

Coronavirus forces new approaches to fighting wildfires

By REBECCA BOONE
Associated Press

BOISE, Idaho — They are two disasters that require opposite responses: To save lives and reduce the spread of COVID-19, people are being told to remain isolated. But in a wildfire, thousands of firefighters must work in close quarters for weeks at a time.

Wildfires have already broken out in Texas and Florida, and agencies are scrambling to finish plans for a new approach. They are considering waivers for some training requirements to previously certified crew members, and moving some training online.

Other proposals include limiting fire engines to a driver and one passenger, requiring other crew members to ride in additional vehicles. They may scrap the normal campsite catering tents in favor of military-issue MREs, or “Meals Ready to Eat,” to reduce touching serving utensils.

Federal resources for fire-fighting efforts may be more scarce, leaving states to deal with more fires.

In light of the “unprecedented challenge” of the pandemic, Forest Service resources will be used “only when there is a reasonable expectation of success



In this Nov. 26, 2019, file photo, firefighters battle the Cave Fire as it flares up along Highway 154 in the Los Padres National Forest above Santa Barbara, Calif.

in protecting life and critical property and infrastructure,” says Forest Service Chief Victoria Christiansen.

Wildland fire camps have always had a reputation for spreading illness. Norovirus outbreaks have occurred and outbreaks of illnesses collectively dubbed the “camp crud” are yearly occurrences for many.

The job is so demanding that it’s typically done by younger, healthy and physically fit people. But the nature of the job also works against them: firefight-

ers regularly experiencing high stress, inhaling smoke and dust and dealing with poor sleeping and personal hygiene.

A suck-it-up and tough-it-out culture doesn’t help either, said Jessica Garetto, spokeswoman for the National Interagency Fire Center in Boise, Idaho. The center coordinates logistics for 14,000 federal firefighters and thousands more state, local and private crews.

“We have really been trying to educate and change that culture because not just

in this situation but in others, it’s not OK to just tough it out if something’s wrong,” she said.

You don’t have to look too far back in history to see how the one-two punch of a pandemic and wildfire can decimate communities. The 1918 influenza pandemic killed an estimated 50 to 100 million people worldwide. In October 1918, sparks from a passing train ignited fields near Cloquet and Moose Lake, Minnesota.

Four hundred and fifty people were killed in an

area that spanned 1,500 square miles. There were 21,000 injuries and 52,000 displaced people, said Curt Brown, a journalist and the author of “Minnesota, 1918.” The aftermath made it easy to spread disease.

“It was the perfect situation to spread the flu — if you were lucky enough to survive the wildfire, you were crammed into evacuee housing,” he said. At least 100 people died of the flu in evacuee housing, an estimate Brown called conservative.

There also are concerns about preparations not being done. Typically, agencies spend months and millions of dollars preparing for wildfire season — clearing brush and doing prescribed burns to reduce the plants that feed massive wildfires.

That’s not happening in many places because some fire managers are trying to allow employees to abide by social distancing guidelines as long as possible and to curb smoke from the prescribed burns during the pandemic. Smoke can make breathing more difficult for people with asthma and other lung conditions.

“The biggest issue I see right now is that the prescribed burns aren’t getting done,” says Casey Judd, the president of the Federal Wildland Fire Ser-

vices Association, which advocates on behalf of federal firefighters in 42 states. “That’s going to increase the fire load.”

He said leaders should have started working on a coronavirus plan for firefighters months ago. “I’m not suggesting they’re dragging their feet, but obviously they’re trying to figure it out just like everyone is,” he said.

Kerry Greene, an emergency management specialist and spokeswoman with the U.S. Forest Service, said although the plans haven’t been released yet, they’re coming together. The agency is already working to follow directives from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention as well as infectious disease guidelines created in 2008 after a bird flu epidemic.

Like many, fire managers are to some extent flying blind.

“Some of the things we’re probably going to have to learn as we go,” Greene said.

For most people, the virus causes mild or moderate symptoms, such as fever and cough that clear up in two to three weeks. For some, especially older adults and people with existing health problems, it can cause more severe illness, including pneumonia and death.

Forecast for Pendleton Area

TODAY

Cooler with some sun

SUNDAY

Plenty of sunshine

MONDAY

Sunny to partly cloudy

TUESDAY

Partly sunny

WEDNESDAY

Sunshine

PENDLETON TEMPERATURE FORECAST									
60°	31°	55°	30°	58°	39°	67°	46°	63°	41°

HERMISTON TEMPERATURE FORECAST									
67°	33°	61°	30°	64°	38°	72°	47°	68°	42°

AccuWeather

DOWNLOAD THE FREE APP

OREGON FORECAST

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

Forecasts and graphics provided by AccuWeather, Inc. ©2020

ALMANAC

PENDLETON through 3 p.m. yest.

TEMP.	HIGH	LOW
Yesterday	71°	44°
Normals	60°	38°
Records	87° (1925)	24° (2010)

PRECIPITATION

24 hours ending 3 p.m.	0.00"
Month to date	0.03"
Normal month to date	0.44"
Year to date	4.98"
Last year to date	7.14"
Normal year to date	4.44"

HERMISTON through 3 p.m. yest.

TEMP.	HIGH	LOW
Yesterday	73°	35°
Normals	63°	39°
Records	80° (1985)	22° (1933)

PRECIPITATION

24 hours ending 3 p.m.	0.00"
Month to date	Trace
Normal month to date	0.24"
Year to date	0.48"
Last year to date	3.80"
Normal year to date	3.38"

WINDS (in mph)

	Today	Sun.
Boardman	N 7-14	ENE 4-8
Pendleton	NW 10-20	N 4-8

SUN AND MOON

Sunrise today	6:16 a.m.
Sunset tonight	7:37 p.m.
Moonrise today	none
Moonset today	8:45 a.m.

Last

New

First

Full

Apr 14

Apr 22

Apr 30

May 7

Oregon’s snowpack 109% of normal

Associated Press

PORTLAND — Although Oregon’s mountain snow accumulation started slowly this season, the snowpack now appears to be in good shape.

Recent snowstorms have lifted the state’s overall average snowpack to 109% of normal as of April 8, compared with 91% of normal at the beginning of March, according to the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service.

The highest totals are in Eastern Oregon, the *Capital Press* reported.

The Willamette Valley — home of 60% of Oregon’s population and nearly half its gross farm sales — is also above average for snow, at 110% of normal.

Agriculture relies on snowpack to act as a natu-

ral reservoir into the spring and summer, gradually replenishing streams and filling reservoirs used to water crops and livestock.

Snowpack in Oregon got off to a slow start in November and December of 2019 before rebounding significantly in January. February and early March brought another round of warmer and drier weather, which turned to snow again by month’s end.

Scott Oviatt, snow survey supervisor for NRCS Oregon, said snowpack typically peaks in April and May across the state.

“The key is going to be how quickly or rapidly that snowmelt runs off,” he said. “We don’t want it to come out in a sudden flush, with warm temperatures or rain on snow.”

That sudden flush was

felt especially hard earlier this year, when those conditions contributed to massive flooding on the Umatilla and Walla Walla rivers in Northeast Oregon and Southeast Washington, damaging farms and homes.

Despite relatively strong snowpack, the optimism is tempered by lower-than-normal total precipitation, Oviatt said, which remains at 80% statewide.

The driest areas are in Southwest Oregon. Gov. Kate Brown has already declared a drought emergency in Klamath County.

There is still time for areas facing water shortages to recover, Oviatt said.

“We’re not necessarily in complete dire straits, but time is running out,” he said.

BRIEFLY

Oregon will increase food stamp funding amid coronavirus pandemic

SALEM — Oregon will funnel an extra \$60 million into its food stamp program to help people buy groceries amid the economic fallout of the coronavirus pandemic.

The Department of Human Services said Thursday that the money will be split between April and May to increase the monthly amount people receive through the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program.

“Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Oregonians are facing unprecedented economic instability and food insecurity,” the agency’s director, Fariborz Pakseresh, said in a statement. “This emergency assistance will help address the food needs our neighbors and communities are suddenly facing.”

The \$60 million will cover the costs of giving all recipients the maximum amount of assistance allowed for their household size, said Jennifer Greutz, a DHS spokeswoman.

The maximum varies, from \$194 for one person to \$646 for four people.

Households already receiving the maximum monthly amount will not receive any additional benefits, the agency said. Recipients eligible for the additional money will receive the new benefits automatically.

The agency did not identify the funding source of the increased benefits.

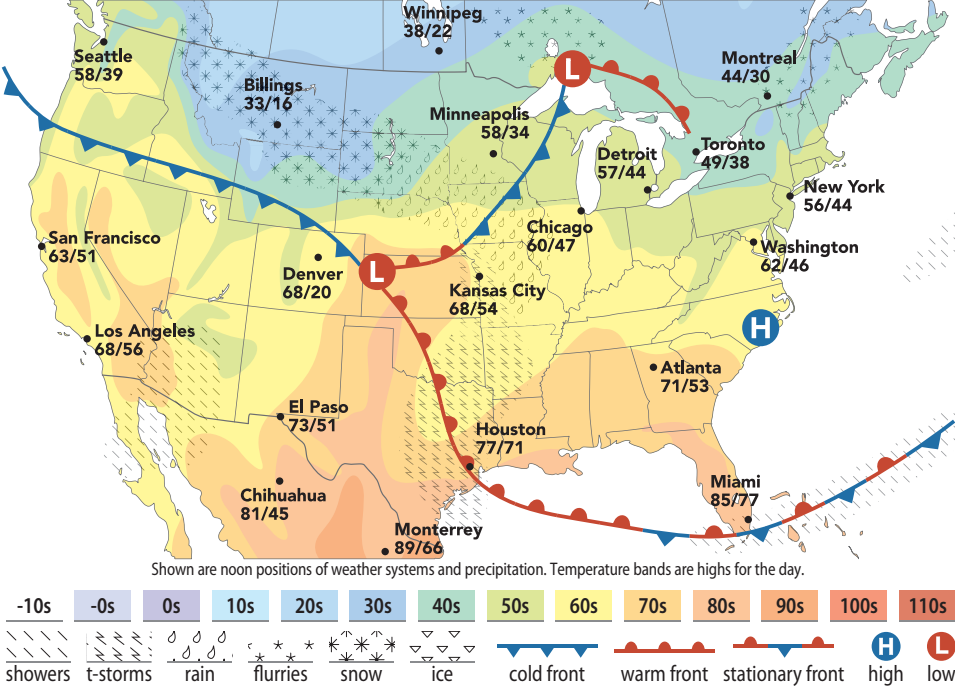
— *The Oregonian*

NATIONAL EXTREMES

Yesterday’s National Extremes: (for the 48 contiguous states)

High 96° in Opa Locka, Fla. Low 13° in Plentywood, Mont.

NATIONAL WEATHER TODAY



CORRECTION: In the Page A1 story “M-F drive-in theater to reopen for business,” published on Thursday, April 9, the story misstated the theater’s plan to reopen. Owner Mike Spiess said the drive-in will begin showing movies April 17 only if they get permission from the necessary government agencies and the owners feel it is safe to do so. A final decision has not been made. They will start by opening the snack bar for takeout on Fridays and Saturdays from 4-8 p.m. Because of the way COVID-19 has halted the release of most new movies, they are not sure yet what movie will be shown at the date they reopen. They also would not go car to car to take orders for food.

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.

EAST OREGONIAN

— Founded Oct. 16, 1875 —

211 S.E. Byers Ave., Pendleton 541-276-2211
333 E. Main St., Hermiston 541-567-6211
Office hours: Monday through Friday, 8 a.m. to 5 p.m.
Closed major holidays

EastOregonian.com

To subscribe, call 1-800-522-0255
or go online to EastOregonian.com
and click on 'Subscribe'

East Oregonian (USPS 164-980) is published daily except Sunday,
Monday and postal holidays, by the EO Media Group, 211 S.E. Byers
Ave. Pendleton, OR 97801. Periodicals postage paid at Pendleton, OR.
Postmaster: send address changes to
East Oregonian, 211 S.E. Byers Ave. Pendleton, OR 97801.
Copyright © 2020, EO Media Group

Subscriber services:
For mail delivery, online access, vacation stops
or delivery concerns call 1-800-522-0255 ext. 1

SUBSCRIPTION RATES

	Local home delivery	Savings (cover price)
EZPay	\$13/month	60 percent
52 weeks	\$173.67	41 percent
26 weeks	\$91.86	38 percent
13 weeks	\$47.77	36 percent

*EZ Pay = one-year rate with a monthly credit
or debit card/check charge

Single copy price:
\$1.50 Tuesday through Saturday

Circulation Dept.
800-781-3214

ADVERTISING

Regional Publisher and Revenue Director:
• Christopher Rush
541-278-2669 • crush@eomediagroup.com

Advertising Manager:
• Angela Treadwell
541-966-0827 • atreadwell@eastoregonian.com

Multimedia Consultants:
• Lora Jenkins
541-276-2214 • ljenkins@eastoregonian.com
• Jeanne Jewett
541-564-4531 • jjewett@eastoregonian.com
• Audra Workman
541-564-4538 • aworkman@eastoregonian.com

Business Office Coordinator
• Dayle Stinson
541-278-2670 • dstinson@eastoregonian.com

Classified & Legal Advertising

1-800-962-2819 or 541-278-2678
classifieds@eastoregonian.com or legals@eastoregonian.com

NEWS

• To submit news tips and press releases:
call 541-966-0818 or email news@eastoregonian.com
• To submit community events, calendar items and Your EO News:
email community@eastoregonian.com or call Renee Struthers
at 541-966-0818.
• To submit engagements, weddings and anniversaries:
email rstuthers@eastoregonian.com or visit eastoregonian.com/community/announcements
• To submit sports or outdoors information or tips:
541-966-0838 • sports@eastoregonian.com

Business Office Manager:
541-966-0824

COMMERCIAL PRINTING

Production Manager: Christopher Rush
541-278-2669 • crush@eomediagroup.com