

Fire season comes to an end

2019 season shortest in two decades for lands protected by ODF

East Oregonian

SALEM — The 2019 fire season officially came to an end Tuesday on all lands protected by the Oregon Department of Forestry. The 923 wildfires on ODF-protected lands this year is about average.

However, because of favorable conditions and successful initial attacks, the 16,867 total acres burned is 56 percent below average. Based on the number of days in the fire season as an agency, 2019 was the shortest fire season in the 21st century at only 99 days, three weeks shorter than the 121-day fire season average for ODF.

“Thanks to a minimum number of wildfires on the landscape statewide, we were fortunate to have adequate resources to respond to fires on our jurisdiction,” said ODF Fire Protection Chief Ron Graham. “With two team deployments — to the Milepost 97 Fire and Ward Fire — we share in the success of the 2019 fire season with Oregon’s complete and coordinated fire protection system, including forest and range landowners, local fire districts, Tribes,



OPB Photo/Jon Mitchell, File

Flames rage next to Interstate 5 south of Canyonville in late July during the Milepost 97 Fire.

contractors, federal, state and county partners.”

The end of the fire season removes restrictions on ODF-protected lands intended to prevent wildfires, such as on backyard debris burning and use of certain equipment. Many structural fire departments in Oregon, however, still may require a permit for debris burning.

As Oregon transitions out of fire season, ODF districts across the state are shifting attention to wildfire prevention efforts. Clearing vegetation, creating defensible space around homes and keeping debris piles under control are just a few ways ODF is working with local landowners, members of the public and fellow fire response agencies to mitigate wildfire risk.

“While we are seeing cool, rainy fall weather, it is import-

ant to note conditions can change quickly,” Graham said. “Given most of the lightning this time of year is accompanied by rain, human-caused fire starts tend to increase in number. People are anxious to burn backyard debris piles and can get complacent with fire safety. We are grateful for the help of every Oregonian working together to prevent wildfires year-round.”

The start and end of fire season is set by each fire protection district based on the fuel conditions in their area. The arrival of steady, soaking rain coupled with cooler temperatures and shorter day lengths usually triggers the closure of fire season. The 2019 fire season varied in length from 122 day in ODF’s Southwest Oregon District to 78 days in the Northwest Oregon District.

Search warrant leads to solving 9 cases

By PHIL WRIGHT
East Oregonian

HERMISTON — A Morrow County Sheriff’s Office investigation into a theft of navigation equipment led to the arrest of a Hermiston man and solved a number of local cases.

The suspect, Chalen James Ottmar, 24, faces several charges. State court records show Ottmar has been on a downward spiral of crime since December 2018.

Hermiston-based Barton Laser Leveling Inc. on Aug. 6 reported the theft of equipment from a tractor near Pole Line Road and Homestead Lane outside Boardman. Morrow County Sheriff’s Office Deputy Taylor Wasserman responded to the scene, according to a news release from the sheriff’s office, and took a report for the theft of a RTK radio with receiver and a John Deere 2630 display from a John Deere tractor.

Morrow County District Attorney Justin Nelson said the theft occurred in July. He described the items as navigation equipment. The sheriff’s office reported Barton Laser valued the equipment at approximately \$20,000.

The investigation led Wasserman to the auction website eBay, where Ottmar posted the missing goods. Wasserman worked with the the Fulton County Sheriff’s Office in Illinois and others there to get the property back to the owner.

After gathering additional evidence, Wasserman obtained a search warrant for Ottmar’s residence, 19 Westview Drive, Hermiston. Members of the Morrow County Sheriff’s Office and Hermiston Police Department served the search warrant Tuesday, arrested Ott-

mar and recovered property from crimes in Morrow and Umatilla counties.

According to the news release, the goods solved nine cases in all for the Morrow County Sheriff’s Office, Umatilla County Sheriff’s Office, Hermiston Police Department, Oregon State Police and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The Morrow County Sheriff’s Office hauled Ottmar to jail in Pendleton for two counts of unauthorized entry into a motor vehicle, two counts of trespassing and two counts of aggravated theft.

State court records show Ottmar in 2014 pleaded guilty to possessing less than 4 ounces of marijuana, in 2016 he pleaded no contest to violating the basic driving rule and in 2018 he pleaded no contest to speeding, all Umatilla County cases.

This year, Ottmar faced three separate criminal cases in Umatilla County.

He pleaded guilty in May to three counts of second-degree theft for stealing dog food, a cooler and and spa pump from three people in January and received 12 months of court-supervised probation.



Ottmar

Later that month, he faced first-degree theft and second-degree burglary charges for breaking into Highland Hills Elementary School, Hermiston, on Dec. 6, 2018, and stealing Apple iPads. And in July the district attorney’s office charged Ottmar with criminal simulation and attempted third-degree theft for altering currency and trying to pass it off on June 23 at a McDonald’s. He took deals in both cases, pleading guilty on Sept. 20 to the theft and criminal simulation charges in exchange for two years of probation.

The Morrow County District Attorney’s Office on Wednesday arraigned Ottmar on preliminary charges in the latest case, including for aggravated theft, a felony. Nelson said Ottmar’s next court appearance is Oct. 31.

The delay is due to the court granting a request to release Ottmar from jail. Nelson explained Ottmar’s attorney, Steven Thomas of Pendleton, told the court Ottmar begins an addiction treatment program Monday in Eugene, and he asked the court to let him do that.

The hearing at the end of the month also means Nelson’s office has more time to present evidence to a grand jury for formal charges against Ottmar.

Hit-and-run suspect out of jail

East Oregonian

IRRIGON — Christopher Michael Swope, of Irrigon, is out of jail on a conditional release while facing 17 counts stemming from a Sept. 8 hit-and-run involving five victims.

Swope, 40, faces 17 counts in all — five counts of fourth-degree assault, six of recklessly endangering another person, one for reckless driving, all misdemeanors, and five felony counts of failure to person duties of driver to injured persons.

Morrow County Sheriff Ken Matlack reported Swope the night of Sept. 8 was driving eastbound on Highway 730 near Lewis and Clark Drive west of Irrigon when he crossed the center lane and collided with a westbound vehicle. Selina Jim, the driver of that vehicle,

and passengers Anthony Culp Jr., Anthony Culp Sr., Cougar Frank and Jade Jim-Heath, suffered non-life threatening injuries.

Swope was serving two years of probation at the time after pleading guilty in 2018 to misdemeanor fourth-degree assault, according to state court records. He took off from the crash, but the sheriff’s office caught him two days later and booked him into the Umatilla County Jail, Pendleton.

Swope on Sept. 16 asked for release from the jail, and freshman Circuit Judge Rob Collins on Sept. 19 granted the request with certain restrictions, including no contact with the victims in the case.

Swope’s next court proceeding is a pre-trial conference Oct. 17. Boardman Police Chief

Rick Stokoe said that Swope was suspected to be involved in a single-vehicle crash reported in Boardman earlier on the same evening as the Irrigon crash.

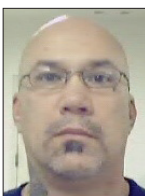
He said a caller described driving past a crashed car, but did not describe the driver, and the vehicle had left the scene when Boardman police arrived. They soon located Swope’s vehicle, which matched the description, parked at a residence. No one answered the door when they knocked.

Stokoe said Boardman police would have “loved” to be able to prevent the crash that happened later that evening, but they didn’t have a search warrant for the home or probable cause to arrest Swope. “We did our job to the best of our ability,” he said.

BRIEFLY

EOCI reports in-custody death

PENDLETON — An inmate at the Eastern Oregon Correctional Institution in Pendleton



McPhail

died Wednesday morning in the institution’s end-of-life care program, according to a press release from the state’s Department of Corrections.

Kenneth Charles McPhail, 53, entered DOC custody on March 22, 2006, from Linn County. His earliest release date was Dec. 28, 2068.

EOCI is a multicustody prison located in Pendleton that houses more than 1,600 adults in custody.

Biggest fire of the season in Echo Tuesday

ECHO — A rangeland grass fire burned 350 acres across two separate properties near Reith Road in Echo on Tuesday afternoon.

The Echo Rural Fire District responded to a call shortly after 3:30 p.m. for the fire, and eventually called for mutual aid from Umatilla County Fire District 1. Nine units total were dispatched. It took 2-1/2 hours to contain the fire.

Echo Fire Chief Delbert Gehrke said no injuries or structural damages occurred, although the fire did threaten two houses that were occupied at the time. The fire was about

a mile away from major roads.

“Both homeowners had a good buffer zone, which helped us a lot. It’s nice to come up to a house and see just regular grass or gravel, and not rangeland grasses,” he said.

Gehrke said the exact cause of the fire has yet to be determined, but that it was most likely man-made, and caused by a tumbleweed burning gone wrong. The Umatilla County non-agricultural burn ban was lifted at noon on Tuesday.

“We thought fire season was over, but this was probably the largest fire of the season,” Gehrke said. “It was surprising to us, with the cool weather. It reminds us to still be careful.”

— East Oregonian staff

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