

Fire season comes to an end

Season ends with Wallowa County seeing just over 10 acres burned

By RONALD BOND
Wallowa County Chieftain

ENTERPRISE — Fire season in many parts of Oregon has been brutal.

But in the northeast corner, it has been considerably tame, and was declared officially over Saturday, Oct. 17.

The Oregon Department of Forestry, in a press release Thursday, Oct. 15, said it was terminating fire season for forest lands that are “protected by the Northeast Oregon District” at 12:01 a.m. Saturday. The district includes land in Wallowa, Union, Baker and Umatilla counties, as well as portions of Grant, Morrow and Malheur counties.

“The past few days have brought quite a bit of precipitation across the region,” Matt Howard, Wallowa Unit Forester, said in the release.

“While the district is comfortable with removing the general fire season restrictions, it is important to remember that weather patterns could change and conditions could return to dry and windy. This probably isn’t the right time to burn slash or large debris piles. Waiting for more moisture and a sustained fall weather pattern is key.”

While fires raged on the west side of the state, especially during September, Oregon’s northeast corner was relatively unscathed. In all, the district responded to 66



Ellen Morris Bishop/For the Wallowa County Chieftain, File
Smoke from the epic forest fires in Western Oregon and Northern California obscure the landscape on Alder Slope as an orange sun sets over Ruby Peak on Sunday, Sept. 13, 2020. Fire season in the Northeast Oregon District officially ended Saturday, Oct. 17, 2020, with the district having just more than 250 acres burned.

fires — 40 lightning-started and 26 human-caused — that burned a combined 253.5 acres.

By comparison, the entire district has about 1,400 acres a year burn on average, Howard told the *Chieftain* Oct. 15. Things were even better in Wallowa County, where Howard said just over 10 acres burned.

“My hat’s off to the folks in our community for being fire conscious,” Howard said.

In fact, Howard said the month of July was historically good in the county.

“We didn’t have one fire on our jurisdiction in July, which has never happened before,” he said.

The records tracking that data, he said, go back to 1960, “and I would be shocked if it didn’t go back to the beginning of the Department of Forestry,” he said.

And given what happened in Western Oregon, Howard

feels fortunate to have gone through a light season.

“We definitely had the potential in late August and September,” he said. “Our fuels were critical. (As a result), we were able to support fire efforts across the state. We sent a lot of people out to help with large fire support this year.”

Landowners do have the OK to begin using burn barrels or to burn yard debris piles, the release states.

And through the restrictions will be lifted, Howard encouraged the public to remain cautious.

“What we want to stress is for folks to be really careful in the fall with their burning, that they stay with (their fires), that they make sure it’s out,” he said, adding that those burning industrial slash piles need to notify the department and register the burn with ODF, then report back when the burn is done.

Wallowa-Whitman firefighters still fighting blazes elsewhere

By KATY NESBITT
For the Wallowa County Chieftain

ENTERPRISE — Wildfires raging in California and the Southwest are extending fire season for many Wallowa County firefighters.

Last week a 20-person hand crew headed to the Arapaho-Roosevelt National Forest in Colorado to fight the Cameron Peak Fire, and an engine with six crew members was dispatched to the Tonto National Forest in Arizona.

“Arizona’s fire season won’t stop,” said Nathan Goodrich, Wallowa-Whitman National Forest north zone fire management officer. “The season usually ends in late July, but it didn’t get the monsoons it usually does.”

Goodrich called the Tonto a “sister” forest to the Wallowa-Whitman, and said it’s normal for crews from each of the forests to support each other as the two regions’ fire seasons don’t generally overlap.

“We have had a relationship with the Tonto for six to eight years,” Goodrich said, “We send people down there and they send people up here.”

This year, Oregon’s fire season was slow to materialize, but blew up the week of Labor Day to an historic level, taxing resources as college students started returning to class. Now that fires in Western Oregon are cooling down, Goodrich said

remaining seasonal and permanent employees are being released for availability in other regions.

The 20-person hand crew that went to Colorado was the fifth of its type dispatched off-forest this season, Goodrich said. Last weekend, his overhead team was headed to support fires in Northern California near Redding where one fire, the August Complex, has burned 1 million acres. He said the California fire season started a little early this year and will likely continue for more than another month.

“IT’S BEEN A BUSY YEAR ROTATING TEAMS.”

— Nathan Goodrich, Wallowa-Whitman National Forest north zone fire management officer

“It’s been a busy year rotating teams,” Goodrich said. “Team members are getting tired, and it’s getting hard to fill out manifests.”

Luckily, some of the seasonal employees still available and willing to work are able to, due to an extension of allowable days to work. Goodrich said by allowing seasonals to work past Sept. 30, the end of the federal fiscal year, between 500 and 1,000 fire fighters were added to the ranks to staff late season wildfires. Many of the Wal-

lowa-Whitman National Forest firefighters were held back to burn piles and to broadcast burn this fall. Goodrich said in Wallowa County his crews would mostly be burning slash piles from thinning projects as the recent rains dampened hopes of doing large prescribed burns.

“There may be a window later on, but in the meantime we will help out the south end of the forest where elevations are lower and dryer,” he said.

COVID-19 restrictions played heavily in the lives of firefighters and their managers this year, Goodrich said, and the end result was healthier crew members. Typically by September and October crews come down with what he called “camp crud.” He credited wearing face coverings, hand washing, crews eating at their vehicles and using toilets reserved for their modules, small groups of co-workers, for slowing down the spread of late fire season colds and flus.

“Nobody’s sick,” Goodrich said.

Other precautions taken on the fireline Goodrich listed were hosting morning briefings via video conferencing and all planning and public meetings were virtual. He said while some firefighters did contract COVID-19 on the fireline, for the most part sickness was curtailed.

“The precautions worked, for the most part, really well,” he said

Area national forests receive \$2.7 million

Funding will help Forest Service pay for vegetation management and monitoring

By ANN BLOOM
For the Wallowa County Chieftain

ENTERPRISE — The Wallowa-Whitman and Umatilla national forests will receive \$2.7 million to improve forest resiliency, reduce long-term costs of fire management and improve watershed conditions across Northeast Oregon and southeast Washington.

“We are deeply excited that the Northern Blue Mountains Collaborative will be receiving funding from the Collaborative Landscape Forest Restoration Project this year after being ranked the top proposal from across the country,” said Alyssa Cudmore, Forestland Program manager and coordinator for Wallowa Resource’s My Blue Mountains Woodland Partnership.

Cudmore said the total investment could exceed \$40 million over the next 10 years if Congress continues to fund this program.

Congress created the Forest Restoration Project funding in 2009, and intended to support large scale forest restoration projects and benefit local communities using

collaborative approaches to solve forest health problems.

“In particular, we are very excited about the CFLRP’s ability to implement all lands’ shared stewardship of forest restoration and fires resiliency projects across the Northern Blues landscape,” Cudmore said.

Many of the challenges forests and communities face today, such as severe wildfire, invasive species, insects and disease, she said, don’t adhere to boundaries and don’t stop at fire lines.

“In order to prepare our forests to withstand these natural disturbances we need solutions that cross boundaries regardless of who owns the land,” she said.

The \$2.7 million will only be used for projects on federal land managed by the Forest Service. However, this investment will help leverage other funding for projects on tribal and private land adjacent to Forest Service-managed public land.

According to Cudmore, these treatments will reduce overstocked forests with timber harvest, thinning and prescribed fire creating landscapes and communities that can better endure wildfire. All of this will ultimately support vibrant, local economies, healthy watersheds and healthy forests with reduced wildlife risk, she said.

Cudmore said the concept of shared stewardship of the land was evident throughout the grant pro-

posal and emphasized that there were many partners involved in its creation and the prioritization of projects. The project is supported by the Forest Service, the counties within the Umatilla and Wallowa-Whitman national forests, industry and conservation groups like Wallowa Resources, one of the lead organizations that worked on the grant application.

Executive Director Nils Christoffersen said the Northern Blues Collaborative, with its founding members serving since 2012, recognized an urgent need and has long aspired to scale up the collaborative’s early success to address restoration and rural economic revitalization in projects such as the Lower Joseph Creek project in Wallowa County and the East Face project bordering Union and Baker counties.

Included in the funding is money to pay for monitoring Forest Service timber harvest, thinning and prescribed burning projects. Baker and Wallowa counties are looking to employ youth and young adults to learn and execute forest monitoring techniques.

“We’re excited that partnerships continue to expand and deepen as we pursue all lands shared stewardship across Northeast Oregon and Southeast Washington,” Christoffersen said. “We look forward to the opportunity this will create for the next generation of land

stewards to gain jobs and experience in caring for this special place.”

Lindsay Warness, Woodgrain Millwork in La Grande’s Forest Policy and Environmental manager, said she is looking forward to working with the Forest Service and using this funding to develop projects that are beneficial and meet the social, economic and ecological needs of both forest and communities that depend on them.

“This is an exciting opportunity to increase the pace and scale of restoration in our area as well as provide economic benefits to our local communities,” Warness said.

According to Mike Billman, Oregon Department of Forestry’s Northeast Oregon Federal Forest Restoration Program Coordinator, the funding will be instrumental in accomplishing fuel-reduction and forest restoration projects vetted through the environmental planning process, but still in need of funding.

“The Wallowa-Whitman and Umatilla national forests have huge backlogs of acres needing treatments and increased funding will certainly help in attaining some level of catching up,” Billman said. “It has been truly inspiring to watch the stakeholder partnerships form and step up in the process of preparing the CFLRP proposal and now draw together to begin implementation.”

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