

Wildfire effects force five-day closure of Tribal government

By Dean Rhodes

Smoke Signals editor

Tribal offices in Grand Ronde remained closed for the fifth work day in a row on Monday, Sept. 14, because of poor air quality, General Manager David Fullerton announced Sunday, Sept. 13.

According to the Oregon Department of Environmental Quality, air quality in most of the Willamette Valley remained at hazardous levels on Monday. Clearing is not expected until late Monday and Tuesday as a weather front moves in bringing rain and favorable winds.

Although the Grand Ronde area did not have any wildfires that plagued the rest of western Oregon, it did have to deal with the smoke created by those wildfires for most of the Labor Day week.

As a precaution, Grand Ronde Police Chief Jake McKnight announced that all gates to the Reservation are closed because of the extreme fire danger in western Oregon.

On Tuesday, Sept. 8, primary phone and Internet service for the Tribal government went down due to a disruption with Wave Broadband. The disruption affected all incoming e-mail, web and remote desktop functions. That, in turn, forced the Grand Ronde Health & Wellness Center to close since it could not receive calls and Pharmacy computers were inoperable.

Health Services Executive Director Kelly Rowe said on Thursday, Sept. 10, that patients needing refills can obtain them at any pharmacy by presenting the outside pharmacy with a prescription label. Gov. Kate Brown has authorized the emergency pharmacy rules and pharmacies can contact the Board of Pharmacy with any questions. Patients will still need to present



The Tribal Governance building was shrouded in the smoke and haze that hung over the Grand Ronde Valley on Wednesday, Sept. 9.



Photos by Timothy J. Gonzalez

Highway 18 was closed in both directions west of Grand Ronde because of two wildfires burning near the highway in the Otis area in Lincoln County.

insurance information and pay any co-pays.

Patients also can contact Shasta Customer Service at 800-880-5877 if they have any problems getting their prescription filled.

“The Grand Ronde Pharmacy, though closed, is working behind the scenes to help patients obtain their medications without disruption,” Rowe said. “The Pharmacy hopes to open soon, and we want to ensure patient needs are met until then.”

Rowe announced on Friday, Sept. 11, that the Pharmacy would begin processing prescriptions and mail them out. However, since campus

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phones remain down, the only way to order prescriptions is through the web refill site at <https://cyberscript.ais-rx.com/Independents/Login.aspx?IndependentStoreNumber=3843150&ImageLib=GrandRonde> or through the phone app, both of which have continued to track requests since the Pharmacy has been closed. The phone app can be downloaded by searching for “Grand Ronde Pharmacy” in your phone’s app store.

“If patients have an urgent need for something to be filled the same day, filling at an outside pharmacy is still allowed and recommended as the Pharmacy catches up from the backlog of this week’s request,” Rowe said. “All previous requests are expected to be mailed out by Monday evening at the latest. The staff is relieved to be filling prescriptions again and looks forward to helping patients through this difficult time.”

Although the Tribe’s Information Systems staff was able to bring many of the Tribe’s important Internet services back on line by switching to a backup link, phone services remained down on Monday until Wave Broadband can re-establish the primary connection that runs through the coast range and has been affected by the wildfire near Otis.

On Monday morning, the Grand Ronde area and Spirit Mountain remained shrouded in a thick smoky haze as Highway 18 — the Salmon River Highway — was closed just west of the Grand Ronde Road intersection because of wildfires. Signs situated just west of the Grand Ronde Road intersection warned travelers of the closure at milepost 5.

The Echo Mountain Fire started on the north side of Highway 18 near mile marker 7-8 and crossed over and was burning in a southward direction. The Kimberling Fire is located on Highway 18 near mile marker 3-4 near Otis. Highway 18 remains closed for travel between Highway 101 and Grand Ronde.

The Grand Ronde Tribe opened its campus to a fire camp that provided a staging ground for firefighters battling the blaze outside of Lincoln City.

Communications Director Sara Thompson said that the scheduled Wednesday, Sept. 9, Facebook Live event was canceled because of the Tribal office closures. However, the 10 a.m. Tribal Council meeting to approve a fourth supplemental budget was still held virtually.

According to the Oregon Department of Forestry, all state forests were designated to be in extreme fire danger starting on Monday, Sept. 7.

One bit of good news for the Grand Ronde area was announced on Friday, Sept. 11, when Grand Ronde Station re-opened after being closed for a deep cleaning on Aug. 27 after contact tracing found positive COVID-19 connections to the facility. “We would like to thank all of you who helped during the closure,” General Manager Tim Jackson said in an e-mail.

The Saturday, Sept. 12, Tribal Council election also proceeded as planned. Voters were able to visit the Tribal Community Center, 9615 Grand Ronde Road, between 9 a.m. and 6 p.m. to cast their ballots in person. According to the Tribe’s Election Board, 126 Tribal voters braved the conditions to vote. ■

Tribal crews assisting in efforts

By Danielle Frost

Smoke Signals staff writer

The Confederated Tribes of Grand Ronde’s Silviculture/Fire Protection Department focused its efforts to keep the Reservation safe while also assisting other rural departments in the region during last week’s wildfire emergency in western Oregon.

“We are focusing on protecting the Grand Ronde area, but are also engaged in mutual aid efforts with local departments,” Silviculture/Fire Protection Supervisor Jim Pinder said on Wednesday, Sept. 9.

The Tribe worked with the West Valley Fire District and also reached out to the Tillamook Fire Department to see what needs are there.

Additionally, a Tribal fire engine was sent to Otis, 21 miles west of Grand Ronde, to help contain the Echo Mountain Complex Fire. Officials from the Oregon Department of Forestry said approximately 300 acres had burned as of Tuesday, Sept. 8. That and other wildfires in Lincoln County forced residents to evacuate and created hazardous air quality conditions.

The Grand Ronde area and Spirit Mountain remained shrouded in a smoky haze most of last week as Highway 18 — the Salmon River Highway — was closed at milepost 10 in Lincoln County because of the wildfires. Signs situated just west of the Grand Ronde Road intersection warned travelers of the closure.

The U.S. Weather Service issued an air quality alert on Monday, Sept. 7, that remained in effect for the Oregon Coast, Willamette Valley, southwest Washington and southern Oregon.

“Wildfires burning in the region combined with forecasted conditions will cause air quality to reach unhealthy levels at times,” the alert stated. “Pollutants in smoke can cause burning eyes, runny nose, aggravate heart and lung diseases, and aggravate other serious health problems.”

In addition to battling blazes locally, Grand Ronde fire crews are also assisting in regional efforts.

“We have one engine in Warm Springs at the Lionshead Fire, one in the Medford area and we have a hand crew on the Colville Reservation in eastern Washington helping with efforts there,” Pinder said.

The 91,754-acre Lionshead Fire

spread through Marion and Clackamas counties, prompting numerous evacuations. The Almeda Fire resulted in level 3 evacuations in south and central Medford. Level 3 evacuations also were issued for the Inchelium Highway Fire, part of a larger blaze that burned more than 12 square miles of the Colville Reservation.

“We’re really just kind of holding things down here,” Pinder said. “Tonight is the end of the red flag warnings, but we will still have engine patrols in place until further notice. We are keeping on the lookout and are creating a presence to let people know the Tribal engines are around here and can respond to something.”

With four engines and a water tender at the ready, Pinder added the Grand Ronde Reservation will be protected.

“If anyone sees a fire, do not call the Natural Resources Department,” he said. “Call 911 and that will be immediately routed to us.”

To help safeguard against additional wildfires, the Reservation gates were closed on Tuesday, Sept. 8, and Police Chief Jake McKnight said that he expected the closure to last for at least a week. ■