



Contributed Photo

Smoke expands Saturday, Sept. 3, 2022, from the Nebo fire in the Eagle Cap Wilderness in Northeastern Oregon.

## Wildfire:

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Freezeout Road and north along the Upper Imnaha Road. Firing operations will continue along the Upper Imnaha Road to secure the fire backing down drainages to the east. State Fire Marshal task forces will continue to assist with structure protection along the Imnaha Road and ensuring the protection of life and property in the community of Imnaha.

Brown's declaration cleared the way for the State Fire Marshal to mobilize firefighters and equipment to assist local resources battling the fire and further support a coordinated response.

Local mutual aid and federal resources are on scene working to slow the fire's progress. An OSFM Incident Management Team assumed unified command Sept. 3 with federal partners. OSFM will bring in four additional task forces through the Oregon Fire Mutual Aid System from Lane, Clatsop, Washington and Yamhill counties to assist in the response.

The Double Creek Fire is a "full suppression" blaze, which means officials are trying to douse it as soon as possible.

The Wallowa County Sheriff's Office on Sept. 4 modified the evacuation levels for the Double Creek Fire. A Level 3 "Go Now" is in effect for the town of Imnaha and south to Freezeout Road. The Upper Imnaha Road, Hat Point Road and Wallowa Mountain Loop Road (Forest Service Road 39) are closed. A Level 2 "Get Set" is in effect for the area from the town of Imnaha north to Fence Creek, including the lands east toward Lightning Creek. A Level 1 "Be Ready" is in effect from Freezeout south to the Pallete Ranch and Imnaha River Woods.

The two fires in the wilderness, by contrast, are "managed" fires. That means officials are using a variety of tactics, monitoring the fires in some areas but taking actions, such as having helicopters drop water and dispatching firefighters on the ground, to try to limit the fires' spread in certain directions.

Both wilderness fires — Sturgill, estimated at 11,600 acres on Sept. 4, and Nebo, estimated at 6,900 acres — have surpassed the 2019 Granite Gulch Fire as the biggest in the Eagle Cap Wilderness since the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest instituted a policy allowing lightning fires to burn naturally. The Granite Gulch Fire burned about 5,500 acres in August and September 2019.

The Eagle Cap, at 365,000 acres, is the biggest federal wilderness in Oregon.

Besides the Sturgill and Nebo fires, there are two other fires, also sparked by lightning Aug. 22 or 23, in the wilderness. The Goat Mountain Fire 1 is not active, according to fire managers. The Goat Mountain 2 Fire is about 95 acres, but unlike the Sturgill and Nebo fires, it did not grow substantially over the weekend.

### Sturgill fire

A group of firefighters is prepared to protect buildings on private parcels at Red's Horse Ranch and the Minam River Lodge, both west of the Minam River.

However, the fire remains east of the Minam River.

### Nebo fire

On Sept. 3, the blaze crossed Big Sheep Creek and crested Wing Ridge to the north. The fire also burned outside the wilderness toward Forest Road 39. Firefighters that afternoon evacuated the Lick Creek Campground.

The following areas are closed to the public:

- Use of Forest Service Road 3900100 from the 39 Road junction to Tenderfoot Trailhead.

- Use of Forest Road 3925015 from junction of Forest Service Road 3925 to Lick Creek Trailhead.

- Use of Forest Road 3900200 from the 39 road junction to Forest Service Road 3925015 road.

- Use of Tenderfoot Trail (1819) from the Tenderfoot trailhead to the 1828 and 1812 trail junctions.

- Use of Lick Creek Trail (1809) from the Lick Creek Trailhead to the junction of the South Fork Imnaha Trail (1816).

### Double Creek fire

On Sept. 3 the fire spread north along Grizzly Ridge and east toward the Snake River.

To the south, the fire moved down the Granny Creek drainage toward the Freezeout Road. Firefighters are working to protect private property along the Imnaha River corridor, but they had to take refuge several times on Sept. 3 due to intense and erratic fire behavior, according to fire managers.

Firefighters evacuated several groups of hunters in the area.

Although lighter winds are forecast on Sept. 4, fire officials expect the blaze to continue to spread on the east and west sides of Grizzly Ridge, and also grow to the north.

Flames also are likely to continue moving downslope toward the Imnaha River along Schleur, Adams, College, Double and Blackmore creeks. Firefighters on Sept. 4 worked with task forces from the Oregon Office of the State Fire Marshal to protect property and infrastructure along the Upper Imnaha Road.

### Smoke

Smoke is expected to settle in the lower elevations and drainages in the early morning hours. Current air quality information for the local area is available on the PurpleAir website.

### Evacuations

There are evacuations in place for the Double Creek Fire. Hat Point and Freezeout Roads are under a Level 3 "Go Now" evacuation. The Hat Point Road is closed due to the fire activity. Imnaha River Road, from Rippleton Creek to the Imnaha Grange is under a Level 2 "Get Set" evacuation. Imnaha River Road, from the town of Imnaha to Rippleton Creek and from the Imnaha Grange to the Pallete Ranch including Imnaha River Woods is under a Level 1 "Be Ready" evacuation. There are currently no evacuations for the Eagle Cap Wilderness Fires.

### Crookets Knob fire

The other major blaze in the region is Crookets Knob, on the Malheur National Forest about 19 miles north of Prairie City. The fire, started by lightning on Aug. 22, has burned 4,280 acres and is 15% contained.



Dakota Castets-Didier/East Oregonian

Rosalee Weller of Black Widow Racing from Caldwell, Idaho, stands before the car in the modified class Saturday, Sept. 3, 2022, at the Hermiston Raceway in Hermiston. "I've been racing since I was 15, I'm 35 now," Weller said. Black Widow is a family affair, with Weller's family having built her last three cars.

## Races:

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Sneeva and Herschel McGriff, a NASCAR legend and Motorsports Hall of Famer, are just a few of a long list of motorsport talent who have raced at the Hermiston track.

"Hermiston Raceway is one of the oldest tracks in Oregon, it's also the last paved track," Greg Walden explained.

He is the family's raceway historian, as well as its owner, operator, promoter, organizer and, as he added with a chuckle, janitor.

The raceway hosts 4,000 attendees for the Spectacular.

The racing of the day was broken up into five racing classes, the Betteral 100 Pro Lates Wesco/Inland Sprints, Speed Tour Modified, mini stocks, AMCA and street stocks (stocks being short for stockcars). Each class is composed of different cars and challenges, but some "double-up," or ran multiple races throughout the evening.

Bart Hector, from Ephrata, Washington, has been racing at the Hermiston Raceway since 2008 and was "doubling-up" — driving in both the Modified and the Mini Stock classes.

"My family started racing here in the 1970s," she said. "My uncles, I grew up at the race track with them. I had a love for it by the time I was 2 or 3."

At the Labor Day Spectacular, Waters was racing in the modified class, which required her to develop a new skill set and face new challenges.

"I've been racing open-wheel my whole life, I needed that full body car and horsepower experience to get better as a driver, so they say the modified is one of the hardest cars to drive," Waters said.

"This modified has proven it to me. We're in it to get more experience."

And NASCAR is the top goal, she said, as her pit crew worked tirelessly around her, preparing her for a qualifying session, and later, the race.

Waters would be battling it out on track with local racing veterans such as Bart Hector and Rosalee Weller. Weller, of Black Widow Racing from Caldwell, Idaho, has been racing for 20 years, and has raced at the Raceway several times.

"My last three cars have been completely built from the



Dakota Castets-Didier/East Oregonian

The checkered flag comes out Saturday, Sept. 3, 2022, during the Labor Day Spectacular at the Hermiston Raceway, Hermiston. The event draws fans and drivers from around the Northwest for the multi-class action.



Dakota Castets-Didier/East Oregonian

Bart Hector's No. 86 modified class car sits idle during a driver's meeting before the race Saturday, Sept. 3, 2022. Hector's family has been racing at the Hermiston Speedway in Hermiston since the 1970s.

"I pretty much grew up racing, I knew nothing other than racing," she said. "My uncles, I grew up at the race track with them. I had a love for it by the time I was 2 or 3."

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## M-F fire:

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Her family has three vehicles, she said, so they bolted to get those away from the fire. Other residents in Locust Mobile Village lost cars and motorcycles to the fire.

"All five of us made it out," Lopez said.

Lopez's younger sibling, Juliet, said her family has lived there since she began kindergarten and she now is a senior at McLaughlin High School, Milton-Freewater. She said the events of that night stunned her.

"They started yelling to get out," she recalled. "I didn't have much thinking time."

Members of the First Baptist Church, 102 S. Main St., Milton-Freewater, came down Sept. 5 to help. Pastor Tim Sanchez livestreamed from the scene on the church's Facebook page to raise awareness about the fire.

He and his wife, Robin, said perhaps a dozen or more people now are homeless from this disaster. They came



Andrew Cutler/East Oregonian

Juliet Lopez, right, and her father, Manuel Lopez, on Monday, Sept. 5, 2022, sift through the remains of their mobile home in Milton-Freewater. Fire the night of Sept. 3 destroyed their home and three more.

to assess how to help.

"The best way for us to know what they need is to

come talk to them," he said.

First Baptist is setting up to collect donations to help

ground up by my husband," Weller explained, as she stood beside her neon-green modified class car. Weller is one of many drivers whose teams and cars are built and maintained as a family affair.

Rick Thompson, from the Tri-Cities, raced at the Raceway for 30 years before his son, Trace, came of age. Now, he's helping Trace kick-start his racing career.

"We bought this car used, did some upgrades to it over the winter, massaged it, put a new engine in it, came to the race track, time to have fun," Rick Thompson said as he stood beside his son.

The family affair extended to the grandstands, where families traveled from just as far as the teams to enjoy the Spectacular.

Throughout the evening, fans cheered on their favorite drivers, roaring for them to "start their engines" and loaded with winners as they received their trophies.

The Labor Day Spectacular continued through Sept. 4, where four more classes would compete for racing glory.

the Lopez family and others. But Sanchez stressed these Milton-Freewater residents don't need furniture, appliances or even new clothes.

"They have no place to put it," he said. "They're biggest need is going to be housing."

But housing in the small town near the Washington border is tight, Sanchez said, and the Red Cross has been to the trailer park but residents are waiting to hear back from the charitable organization.

The Lopez family are staying with another family in Walla Walla, other residents at the trailer park have opened their homes to their neighbors.

Lopez said she was stunned at what survived — her diploma from Eastern Oregon University.

The document was pristine. Not a hint of damage of any sort.

She graduated summa cum laude in June with a Bachelor's of Science degree in computer science.

Lopez said while the family lost belongings, they did not lose each other. But they will have much work to do to rebuild.