

Incident Commander Smith talks fire strategy

By RONALD BOND
Wallowa County Chieftain

WALLOWA — Link Smith has previously fought fire in every portion of Oregon except for the northeast corner.

He's now coordinating the attack on the Elbow Creek Fire burning southwest of Troy.

Smith is the incident commander for the Type 1 Oregon Department of Forestry Incident Management Team 3 that has been on the scene trying to quench the Elbow Creek Fire since Sunday morning, July 18.

Smith, the district forester for the Western Land District west of Eugene, is a veteran firefighter. He said during an interview with the Chieftain on July 20 that this is his 37th year fighting fire, his 29th with the ODF and his eighth as an incident commander.

He's faced some of the state's biggest blazes, as well. Smith was the IC on the Holiday Farm Fire, which burned more than 173,000 acres east of Eugene and Springfield in 2020.

The Elbow Creek Fire, while just over one-eighth the size of the Holiday Farm Fire at 22,790 acres as of Tuesday, presents its own



Ronald Bond/Wallowa County Chieftain
Incident Commander Link Smith, left, and Deputy IC Les Hallman, speak in Wallowa on Tuesday, July 20, 2021, during a community meeting on the Elbow Creek Fire.

challenges. While the Holiday Farm Fire was affected heavily by wind, it's been the terrain, he said, that has been difficult at Elbow Creek.

"Every fire is different just based on the environment and weather conditions," he said. "You look at Holiday Farm last year, it was wind-driven, a very significant wind event, which is challenging in itself because of the rate of spread, but you

knew where it was going. The wind's blowing from one direction and pushing on the fire. Here, what's challenging about it is it's fuel-driven and (you face) smoke and drainages. You don't know which way the wind is going to blow up these drainages."

He said that the deep, steep drainages and canyons in the area where the fire is burning makes trying to attack it difficult.

"The Holiday Farm Fire, you could reach everywhere," he said. "These canyons are so deep, it's really challenging to get people down into them."

The canyons' depth and steepness have even limited one of the tactics Smith likes to employ — fighting fire at night.

"It's a really good time to catch a fire, but it's too steep and too dangerous to put firefighters in a draw at

nighttime here, so that takes away one of our typical strategies simply because of geography," he said.

In explaining firefighting and tactics, he said there is a benefit to having air support, but manpower on the ground is what matters.

"People like to think 'just bring in more helicopters or air tankers.' They slow the fire, (but) you have to have boots on the ground to really put it out," he said. "Even if it rains, it buys you an opportunity. I like to tell people we take advantage of opportunities. If we can get an air tanker in there and slow it down, maybe we can chip away at a line. It's all about containment, and in this country it's hard to contain a fire."

A contained portion of a fire, he said, is where a border containment line is holding to the point the crew feels confident they could leave that portion and it would no longer spread.

"We're estimating if we walked away from it, we're estimating 15% of that line we have in, it wouldn't expand," he said when explaining the containment at the time, which was 15%. "The rest of the fire could. As we continue to strengthen those lines,

the containment goes up. Before we leave here it will be at 100%."

The terrain, he said, dictates what strategy is put in place, but he added the team will "chisel away" putting a border around the fire until it's handled.

"What's your first priority? Maybe it's a little section of line, but you have to button that up. We have people throughout the fire, we'll really put an emphasis on one of those fronts, catch that one, and (then) we'll put emphasis on another one, and just chisel away at it."

The blaze Smith worked on last year was the largest he had ever been on, yet he's stunned by the current fire situation.

"It's crazy the size of fires right now. Never seen anything like it," he said. "It's more fires, and they're all big fires."

Births
A son, Cavanaugh Brian Freels, was born July 1, 2021 in Enterprise to Clay and Erin Freels of Enterprise. Grandparents are Catherine Doherty, Mark McLaughlin, and Ted & Kathy Freels.

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WHAT'S HAPPENING

SEE THE EXPANDED ONLINE CALENDAR AT EASTERNOREGONEVENTS.COM

WEDNESDAY, JULY 28
CHIEF JOSEPH DAYS: LITTLE BUCKAROO SPECIAL NEEDS RODEO: 9 a.m. Harley Tucker Memorial Rodeo Arena. Free.

CHIEF JOSEPH DAYS: PRCA FAMILY NIGHT RODEO: 7 p.m. Harley Tucker Memorial Rodeo Arena.

CHIEF JOSEPH DAYS: FAMILY DANCE AT THE THUNDER ROOM — DJ: 9 p.m. At the rodeo grounds.

THURSDAY, JULY 29
RETURN TO AM'SÁAXPA — NEZ PERCE TRIBE RIDE: 8 a.m. — noon. The Nez Perce Tribe will ride and walk the traditional route of the Nimiipuu to their recently purchased property where they will formally bless their homeland. Camping space is available, first come first serve. Restrooms, sinks and trash receptacles will be on site. Parking will be available. No RV hookups. Questions: 208-621-4772.

CHIEF JOSEPH DAYS: TOUGH ENOUGH TO WEAR PINK WALK: 9 a.m. Harley Tucker Memorial Rodeo Arena. Entry fee: \$40; register your dog for an additional \$5 and receive a pink scarf for them. Entry fee includes

T-shirt, refreshments and prizes after the walk in the Thunder Room, one general admission rodeo ticket for Thursday night's "Tough Enough to Wear Pink" rodeo.

PILATES: 9-10 a.m. Wallowa Senior Center.

SENIOR QUILTING GROUP: 10 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. Wallowa Senior Center.

WALLOWA COUNTY CHESS CLUB: 4-6 p.m. Joseph Center in Joseph. Visitors and players of all levels are welcome! Free.

WALLOWA LAKE LODGE MUSIC ON THE DECK: 5-7 p.m. Enjoy acoustic guitar with Gabriel Bush. Free and open to the public.

16th ANNUAL COURTHOUSE CONCERT SEVRIES: 5:30-7 p.m., at the gazebo on the courthouse lawn in Enterprise. Classical, folk, jazz and rock. Tonight's performance is by Hillfolk Noir. Free.

WALLOWA LAKE LODGE LECTURE SERIES: 7-8 p.m. Tonight's topic is "Wolverines."

CHIEF JOSEPH DAYS: PRCA TOUGH ENOUGH TO WEAR PINK RODEO: 7 p.m. Harley Tucker Memorial Rodeo Arena. Wear pink!

CHIEF JOSEPH DAYS: FUN AT THE THUNDER

ROOM: 9 p.m. Harley Tucker Memorial Rodeo Arena.

FRIDAY, JULY 30
DISCOVERY WALK: 9-11 a.m. West Fork Trail family-friendly hike (easy). Meet at Wallowa Lake Trailhead at the end of Wallowa Lake Highway at 9 a.m. Registration required, with a 10-person maximum group size. Register at info@wallowa-oly.org

CHIEF JOSEPH DAYS: JUNIOR PARADE: 10 a.m. on Main Street in Joseph.

WALLOWA LAKE LODGE MUSIC ON THE DECK: 7-10 p.m. Free & open to the public. Live music — hang out on the deck or spread out a blanket on the lawn. Full bar will be open until 9 p.m.

CHIEF JOSEPH DAYS: PRCA FAMILY NIGHT RODEO: 7 p.m. Harley Tucker Memorial Rodeo Arena.

CHIEF JOSEPH DAYS: ALL TEEN DANCE: 9 p.m. Joseph Community Center.

CHIEF JOSEPH DAYS: LIVE MUSIC & DANCING AT THE THUNDER ROOM: 9:30 p.m.

SATURDAY, JULY 31
DISCOVERY WALK:

9-11 a.m. Family-friendly stroll, meet in the lobby of Wallowa Lake Lodge.

CHIEF JOSEPH DAYS GRAND PARADE: 10 a.m. Main Street, Joseph.

WALLOWA COUNTY FARMERS MARKET: 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. Main Street in Joseph near Stein's Distillery. Crafts, produce, homemade goods and some live music will be on tap for visitors. www.wallowacountyfarmersmarket.com, 541-426-0795 or search for "Wallowa County Farmers' Market" on Facebook.

CHIEF JOSEPH DAYS PRCA FAMILY NIGHT RODEO: 7 p.m. Harley Tucker Memorial Rodeo Arena.

CHIEF JOSEPH DAYS ALL TEEN DANCE: 9 p.m. Joseph Community Center.

CHIEF JOSEPH DAYS MUSIC & DANCING AT THE THUNDER ROOM: 9:30 p.m.

SUNDAY, AUG. 1
WALLOWA LAKE LODGE PIANO WITH GAIL SWART: 6-9 p.m. Free and open to the public.

TUESDAY, AUG. 3
PILATES: 9-10 a.m. Wallowa Senior Center.

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