

Northeast Oregon native leading effort to stop nation's largest wildfire

By JAYSON JACOBY
Baker City Herald

BAKER CITY — Joe Hessel remembers when the Dooley Mountain Fire, which burned 20,000 acres south of Baker City over several days, was a “giant” blaze.

Nowadays he's coordinating the effort to stem a fire that burned more land than that every day.

For almost two weeks straight.

This yawning difference between what was typical early in Hessel's career, and what is commonplace today, illustrates his longevity in a way perhaps more compelling than a couple of numbers can.

Certainly Hessel, who lives in Baker City and is in his 38th summer amidst the smoke and the flames, can attest to the changes time has wrought when it comes to fighting wildland fires in Oregon and across the West.

The Dooley Mountain Fire, sparked by lightning in late July 1989, was at the time the biggest blaze in Baker County in several decades.

It also was an abnormally large fire by Oregon standards.

But today, the acreage charred that distant summer would occupy a scarcely noticeable corner of the fire that has kept Hessel away



Bootleg Fire Incident Command/Contributed Photo

Columns of smoke rise from the wildfire burning in Klamath and Lake counties Sunday, July 18, 2021. The fire as of July 26 became the largest in the U.S., approaching 410,000 acres.

from his Baker City home, and his La Grande office, for almost two weeks.

Hessel, 54, who is the Northeast District forester for the Oregon Department of Forestry, is one of three incident commanders for the Bootleg Fire, a lightning fire burning in Klamath and Lake counties in south-central Oregon.

Approaching 410,000 acres as of Monday, July 26, it's the nation's biggest blaze, the one responsible for much of the smoke that has clogged Baker

Valley at times this month.

The one that has spawned smoke plumes which look, from the vantage point of space satellites, similar to a cataclysmic volcanic eruption.

Hessel said his experience on the Bootleg Fire has led him to ponder, as he sometimes has over the past 32 years, the days when he worked on the Dooley Mountain Fire as a firefighter with the ODF.

“That was one of the first big fires I was involved in,

and it left an impact on my mind,” Hessel said in a phone interview from the Bootleg Fire camp.

The Dooley Mountain Fire affected Hessel in a couple of ways.

He remembers vividly the photograph that S. John Collins, retired Baker City Herald photojournalist, took from Main Street in downtown Baker City on July 30, 1989. The photo shows the fire's smoke cloud looming above the city's historic buildings, the angle of the

lens making the blaze seem much closer than it was (the fire never got within about eight miles of town).

Hessel calls the photo an “iconic image.”

But that acreage figure — 20,000 — was memorable, too.

In 1989, its size made the Dooley Mountain Fire an outlier.

It was a time when firefighters considered even a 500-acre fire a significant blaze.

But then Hessel, who started his firefighting career with ODF at age 16, compares Dooley Mountain to Bootleg.

“This fire grew an average of 30,000 acres for 13 days straight,” he said.

The Bootleg Fire is the sort of blaze that requires a group of specialists — what's known as an “overhead team” or “incident management team” — to coordinate the efforts of hundreds or even thousands of people, as well as bulldozers and other equipment on the ground, and air tankers and helicopters above.

Almost 2,400 people were assigned to the Bootleg Fire.

Hessel, who heads one of the ODF's three overhead teams, said they have been called out more often, and for longer periods, over the past several years.

He said it has become

increasingly difficult for agencies to find employees willing to potentially give up much of their summer, to forego family vacations in favor of traveling hundreds of miles to work on a big blaze.

“We used to go out maybe only once in a summer,” Hessel said. “One of our teams was out five times last year.”

The Bootleg Fire is his team's second assignment this summer. The first, also in Klamath County, was the Cutoff Fire in June.

Hessel, whose dad was a Forest Service smokejumper and manager of the firefighting air center in La Grande while he was growing up, said incident management teams typically are assigned to a fire for 14 days, with the potential to extend the stay to 21 days.

Team members then return home for a couple days.

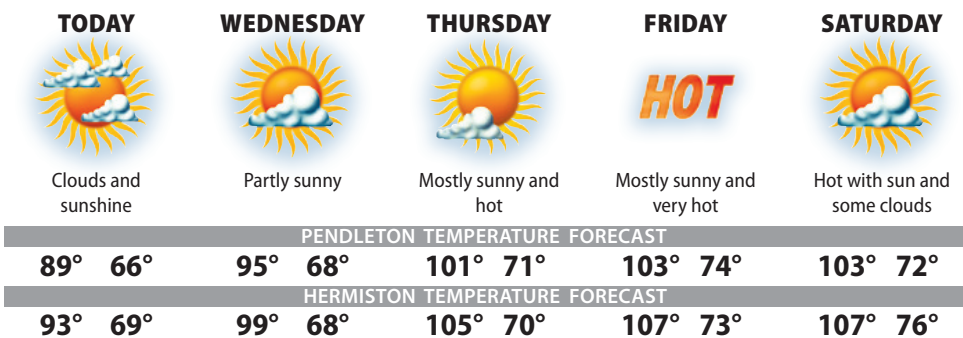
Hessel, who was sent to the Bootleg Fire on July 10, said he doubts he'll return home before July 27.

And after his time off, he said his team will be “back on the board” — meaning they're available to be assigned to another fire.

And with most of Oregon enduring extreme fire danger, Hessel doesn't expect to wait long for his next job.

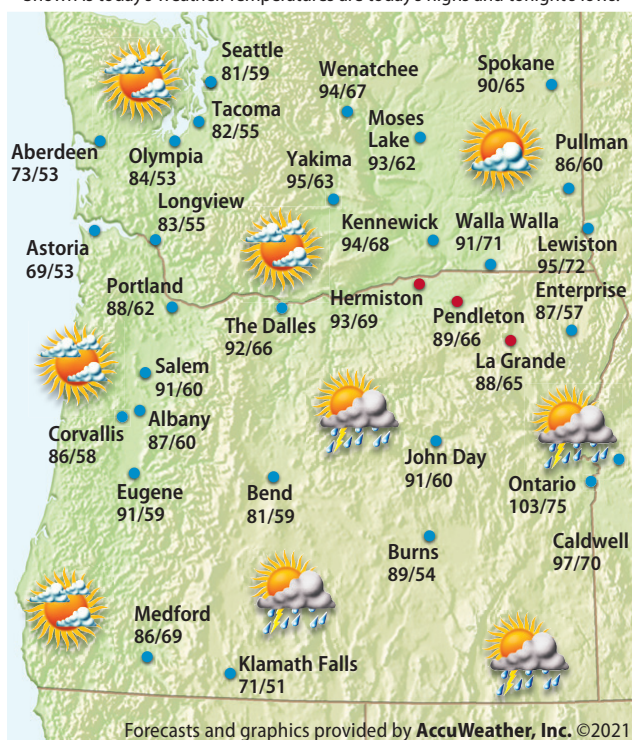
“It's become a recurring theme every summer,” Hessel said.

Forecast for Pendleton Area



OREGON FORECAST

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



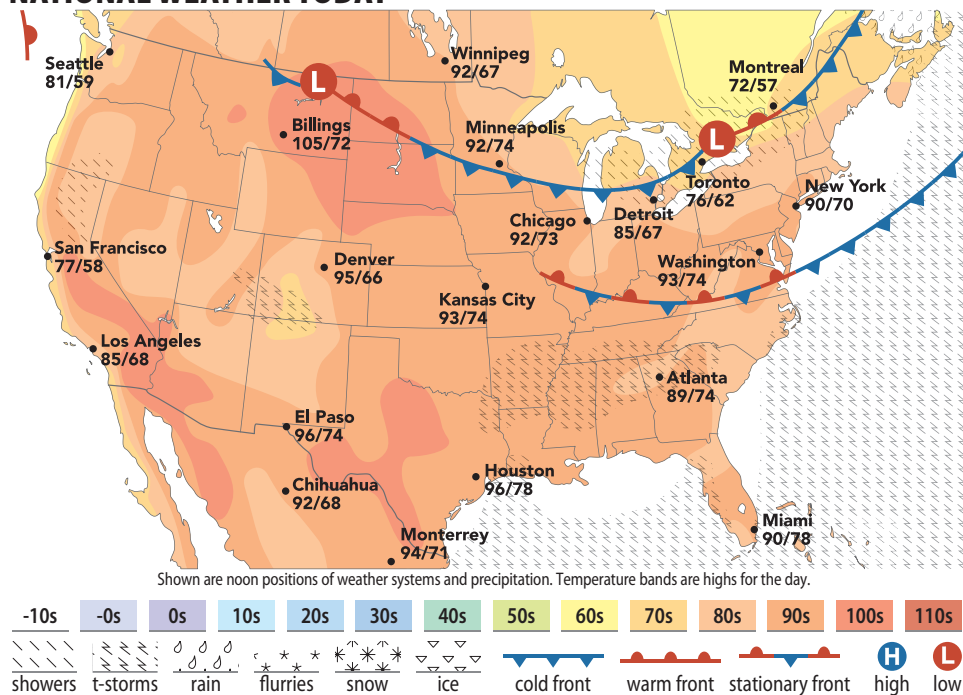
ALMANAC

PENDLETON through 3 p.m. yest.			
TEMP.	HIGH 87° LOW 61°		
Yesterday	87° 61°		
Normals	92° 60°		
Records	109° (1928) 40° (1908)		
PRECIPITATION	24 hours ending 3 p.m. 0.00"		
Month to date	Trace		
Normal month to date	0.31"		
Year to date	4.34"		
Last year to date	8.63"		
Normal year to date	8.26"		
HERMISTON through 3 p.m. yest.			
TEMP.	HIGH 91° LOW 64°		
Yesterday	91° 64°		
Normals	95° 60°		
Records	109° (1939) 45° (1936)		
PRECIPITATION	24 hours ending 3 p.m. 0.00"		
Month to date	Trace		
Normal month to date	0.10"		
Year to date	1.93"		
Last year to date	1.66"		
Normal year to date	5.12"		
WINDS (in mph)			
Today	SW 7-14		
Wed.	SW 4-8		
Pendleton	W 6-12 WNW 6-12		
SUN AND MOON			
Sunrise today	5:33 a.m.		
Sunset tonight	8:30 p.m.		
Moonrise today	10:53 p.m.		
Moonset today	9:31 a.m.		
Last	New	First	Full
July 31	Aug 8	Aug 15	Aug 22

NATIONAL EXTREMES

Yesterday's National Extremes: (for the 48 contiguous states)
High 104° in Durant, Okla. Low 37° in West Yellowstone, Mont.

NATIONAL WEATHER TODAY



Trump-Biden voting split aligns with rates

BY AIMEE GREEN
The Oregonian

SALEM — What's true across the nation appears to be true in Oregon: If you're a Republican, you're less likely to be vaccinated against COVID-19.

The Oregonian looked at the county-by-county statistics of Oregonians inoculated against the coronavirus and saw a clear correlation: The 10 counties with the lowest percentages of residents vaccinated all voted — by a landslide — for Donald Trump in the last presidential election.

That's Lake, Malheur, Umatilla, Grant, Harney, Gilliam, Morrow, Union, Douglas and Baker counties.

Eight of the 10 counties with the highest vaccination rates voted overwhelmingly for Joseph Biden. That's Washington, Hood River, Multnomah, Benton, Lincoln, Deschutes, Lane and Clackamas.

Polk and Tillamook — where Trump beat Biden by slim margins of less than 2 percentage points — also made Oregon's top 10 list of most-immunized counties.

Another way to look at it? Compare the most-Republican county in the state — Lake — with the most-Democratic — Multnomah. Eight out of 10 voters in Lake County voted for Trump in November 2020, and 35% of residents 16 and older in the county received at least one shot of COVID-19 vaccine as of early July.

Conversely, nearly 8 out of 10 voters in Multnomah County chose Biden, and 73% of residents 16 and older — more than

double the figure in Lake County — had received at least one jab.

Asked about Lake County's low inoculation rate, James Williams, chairman of the County Commission, bristled at the correlation between voting and vaccinations.

“If you are looking to attack or degrade the majority (or any part) of Lake County's population, based around their political affiliation and/or their medical choices,” Williams wrote in an email, “I would say that it not only shows a shameful personal bias on your part, but possibly the need to find a new profession.”

Meanwhile, George Murdock, chair of the Umatilla County Board of Commissioners, said he's a Republican and got vaccinated on the first day he was eligible. “Mind boggling” is how he described the Republican-Democrat divide.

“It just doesn't make any sense to me,” Murdock said. “There's absolutely no reason for it to be polarized between political parties.”

Umatilla County, where 64% voted for Trump, has the third lowest vaccination rate in the state, with just more than 41% of residents 16 and older having received at least one shot.

Murdock, 78, is vocal about his vaccination status and the story of his daughter, 46, who still is a COVID-19 longhailer seven months after she came down with the virus.

In Oregon, it's also worth noting the counties with the highest rates of vaccine hesitancy or resistance are generally the smallest and most rural in the state. Some observers say that might contribute to lower vaccination rates: Residents don't perceive COVID-19 as a significant threat.

IN BRIEF

Starkey Experimental Forest and Range closed to overnight use

LA GRANDE — The U.S. Forest Service announced it closed the Starkey Experimental Forest and Range to overnight camping or other overnight uses in response to extreme fire danger.

Starkey remains open to public entry, but public uses must adhere to fire-prevention measures for the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest under Phase C Public Use Restrictions.

“The extreme fire danger this early in the fire season necessitated our decision to close Starkey to overnight camping,” said Mike Wisdom, a research wildlife biologist with the Forest Service's Pacific Northwest Research Station. “We will be monitoring fire risk and how best to adapt to the situation going forward.”

The 25,000-acre experimental forest and

range is 28 miles southwest of La Grande on the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest. The Pacific Northwest Research Station and the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest jointly manage the area, formally designated for research in 1940, for collaborative studies of deer, elk and cattle and their interactions with public land uses. The Forest Service partners with the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife to conduct wildlife management at Starkey, which includes hunting.

Planned public hunts, under ODFW, begin Sunday, Aug. 1, at Starkey and will occur as proposed for hunters who have successfully drawn a controlled hunt permit. Hunters are being contacted to share fire restrictions and ensure they are aware of the no-camping restriction.

Hunters can camp at sites on the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest outside of Starkey.

— East Oregonian

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