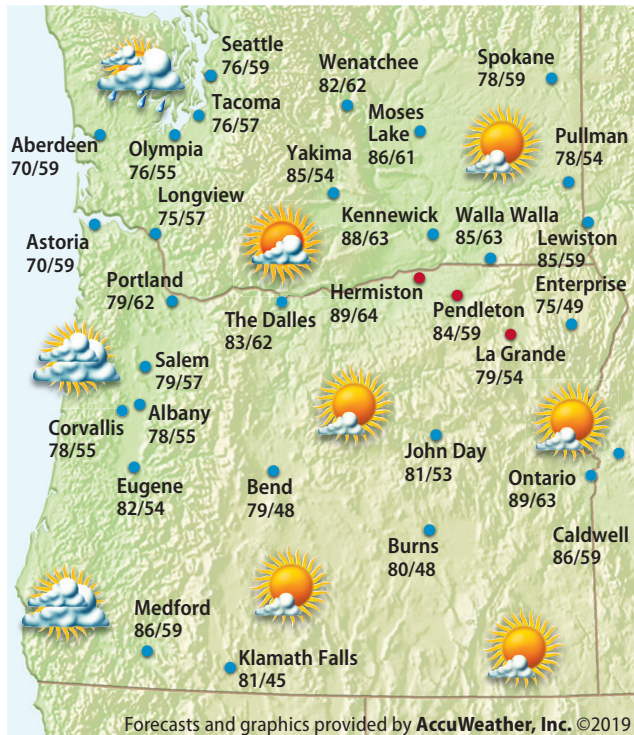
"It's huge," he said while walking past the monument's stones, noting the names of some of the firefighters he knew. "Sometimes we only memorialize quote-unquote 'true heroes.' But they were doing the job no different from anyone else. I think it's good that we're recognizing the contribution that Shane made."

Forecast for Pendleton Area



OREGON FORECAST

Shown is today's weather. Temperatures are today's highs and tonight's lows.



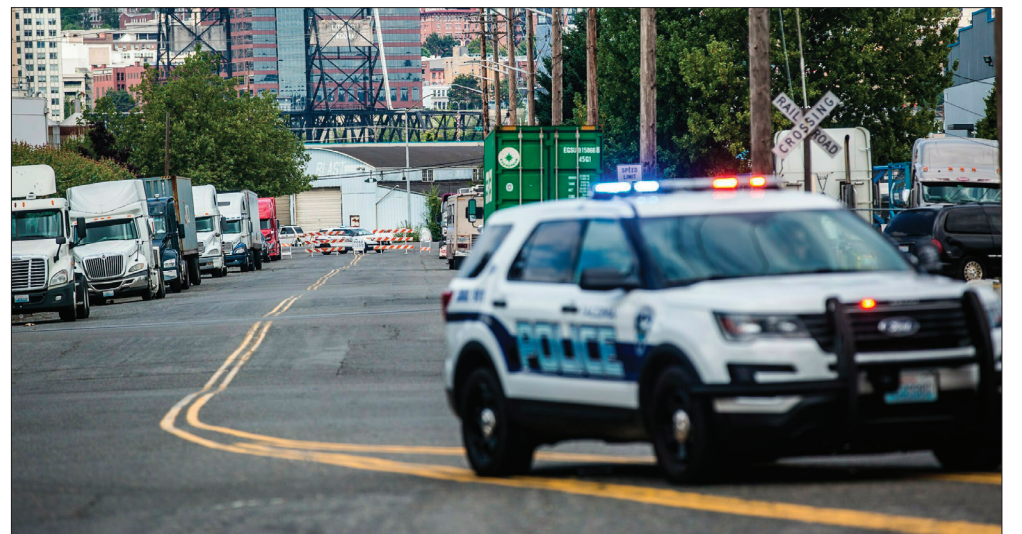
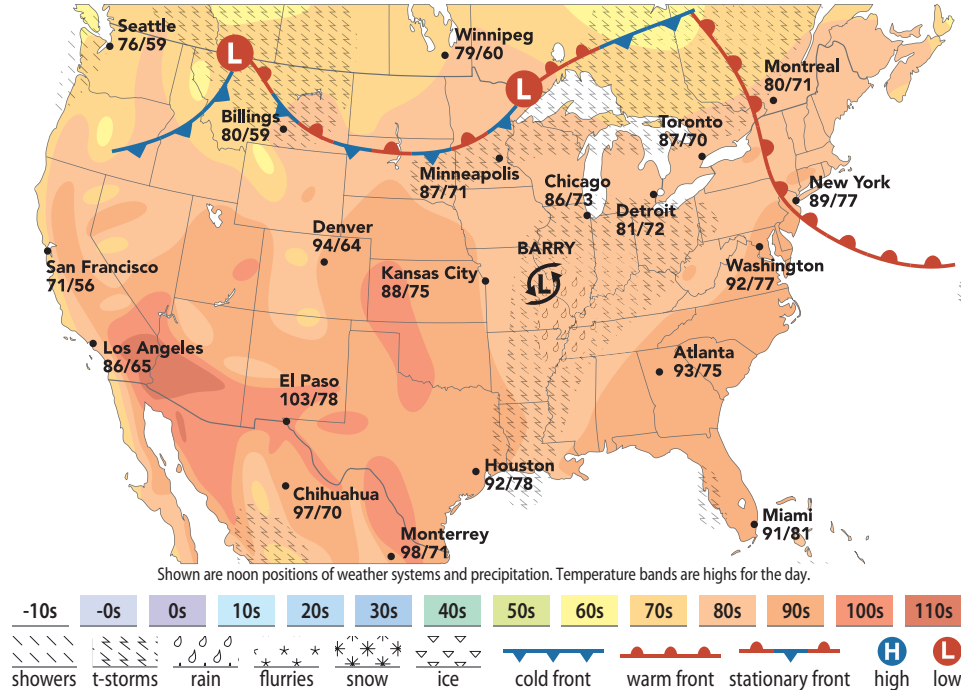
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Table with weather statistics for Pendleton and Hermiston, including temperature, precipitation, and wind data.

NATIONAL EXTREMES

Yesterday's National Extremes: (for the 48 contiguous states) High 116° in Needles, Calif. Low 33° in Mammoth Lakes, Calif.

NATIONAL WEATHER TODAY



A police officer guards the front of a road block near the Northwest Detention Center Saturday in Tacoma, Wash. A man armed with a rifle threw incendiary devices at an immigration jail in Washington state early Saturday morning, then was found dead after four police officers arrived and opened fire, authorities said.

Demonstrators return to immigration jail after attack

Associated Press

TACOMA, Wash. — Demonstrators returned to an immigration jail in Washington state a day after an armed man threw incendiary devices at the detention center and later died.

Willem Van Spronsen, 69, was found dead Saturday after four police officers arrived and opened fire.

Demonstrators returned Sunday to the privately run Tacoma Northwest Detention Center, KOMO-TV reported. The demonstrators were protesting the facility and U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement roundups that were supposed to begin Sunday. There were about 100 people gathered outside the center, the television station reported.

The facility holds migrants pending deportation proceedings. The detention center has also held immigration-seeking parents separated from

their children under President Donald Trump's "zero tolerance" policy, an effort meant to deter illegal immigration.

The center's operator, GEO Group, said in a statement it was aware of a "community gathering" Sunday. "We respect every individual's right to use their voice and express their opinions," the center said.

Bullet holes riddled the scene Sunday, *The News Tribune* reported. Police searched Van Spronsen's Vashon Island home, the Tacoma newspaper reported.

Van Spronsen's friend, Deb Bartley, told *The Seattle Times* she thinks he wanted to provoke a fatal conflict. She described him as an anarchist and anti-fascist.

"He was ready to end it," Bartley said. "I think this was a suicide. But then he was able to kind of do it in a way that spoke to his political beliefs. I know he went down there knowing he was going to die."

Van Spronsen was accused of assaulting a police officer during a protest outside the detention center in 2018, *The News Tribune* reported. According to court documents, he lunged at the officer and wrapped his arms around the officer's neck and shoulders, as the officer was trying to detain a 17-year-old protester June 26, 2018, the newspaper reported.

According to court documents, police handcuffed Van Spronsen and found that he had a collapsible baton and a folding knife in his pocket. Van Spronsen pleaded guilty to the charge of obstructing police, and he was given a deferred sentence in October, *The News Tribune* reported.

Van Spronsen had worked as a self-employed carpenter and contractor, according to court documents. He was also a folk singer, playing shows on Vashon Island and around the Seattle area, *The Times* reported.

CORRECTION: In the Friday, July 12, A1 story on the Eastern Oregon Economic Summit, a list of local legislators giving speeches during the event was incorrect. Also, Sen. Greg Walden's speech may be presented via live video during the summit.

The *East Oregonian* works hard to be accurate and sincerely regrets any errors. If you notice a mistake in the paper, please call 541-966-0818.

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