

Wildfire season starts early in Wallowa County

By KATY NESBITT
For The Observer

ENTERPRISE — Before the state had the opportunity to declare fire season in Northeastern Oregon, two fires erupted late last week in the remote canyons of Wallowa County.

Early morning lightning storms Friday, June 4, started a handful of fires, two becoming large enough to call in smokejumpers and rappellers to access the Joseph Canyon and Dry Creek fires, burning on private land and the Nez Perce Tribe's Precious Lands Wildlife Area.

The fire reportedly ignited on Bureau of Land Management lands, but soon crossed over into Washington state lands protected by the Oregon Department of Forestry.

Until June 6, the U.S. Forest Service was overseeing the coordination of the Dry Creek Fire to the southeast of Joseph Canyon.

A spring drought combined with large, woody debris registering very low moisture and live fuels, such as brush and shrubs, are extremely dry, adding ample fuel to the fire. According to Matt Howard, ODF deputy administrator, high winds shut down air operations on June 5 when



Andy Hayes/Wallowa-Whitman National Forest

The Joseph Canyon Fire burns on Sunday, June 6, 2021. The fire is burning in and around the Grande Ronde and Joseph Creek areas of critical environmental concern on the Vale District Bureau of Land Management and in the Nez Perce Precious Lands Wildlife Area, which is protected by Oregon Department of Forestry. Firefighters are working to protect ecological, geological and cultural resources along with private property, rangeland and timber.

the Joseph Canyon Fire jumped Cottonwood Creek to the east and Joseph Creek to the west.

Adding to dry conditions and high winds, the terrain is some of the most difficult in the Northwest.

"In my opinion it is in one of the toughest spots

due to inaccessibility, steep terrain, remoteness and rattlesnakes," he said.

Although containment remains at 0%, fire spread was limited to 300 acres, for a total of 4,000 acres at the end of June 6. The fires are being battled mostly from the air, with crews on the

ground scouting, checking for hot spots, burnout operations and assisting pilots with water and retardant drops.

As of June 7, the fires transitioned from two Type 3 overhead teams to the Interagency Type 2 Northwest Team 7 led by Jason Loomis.

Brian Anderson, a district ranger for the Wallowa Mountains Office, greeted a group of 50 people assigned to the fires at the Wallowa County Fairgrounds' Cloverleaf Hall June 6. As his agency's representative on the fire, he said the goal was a full perimeter control of the fires.

"It's too early and the conditions and outlooks are not favorable, so we are going to keep the fires to minimum sizes and durations," he said.

Anderson listed valuable rangeland grazed by public land allotment permittees as at risk from the fires as well as infrastructure, recreational and cultural resources, while Mitch Thomas of the BLM, who helped oversee the Joseph Canyon Fire, said some of the area within that footprint includes areas of ecological, cultural and geologic concern.

The troops on the ground are some of the Northwest's

most experienced firefighters — smoke jumpers, hot shots, and helicopter rappellers — all accustomed to being dispatched to the roughest, least accessible terrain.

Joe Hessel, ODF Northeast Oregon forester, said the two fires were managed the first few days by four agencies in two states. He said coordination among the agencies is working well due to long-standing relationships with each other and landowners.

Ahead of Team 7's arrival, La Grande Unit Forester Logan McCrae served as the Joseph Canyon Fire's operations chief. He said on June 5 the fire was burning actively until dark on all flanks. He said as much as 90% of the fireline had been scouted and crews had a successful burnout operation between Cottonwood Creek and the fire to decrease fuels and reduce fire severity.

As of the morning of June 7, the Joseph Creek Fire had consumed 4,000 acres.

Firefighters have little success with Dry Creek Fire

McCall, Idaho, smoke-jumper Jason Foreman was the initial incident commander on the Dry Creek Fire. He said he and crew members jumped the Dry Creek Fire at 2 p.m. June 4

and watched it grow from 20 acres to 200 acres.

"We had little success initially due to fire behavior," he said.

Zach Tayer, a Wallowa County-based Forest Service firefighter, served as the operations chief ahead of the transfer to Team 7. He said two hotshot crews, nine rappellers and two helicopters were working on the fire's northern division, using the Downy Gulch Road to contain the blaze.

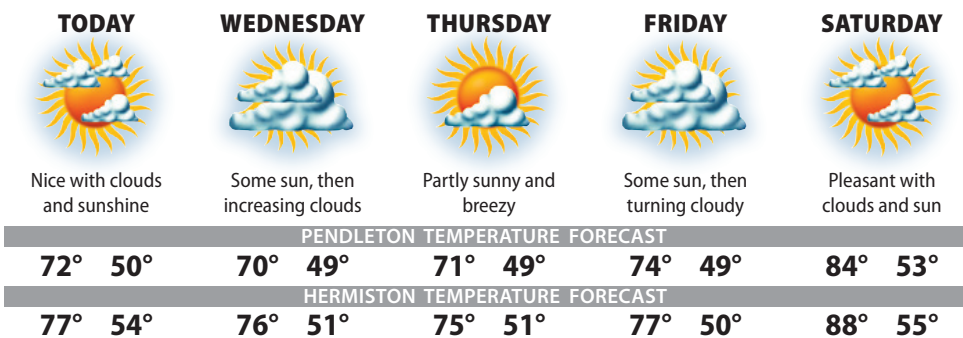
On the Hilo Division, Tayer said firefighters were securing the north edge and working east near Cook Creek.

At risk on the national forest are a handful of grazing allotments. Tayer said cows grazing on Rye Ridge, southwest of the Dry Creek Fire, were removed from their pasture for safety.

Crews are camped all around the fires' perimeters, Tayer said. Food and supplies are driven in or delivered via helicopter. In some cases the staging areas are a two-hour drive from Enterprise.

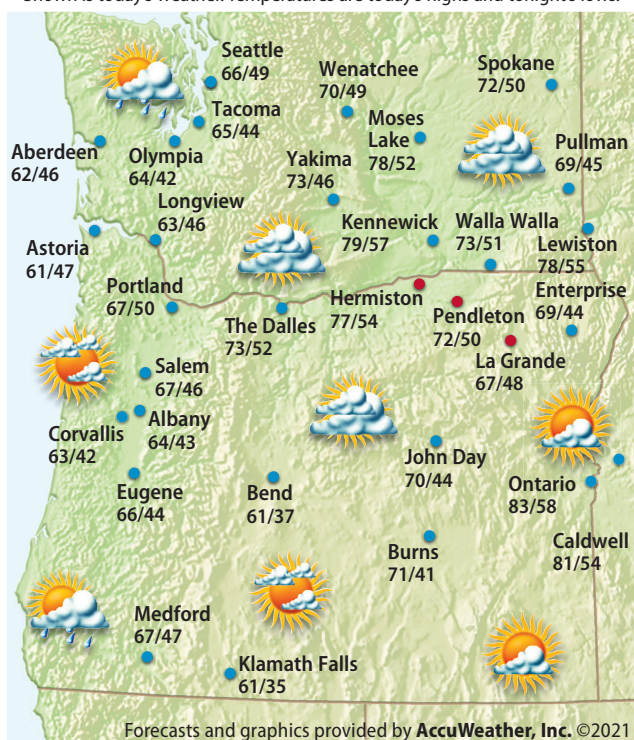
Crews were able to make some headway on the two fires June 6 as temperatures dropped, humidity rose and winds died down. Tayer said the goal was to get as much headway on the fire before temperatures warm up later this week.

Forecast for Pendleton Area



OREGON FORECAST

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



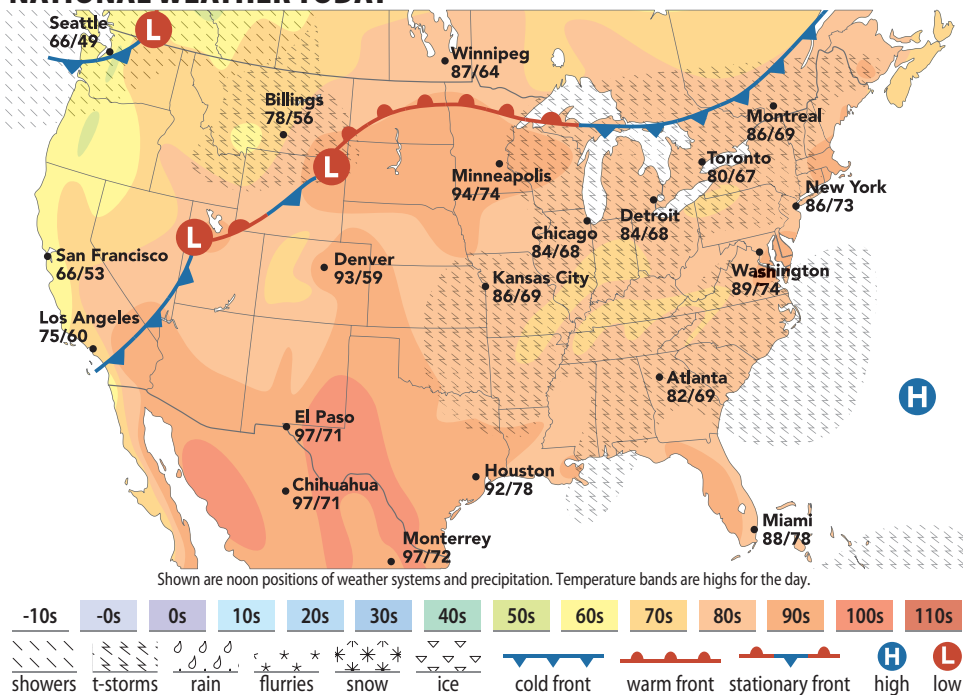
ALMANAC

PENDLETON through 3 p.m. yest.				
TEMP.	HIGH	LOW		
Yesterday	63°	39°		
Normals	76°	51°		
Records	104° (1931)	34° (1919)		
PRECIPITATION				
24 hours ending 3 p.m.	0.00"			
Month to date	Trace			
Normal month to date	0.40"			
Year to date	4.03"			
Last year to date	7.92"			
Normal year to date	6.91"			
HERMISTON through 3 p.m. yest.				
TEMP.	HIGH	LOW		
Yesterday	65°	46°		
Normals	77°	52°		
Records	102° (2016)	40° (2002)		
PRECIPITATION				
24 hours ending 3 p.m.	0.00"			
Month to date	0.00"			
Normal month to date	0.19"			
Year to date	1.70"			
Last year to date	1.43"			
Normal year to date	5.30"			
WINDS (in mph)				
	Today	Wed.		
Boardman	WSW 6-12	WSW 7-14		
Pendleton	W 6-12	W 7-14		
SUN AND MOON				
Sunrise today	5:06 a.m.			
Sunset tonight	8:43 p.m.			
Moonrise today	4:07 a.m.			
Moonset today	7:20 p.m.			
New First Full Last				
	June 10	June 17	June 24	July 1

NATIONAL EXTREMES

Yesterday's National Extremes: (for the 48 contiguous states)
High 106° in Pecos, Texas Low 27° in Afton, Wyo.

NATIONAL WEATHER TODAY



Elkhorn Drive Scenic Byway open from Anthony Lakes to Granite

By JAYSON JACOBY
Baker City Herald

BAKER CITY — The Elkhorn Drive scenic byway is a 106-mile loop, but by late spring in most years just a few sections of the paved road, the total distance little longer than a football field, prevent drivers from making the full trip.

This would have been one of those years.

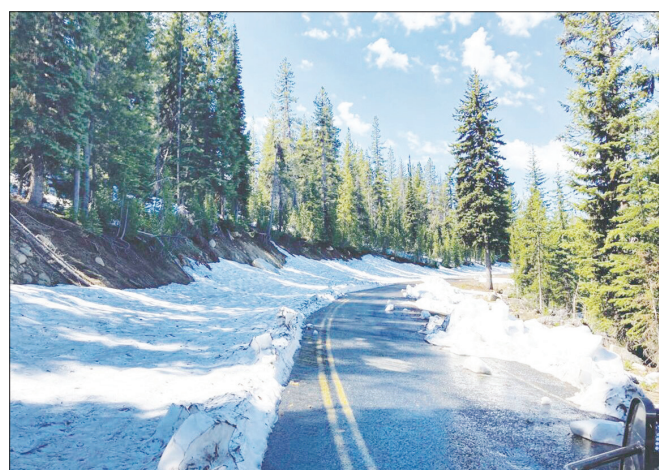
Until a crew from Anthony Lakes Mountain Resort got involved.

The obstacle is snow, a substance that crew has quite a lot of experience with since their usual task is moving snow during the ski season.

On Tuesday, June 1, Anthony Lakes workers finished plowing enough lingering snow to clear one full lane through the higher elevations of the byway, said Chelsea Judy, marketing director for Anthony Lakes.

In most years, snow blocks the two-lane byway until mid to late June. In 2020 the route opened the last week of that month.

Judy said Anthony Lakes officials, after consulting with the U.S. Forest Service, which oversees the section



Peter Johnson/Contributed Photo

The Elkhorn Drive scenic byway on Thursday, June 3, 2021.

of the byway most prone to persistent snowdrifts, decided to punch through those drifts.

"It's something we took on to help people be able to get up and over," she said.

"Over," in this case, meaning over Elkhorn Summit, the 7,392-foot pass about two miles west of Anthony Lakes.

Elkhorn Summit is the second-highest point reached by a paved road in Oregon. The only higher paved road in the state is the Rim Drive in Crater Lake National Park, which tops out at about 7,900 feet.

The longest-lasting snowdrifts usually are along the 2

miles or so beyond Elkhorn Summit, where the byway crosses some areas sheltered from the sun.

By punching through drifts in that area, the Anthony Lakes crew gave travelers a way to access places, such as the North Fork John Day River campground and the Blue Mountains Scenic Byway to Ukiah, via Anthony Lakes rather than through Sumpter and Granite.

In the future, Anthony Lakes will strive to open at least one lane by Memorial Day weekend, although that goal might not always be feasible depending on the amount of snow, Judy said.

IN BRIEF

ODOT holds open house online for curb ramp upgrade

WALLOWA COUNTY — People with mobility issues soon will have a much easier time getting to and from sidewalks in Eastern Oregon, according to an Oregon Department of Transportation press release.

Starting in 2022, ODOT will repair and upgrade hundreds of sidewalk curb ramps along state highways in several communities in Umatilla, Morrow, Wallowa and Baker counties. The work is part of a state-wide effort to bring curb ramps into compliance with Americans with Disabilities Act

standards to improve mobility and safety.

To provide updated information and collect feedback, ODOT is holding an online open house through Friday, June 18. During this time, residents can visit <https://tinyurl.com/EasternOregonADA2022> to review project information, maps, photos and videos or submit questions and feedback.

Eastern Oregon communities that are part of this 2022 construction project include Pendleton, Pilot Rock, Ukiah, Milton-Freewater, Helix, Athena, Wallowa, Lostine, Joseph, Heppner, Ione, Lexington and Baker City.

— EO Media Group

CORRECTIONS: 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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