

# ISSUES

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The new committee will attempt to create a “complete and coordinated fire protection system,” according to Kenneth Cummings, Vice Chair of the committee.

The committee is made up of forest landowners, wildland fire professionals, elected of-

ficials, the Oregon State Fire Marshal’s office and other stakeholders and will advise ODF in developing a “long-term strategic view,” Cummings said.

Among the many members are State Senator Bill Hansell (R-Athena), Nils Christoffersen of Wallowa Resources, Jerome Rosa of the Oregon Cattleman’s Association, Rex Storm of the Association of Oregon Loggers and Amanda Rich of

the Nature Conservancy.

Sen. Hansell said he was pleased to have been appointed to the committee.

“We have a tremendous resource that continues to go up in smoke every year,” Hansell said. “I view this as a very important committee. I am hopeful the committee will tackle the issues — including management of the resource — before the (next) fire season occurs.”

The committee will focus on the 2016 fire season as well as long-term goals for wildfire management and budget development. It started work Dec. 1 with an overview of trends in the Oregon fire seasons, an examination of the evolution of Oregon’s large-fire funding system, and discussion of the role of Emergency Fire Cost Committee (EFC) and Oregon Forest Land Protection Fund.

The program ended with a

summary of key issues identified and the development of working groups.

The committee will meet again Jan. 21 to discuss the working group’s findings, the Emergency Fire Cost Committee report on 2016 Catastrophic Insurance Funding, and to refine key issues.

Interested parties are welcome to attend. There will be opportunity for public comment at the meeting.

# RENTALS

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Whittaker said he employs property managers and thoroughly screens his renters. He argued that his renters contributed financially to Joseph’s economy during their stay. His rentals are registered with the county.

Judy Kinsley, a teacher’s aide at Joseph Charter School, said the lack of affordable housing in Joseph has led to a number of JCS students attending school in Enterprise because of the housing shortage.

Tom Clevenger of the Joseph Fire Department said the lack of local housing at Wallowa Lake Village had reduced the pool of firefighters that lived in that area down to one, which has led to a steep increase in fire insurance premiums. Clevenger said he worried Joseph could experience a similar fate.

Corey Roberts, a Joseph resident who rents long-term, voiced her concerns that the vacation rental phenomenon and lack of local affordable rentals eventually could force her family to move elsewhere.

Many of the others who testified shared concerns about

property tax increases, unruly renters who avoided accountability and the loss of the sense of community with a revolving door of neighborhood guests.

“You won’t have people with a vested community interest,” Shelley Curtiss said.

Council member Tyler Evans suggested allowing a few of the residential vacation rentals to pursue business with appropriate regulation and taxes, with the council having the option to discontinue the practice if it had negative effects on the community.

“If you buy a home in a residential zone, it means resi-

dential - not a business,” Sands said. “The housing market is tight, and this will just make it worse.”

City Attorney Baum said many cities dealing with the issue let current businesses stay open due to fear of litigation over private property rights.

“The council needs to address this,” he said.

A preliminary council vote showed only Sands willing to ban the rentals outright. The council scheduled a community/city council workshop on the issue with the first workshop scheduled for 6 p.m. Wednesday, Dec. 9 at the Joseph City Library.

Other topics covered included presentations by several local organizations applying for grants from the city’s share of the county hotel tax.

The council also discussed the Wallowa Valley Arts Council’s rejection of the Stubborn Mule Saloon and Steakhouse owner’s request to install a bronze motorcycle sculpture outside his business.

“The decision was not made flippantly,” WVAC president

Shelley Curtiss said. “We took it very seriously, like jurors of an art show. The quality of the art work, the size of the artwork compared to the location and whether or not it fit into the general theme of Main Street is the standard we applied to the application.”

The council also approved ordinance 2015-02, which bans the sale or processing of both medicinal and recreational marijuana within the city limits. The council previously had a similar ban on marijuana within 1,000 feet of any designated area children were known to assemble, which the council thought effectively blanketed the city, but concern over some citizens looking to squeeze in a marijuana facility in areas that didn’t overlap led to the complete ban.

The council also approved the hanging of banners from city fixtures to promote the Bronze Blues and Brews festival and decided to advertise for the city’s public works supervisor position for \$35,000 – \$52,000 per year depending on experience.

# FIRES

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The devastation to communities, homes, livestock, wildlife, forests and even the lives of firefighters make this year particularly damaging.

Fires razed 631,000 acres of Oregon land while costing the state more than \$240 million in suppression efforts this year. At least 62 homes and numerous outbuildings were lost as well.

Wallowa County’s largest blaze, the Grizzly Bear Complex fire, burned some 83,000 acres in Washington and Oregon, nearly taking the town of Troy with it. Residents in the Hurricane Creek area were put on a Level 2 evacuation alert because of an Eagle Cap Wilderness fire.

All of that led to the most expensive year yet for wildfire fighting for the U.S. Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management, with expenditures in the range of \$1.25 billion. The USFS spent 52 percent of its 2015 budget on firefighting, including funds earmarked to prevent forest fires. According to US Department of Agriculture figures, those same costs tallied at 16 percent just two decades ago. And according to statistics cited on the the National Interagency Fire Center website, at the current rate of increase the USFS will spend 67 percent of its budget on wildfires by 2025.

The effects of climate change coupled with increasing fuel loads from a lack of management are causing our forests to burn at ever higher rates. Congress, the only group with the power to change forest management policy, is mired in gridlock.

Congress is currently considering three bills addressing forest management or wildfire funding – or in one case – both. All those bills are currently mired in either Senate or House committees.

Of the three bills, two – HR 167 (House) and S 235 (Senate) – are sponsored by Oregon’s Rep. Greg Walden and Sen. Ron Wyden, respectively. Both bills carry the same name: The Wildfire Funding Defense Act.

HR 167 was introduced in the House in January by Idaho Rep. Mike Simpson. It solely addresses changing the way wildfire suppression is funded. Of the three bills, it has the most bipartisan support and the most co-sponsors, includes all five of Oregon’s U.S. Representatives. To date, the bill has 145 co-sponsors, including 79 Democrats, as well as initial support from the White House, yet it has never made it to the House floor on a vote.

S 235 was introduced by Sens. Ron Wyden of Oregon and Mike Crapo of Idaho on Jan. 22. The bill outlines a plan to fund fire suppression to allow affected agencies to apply for disaster funding once they have spent 70 percent of their 10-year average of fire suppression funding. The bill has 20 co-sponsors, including Oregon Sen. Jeff Merkley and four Republicans. Introduced in January, it currently resides in the Senate Budget Committee, where it arrived in July.

HR 2647 is bill touted by Rep. Walden as a major cure for national forest woes. It addresses a number of both wildland fire funding and forestry management issues and has 13 co-sponsors including one Democrat. It tackles wildfire funding through creation of a Federal Emergency Management Agency sub-account and also calls for much more aggressive timber harvesting and salvage. This includes time constraints to accomplish those tasks and requires environmental groups to post a bond when filing lawsuits regarding forest restoration projects.

HR 2647 is the only bill that has passed through a branch of Congress and it is currently frozen in the Senate Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry Committee, where it landed in July. During a Nov. 5 committee hearing a majority of members of both parties as well as five stakeholders voiced approval of the bill. However, the committee’s press secretary, Meghan Cline, recently told The Chieftain that the bill will not reach the Senate floor for a vote in the near future because it is not time-sensitive.



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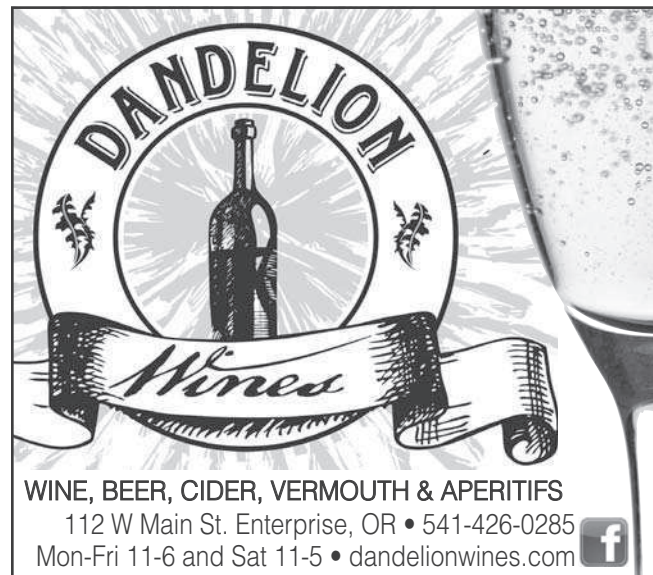
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