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WALLOWA COUNTY CHIEFTAIN



137th Year, No. 16

WINNER OF THE 2020 ONPA GENERAL EXCELLENCE AWARD

Wednesday, July 28, 2021

Wallowa County Voices



Richard Underwood
Lostine

Retired cop found a new home

WALLOWA — A retired police officer, Richard Underwood, settled in the Lostine area 10 years ago and has found a new home. Richard and his wife, Patti, moved here after a visit to Coeur d'Alene, Idaho. Returning to Oregon via the Lewiston Highway, they were going to move to La Pine. They were going to stop and see friends near Minam.

"When we came past (Stangel's) buffalo ranch, we realized we were in the wrong part of the state, so we moved here instead of La Pine," he said.

He and Patti, who works at Wallowa Memorial Hospital, have five children, 15 grandchildren and 10 great-grandchildren.

He retired from Washington County Sheriff's Office in Hillsboro after 27 years and misses some aspects of the job.

"I miss seeing the people every day," he said. "That's part of being a police officer. One thing people don't realize is that if you see a police car at 3 in the morning at a doughnut shop, it's because it's the only place open."

He said visits to his kids' urban homes are a good contrast to Wallowa County.

"Every time we go to see our kids in and beyond Portland, we remember why we moved here," he said.

Richard recently shared his thoughts about living in Wallowa County.

What's your favorite thing about Wallowa County?

Everybody waves, and the real technical part of it is they wave with all of their fingers. And there's the (lack of) traffic and no traffic signals.

What fun things are you planning in the county this summer?

We don't go rafting, but we do go fishing up at the lake, and it's peaceful. The whole county is peaceful.

What are your thoughts about the fires in the county?

It's hard to fathom that much country (burning) and people losing their homes. The whole fire season is bad. People just have to be careful. On the Fourth of July, I saw more fireworks around our home than if I'd gone to the lake. It makes you wonder. Just think. We lost a home to fire a long time ago, and it's pretty devastating.

What have you learned from living in Wallowa County?

There's a lot of work to be done. My wife and I are always working around home, fixing things.

What's your advice for people who are thinking about moving here?

Be prepared for the freedom. You've got a limited number of people here. Over there, you only know the people you work with — and people wave, but they wave with one finger.

Crews make major gains on fire

Elbow Creek Fire nears 23,000 acres, but is 38% contained as of Tuesday morning

By **RONALD BOND**
Wallowa County Chieftain

WALLOWA COUNTY — The Elbow Creek Fire grew into the second-largest in the state of Oregon last week, but crews have been able to get an upper-hand on the blaze that has now scorched more than 22,000 acres.

As of Tuesday morning, July 27, the fire,

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A map of the Elbow Creek Fire, **Page A5**

which started July 15, was reported at 22,790 acres and was 38% contained, according to the latest update from Type 1 Oregon Department of Forestry Incident Manage-

ment Team 3, the lead on the fire. The size of the team has swelled over the last week, and as of Monday night, the group fighting the fire was 954 — more than the population of Wallowa, where they have set up their primary camp. Crews from at least eight other states had joined the Oregon crews in battling the fire.

Crews Monday night

focused on the Elbow Creek area, as the fire has moved north along that corridor in recent days. Crews have worked on containment lines in that region, and have largely slowed the fire's spread.

The rest of the fire is either in mop-up mode or close to it.

Containment lines set up along the fire's east edge at Wildcat Creek have

held for more than a week. Sickfoot Creek and Grossman Creek, which were places fire was spreading south in drainages, has been corralled, and crews are finalizing lines and moving to mop-up there.

Sunday

The fire had grown to 22,681 acres Sunday, but

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Bill Bradshaw/Wallowa County Chieftain

Jeff Weer, supervisor trainee for the Division Tango of the Elbow Creek Fire, talks about battling the blaze Thursday, July 22, 2021, from the Bar B Ranch staging area near Promise. He's been on the fire since its initial outbreak a week earlier.

Easy commute; hard job

Fighting fire in own backyard brings it home

By **BILL BRADSHAW**
Wallowa County Chieftain

PROMISE — Fighting a wildfire is no easy task, but it becomes more meaningful when it's in your own backyard. That's what Jeff Weer said from the front line of the Elbow Creek Fire near Promise on Thursday, July 22.

"It's hard work, it's smoky, it's fun. I wouldn't do this job if I didn't enjoy doing it," he said at the Bar-B Ranch staging area south of Promise. "I just enjoy being out in the field, I enjoy the camaraderie of the crews and the folks involved."

His wife, Maria, is fully supportive of her husband's passion for fighting wildfire.

"I think that I am proud to see him be able to help our community in this way," she said. "I know fighting fires is his passion and he's in his element. He's happy he can make a difference."

The couple has a ranch near Lostine, making it somewhat convenient for Jeff to make it to work each day.

"I live here locally. I can go home and sleep in my own bed — it's a 15-minute drive from my house to the fire camp," he said. "So I'm fortunate to be able to have done that. There's several nights I did stay up here."

But even when he's sent to fires elsewhere, it's still part of his passion.

"I'm happy to be here. A lot of times we get sent to other places, other parts of the state or the country to fight fire," Jeff said. "I wasn't born and raised in Wallowa County but I've lived here (and worked) for the U.S. Forest Service working on my 17th year. It's all been here in this district."



Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian

A fire line, cut with a bulldozer, crosses the forest floor near Promise on Thursday, July 22, 2021 as fire crews work to stop the spread of the Elbow Creek Fire. As of the morning of July 27, the fire was at 22,790 acres and was fought by roughly 1,000 personnel.

There since the outbreak

Jeff is an engine captain with the U.S. Forest Service. On the Elbow Creek Fire he's the supervisor trainee on Division Tango. He's been on the fire since it was first reported a week ago.

"My sole focus is on Division Tango," he said, but added that his concern also is tying in with neighboring Divisions Mike and Whiskey. "We've had our rough patches, but we're holding our own."

He has a good grasp on the progress.

"We've got people down there, we've got an indirect dozer line in, meaning it's not tied in against the fireline, against the black," he said. "There's unburned material between the dozer line and the black and we're trying to keep it

from jumping over the dozer line. We're trying to get that line tighter and get crews in there to put that line tight against the black."

His approximately 120 firefighters are hard at it.

"They use normal wildland firefighting tools — pulaskis, shovels — and putting in hose lays," he said. "We have big tanks of water at the top of a drainage and run hoses down to the bottom of the drainage ... and we branch other hoses off of it and take it out in the woods and try to get a mop-up ... 25 feet around the entire perimeter of our division. We're working on that slowly but surely."

Brett Deedon, a trainee public information officer with the state Fire Marshal's Office, said there

Homes in path of fire spared

By **RONALD BOND**
Wallowa County Chieftain

EDEN BENCH — They were given the notice to evacuate within an hour of the Elbow Creek Fire starting.

Yet Dick and Shirley Hone saw their home spared despite the blaze's quick-burning nature when it started the afternoon of Thursday, July 15, and almost immediately started moving east.

"They saved, I think, basically every structure," Shirley Hone told the Chieftain during an interview Wednesday, July 21.

The Hones own the last home on Eden Bench, closest to Elbow Creek, Shirley Hone said.

"I think within two hours, it was burning hard right below our house," she said.

The couple heeded evacuation notices and were out of their home by about 6 p.m., she said. Other family members stayed overnight at the home to watch the place.

"We left the first night, and my two brothers-in-law from Enterprise and Joseph came and stayed at the house," Hone said.

She added they brought a water truck and stayed at the house in case they could help.

They stayed in Enterprise on July 15-16, but returned home within about 36 hours of evacuating.

"We just wanted to be there. We built this house ourselves, and it's not easy to leave a place like this," she said.

When she spoke to the Chieftain, Hone said she hadn't measured how close the fire came to their home, but her brothers-in-law "said it was within 500 yards of our lowest property."

Hone had immense praise for the efforts put forth by firefighters who stopped the blaze before it reached their home.

"This state fire group did an outstanding job with this fire. It was moving very rapidly," she said. "The organization this group has was unbelievable, both aerial and ground."

Hone added that she and her husband never felt unsafe.

"These guys were right on top of it. What they did was totally amazing. And the ground personnel was

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