

Spring fire season flares up in Eastern Oregon

ODF, local fire departments urge care when burning fence lines, ditches and debris

By ELLEN MORRIS BISHOP
For the Wallowa County Chieftain

WALLOWA — The words “spring” and “fire season” might seem like oxymorons. But this year, dry grass, unpredictable winds and people unprepared for these conditions have sparked a larger-than-usual number of calls for fire department assistance for blazes surging out of control.

“It’s grass-burning season,” Oregon Department of Forestry Wallowa Unit forester Matt Howard said. “People are doing the right thing, burning ditch lines and fields and what they usually do to clean up around their property. But this year, too many of those fires have gotten out of control.”

The problems, Howard said, are mostly that ... the folks who are burning get too much fire going, they don’t have enough personnel on hand, they’re not watching the weather, the wind comes up or shifts, the fire gets into some heavier fuel and it’s off to the races.”

For example, on Wednesday, April 7, brisk winds drove a fire intended to burn a small pile of old hay through the surrounding dry grass and ignited a century-old wood granary at a farm on Liberty Road. The granary was reduced to ashes and charcoal, but Enterprise, Joseph and ODF firefighters controlled the blaze before it could jump to the adjacent vintage barn or the farmhouse.

“It could have been a whole lot worse,” said Chief



The 17-acre Middle Point Ridge fire may have started because a warming campfire fire set by recreationists or shed hunters was not fully extinguished and was fanned back into activity by wind gusts. Oregon Department of Forestry and U.S. Forest Service crews responded and extinguished it.

Oregon Department of Forestry/Contributed Photo

Jeffery Wecks of the Joseph Volunteer Fire Department.

“We’ve had 10 fire runs since April 1,” Howard said, and credited partner firefighting organizations, including the Wallowa, Lostine, Enterprise and Joseph fire departments and USFS firefighters for their critical roles in battling those blazes.

But what really raised Howard’s concerns were the five fire calls to ODF and the other fire departments on one day — Friday, April 9.

“We are just having too many of these fires,” he said.

The fires are often the result of negligence on the part of the burners, Howard noted.

The old grass is tinder dry. And spring green-up

hasn’t really started yet, Howard said.

“When the new, green grass really gets to growing, it will cut down on the fire danger,” he said. “But right now, I dread getting a call from Imnaha or Troy, where there’s lots of old, really dry grass that is very flammable fine fuel. We could have a real problem there.”

On Friday a 17-acre wildfire about 19 miles north of Wallowa torched grass and understory on Middle Point Ridge, Howard said. It burned on Hancock ground and land of the Bureau of Land Management, and may have been started as a warming fire by a recreational group looking for shed antlers, Howard said.

“Whoever started it just didn’t get it completely put out,” he said. “It was on an exposed westerly-aspect slope that caught sun and had dry grasses. When the wind picked up, like it did last week, we had a fire that started in the fine fuels.”

Dry conditions at low elevations around the state already have seen significant fires near Klamath Falls and Sisters, Howard said. Those events were mostly driven by wind in dry, fine fuels.

“Once we declare fire season in June or early July, ODF is not going to allow debris burning or even burn barrels,” Howard said. “I would encourage folks to do the right thing, be careful and burn debris if they

need to or should. But there are a few things, including weather, wind and the resources to control the fire they need to be mindful of.”

He emphasized that he’s no newcomer to fire season in the county.

“I’ve been here for 21 years, and David Weaver has been here for 30 years, and to both of us, this is an abnormal amount of (spring) fires in a short amount of time,” he said. “We’ve had some nice weather, but also cool mornings, so the grass hasn’t responded. And until we get some good green-up that will inhibit the spread of these fires, we’re going to continue to have out-of-control fires if people aren’t careful.”

MORE INFORMATION

Oregon Department of Forestry recommendations for debris burning:

1) Check the weather. The best source is the Pendleton U.S. Weather service site which provides not only a weather forecast, but an hourly forecast that includes winds and wind gusts and their directions for any location chosen on their map. (www.weather.gov/pdt/) Or call the ODF office for info on burning conditions at 541-886 2881

2) Anticipate changes in weather. When fronts move through, they bring increased winds. Don’t burn grass or debris if a change in the weather is imminent.

3) Don’t be too ambitious about how much you are going to burn at one time. Be sure you have adequate people, tools and water to keep your burn under control. “It doesn’t take much wind to push a fire that moves faster than most people can run,” Howard said.

4) Do your burning in several smaller projects rather than one large one.

5) Don’t leave your debris burn unattended. Make sure any burn is completely out before leaving.

6) Consider waiting another week or two to burn, when green-up will reduce the likelihood of a fine-fuel fire getting out of control and weather systems may be more stable.

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