

Two large fires burning just outside Wallowa County

By RONALD BOND
Wallowa County Chieftain

ENTERPRISE — Two large fires are burning in states adjacent to Wallowa County — and one of them, as of Tuesday, July 13, is completely uncontained.

The worst of the two blazes is the Snake River Complex, burning along the Idaho side of the Snake River in steep terrain about 20 miles south of Lewiston in Nez Perce County. The fire, which according to oregonlive.com was lightning-caused and first noticed July 7, is made up of the Shovel Creek, Captain John Creek and Hoover Ridge fires. It currently has burned 88,299 acres and has no current containment reported. All three fires in the complex are burning grass and timber.

“The fire is kind of between the Salmon and the Snake (rivers),” said Kira Powell, public information officer on the blaze. “There were three starts from lightning, three (fires) all merged into what is the Snake River Complex.”

Powell said the fire has moved largely from north to south, and then started moving east. Winds on the fire, she said, have moved in from the North and West, pushing the fire south and east. Currently, there are 263 firefighters on the blaze.

The other major fire is the Dry Gulch Fire, which Monday was renamed the Lick Creek Fire, burning in the Washington side of the Umatilla National Forest southwest of Lewiston and just two miles away from Asotin. It has scorched 58,011 acres in Garfield and Asotin counties as of

Tuesday morning, and is 20% contained, according to inciweb.nwccg.gov. The size of the crew battling the blaze is 536, according to a report Monday.

With both fires burning close to Wallowa County air quality in the region had worsened in recent days. As of 9 a.m. Tuesday morning, the Department of Environmental Quality’s Air Quality Index in Enterprise is at 116, which is considered unhealthy for sensitive groups.

David Weaver, forest officer in Wallowa for the Oregon Department of Forestry, said the smoke settling in the county is largely from the Bootleg Fire, a massive blaze in the Klamath Basin that has burned more than 201,923 acres and has no containment as of Tuesday morning.

Some, though, is from the closer fires.

“Looking at the satellite imagery, we are getting some smoke from the fire near Pomeroy which is the Dry Gulch (Lick Creek),” he said. “A lot of what we are seeing is from the Bootleg Fire.”

Weaver said based on current wind patterns and what is expected over the next few days, agencies aren’t as concerned about the Snake River Complex.

They are, however, watching the Lick Creek Fire closely.

“We have crews monitoring what currently is our biggest threat, which is the Dry Gulch (Lick Creek) Fire,” he said. “... Any winds coming out of the West or Southwest are favorable for us. We’re keeping an eye on winds out of the Northwest, which would be a problem for us.”

Eastern Oregon SAR completes 2021 training

The Observer

ENTERPRISE — Search and Rescue team members from Wallowa, Union, Baker and Umatilla counties honed their skills in the Salt Creek Summit area of Wallowa County.

About 60 SAR volunteers and instructors from the four counties participated June 24-27 in the multi-day training, which was hosted by Wallowa County Search and Rescue volunteers.

“Our numbers were down a little from what we expected, but it’s a little late in the season,” Paige Sully, the event coordinator for WCSAR, said. “But all in all I think it was great.”

Training included swiftwater rescue, tactical fast tracking, advanced incident command, hasty-team and K-9 land searches, rescuing injured hikers from remote locations and coordination with Civil Air Patrol aircraft.

“It was a very good training,” said Jim Akenson, who serves as a WCSAR incident commander and participated in the Incident Command training. “It was fundamental and advanced all rolled into one. As an incident commander, it’s good to see more and more people coming on who can take leadership roles. Everybody I observed did really well.”

June 26 was devoted to classes, most with hands-on field experience.

Tactical tracking, taught by Clifford Pease and Leon Kershaw, proved one of the more popular classes. Both men track wanted suspects and escaped prisoners for the Umatilla County Sheriff’s Office and other law enforcement agencies. Their “fast tracking” techniques have allowed them to follow and apprehend escaped convicts more than 40 miles in three days.

“It’s important to pay attention to the small things that people leave along their path, including actual tracks



Traci Murray/Contributed Photo

Wallowa County Search and Rescue swiftwater team member Kyle Bratcher waits for a rescue line during the swiftwater class in the pond near Salt Creek Summit on Saturday, June 26, 2021.



Traci Murray/Contributed Photo

Wallowa County Search and Rescue packing instructor Jim Akenson, center, shows WCSAR volunteers Mike Musia, left, and John Shull the fine points of packing a mule in the EOSAR packing class on Friday, June 25, 2021.

as well as bent twigs, scuffs and other (signs),” Pease said. “It’s often possible to determine a general path and send a team ahead along that line to pick up (tracks) farther ahead and close the time-distance gap. You can

find the lost person quicker that way.”

The trackers also worked with Wallowa County’s two tracking K-9 teams — Heather Howard and her dog, Gracie, and Edward “Vern” Vernarsky and his

dog, Trooper.

“I really thought the tracking class was great,” said Holly Akenson, WCSAR K-9 team leader. “There were a lot of really good on-the-ground things.”

Swiftwater rescue training, led by a team of instructors from Wallowa County, took place in the pond near Salt Creek Summit. SAR volunteers fine-tuned skills that included accurately throwing rescue ropes.

SAR hasty, medical and K-9 teams coordinated by incident command and SAR members from multiple counties spread out in a mock search and rescue exercise on June 27 in the Salt Creek Summit area. Civil Air Patrol brought in two aircraft — one from Boise and another from Redmond — to aid in searching for several “lost hikers,” some of whom were “injured.” The search and rescue efforts were all successful within the three hours allotted for the exercise.

“Learning to work with and practicing with our neighboring counties for mutual aid just makes us more ready when we have a big search and we all need to work together. This way we all know each other, we’ve worked together, and I think that’s really beneficial,” Akenson said.

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	7:00pm	PRCA RODEO — Harley Tucker Memorial Arena
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THURSDAY	9:00am	Tough Enough to Wear Pink Walk
	9:00am	Steer Tripping, Three Rounds
	2:00pm	Slack — Arena
	6:00pm	Rodeo Gates Open — Harley Tucker Memorial Arena
	7:00pm	PRCA RODEO — Harley Tucker Memorial Arena
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FRIDAY	10:00am	Chief Joseph Junior Parade — Main Street
	2:00pm	Slack — Arena
	6:00pm	Rodeo Gates Open — Harley Tucker Memorial Arena
	7:00pm	PRCA RODEO — Harley Tucker Memorial Arena
	9:00pm	All Teen Dance — Joseph Community Center
	9:30pm	Live Music and Dancing at Thunder Room — Whiskey Creek
SATURDAY	10:00am	Grand Parade — Main Street
	2:30pm	Slack — Arena
	6:00pm	Rodeo Gates Open — Harley Tucker Memorial Arena
	7:00pm	PRCA RODEO — Harley Tucker Memorial Arena
	9:00pm	All Teen Dance — Joseph Community Center
	9:30pm	Music and Dancing at Thunder Room — Whiskey Creek
		After Rodeo — Cowboy Breakfast — Rodeo Grounds — til 3:00am
SUNDAY	6:00am	Cowboy Breakfast — Rodeo Grounds — til 10:00am
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