

Local & State

Crews quickly douse 2 small blazes

By Jayson Jacoby
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Firefighters stopped a pair of blazes from spreading far Thursday afternoon, but fire managers say the persistent hot, dry weather has created potentially volatile conditions in Baker County's forests and rangelands.

"We're as dry as we've been in several years," said Willy Crippen, fire management officer for the Burnt-Powder Fire Zone on the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest.

The Sherman fire burned about a quarter of an acre of public land north of Highway 26 about seven miles northwest of Unity.

The Muddy Creek fire burned one-tenth of acre on

private land in the Elkhorn Mountains west of Haines.

Sherman fire

The blaze was reported about 3:30 p.m. One helicopter dropped water on the fire, and both the Forest Service and the Oregon Department of Forestry (ODF) dispatched engines, Crippen said.

Although the fire started inside a 300-acre area where the Forest Service lit a prescribed fire on April 27, Crippen said fire managers think it's more likely that the blaze was started by a lightning strike earlier this month.

A tree in that area that had its top burned suggests it was struck by lightning, and the blaze might have

smoldered for more than a week, Crippen said.

The fire burned in a stringer of timber, but it was surrounded by areas burned in the April prescribed fire, which consumed much of the fuel.

"That's why we do the burns like that," Crippen said. "To reduce the amount of fuel when we do get wildfires."

Firefighters were mopping up the blaze this morning.

Muddy Creek fire

It was fortunate that a Forest Service firefighting crew was in the area about 2:45 p.m. Thursday, changing a fire danger sign to reflect the extreme fire danger,

when this blaze started producing smoke, said Steve Meyer, wildland fire supervisor at ODF's Baker City office.

The Forest Service crew arrived first, followed by an ODF engine about 10 minutes later, Meyer said.

The fire was human-caused, and is still under investigation, he said.

The fire started in an area with a dense stand of young trees, and it had the potential to grow considerably, Meyer said.

"I'm surprised it didn't spread more than it did," he said. "It started below a road and burned up to the road, which kind of held it. We also had the quick response."

SCHOOLS

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Should voters pass the bond, construction on the new school, which would accommodate grades 1-6 and be built on a 12-acre property that the school district bought last year along Hughes Lane just north of the Baker Sports Complex, would begin in 2019 and likely be completed in 2021.

The new elementary school, which would cost an estimated \$37 million, would accommodate students who now attend Brooklyn Primary, which was built in 1955, and South Baker Intermediate, which was built in 1953.

Seventh- and eighth-graders would likely be moved to the high school in 2020. The middle school students would have a separate section of the school from the high schoolers.

Baker High School was designed to accommodate 830 students, but the enrollment at the end of the previous

school year was about 418.

The district also would use money from the bond measure to revamp Brooklyn Primary School as an early childhood learning center that would house kindergartners, and potentially lease space for Headstart and several other services for young children and families.

The bond measure would boost the property tax rate within the Baker School District by an estimated \$1.97 per \$1,000 of assessed property value (not real market value, which usually is different from the assessed value).

That would increase the annual property tax bill by \$197 for a property with an assessed value of \$100,000.

The tax rate would remain in place for an estimated 30 years.

The district has also secured a \$4 million grant from the state that would be available if voters approve the bond measure.

The district paid for a phone survey in

May that asked 369 voters in the school district more than a dozen questions, including this one:

"If an election were held today, would you favor or oppose a \$48 million bond measure that would increase the existing property tax rate by an estimated \$1.97 per thousand dollars of assessed property value?"

The results of the phone survey:

- 43 percent favor the measure
- 41 percent oppose the measure
- 16 percent were undecided or did not respond

If voters approve the bond measure, the board plans to create an 11-member oversight committee, made up of community members, to track work on the various projects.

In other business Thursday, the board elected Chris Hawkins as chairman, and Katie Lamb as vice chair.

Both said they are excited to serve in their new positions.

GRAZING

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Carrie Matthews of Baker City is concerned about guidelines in the plans for the Wallowa-Whitman, Umatilla and Malheur national forests that call for restricting cattle grazing in areas near wolf dens or where wolves are known to "rendezvous."

Matthews said local ranchers have had their federal grazing allotments closed due to technicalities, and she fears the wolf language in the new plans will have the same effect.

Peter Fargo, a spokesman for the Wallowa-Whitman, said the wolf den guidelines in the plans are "commonsense" management practices that are proven to reduce wolf-livestock conflicts.

Fargo said the new plans call for the same level of grazing as in the previous plans, which were approved in 1990. That amounts over the three forests to 242,800 animal unit months (AUM) per year — an AUM is the amount of forage a cow and her calf eat in a month.

The new forest plan "support ongoing grazing activities, while providing adequate protection of sensitive aquatic species, riparian habitats, and water quality," Fargo said.

Ed Trindle, a Baker



Katly Orr / Baker City Herald file photo

Cattle graze in parts of the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest.

County rancher who has lived here for more than 70 years, said he is concerned that under the new forest plans the Forest Service will decide not to re-issue grazing permits for allotments that are not being used now.

Trindle, who is a member of the Public Lands Committee of the Baker County Livestock Association, said he doesn't believe the Forest Service can meet the AUM numbers listed in the plans as a result of inactive allotments remaining closed to grazing.

In addition to having issues with the plans, Matthews also contends that their sheer volume, and what she considers a lack of transparency from the Forest Service, has prevented the public from fully understand-

ing the ramifications of the new plans.

"This is not for the good of the public, it is just further restrictions of what you can't do," Matthews said.

The plans and supporting documents total almost 6,000 pages. Residents who want to submit a formal objection have until Aug. 28, which is 60 days after the plans were published.

The Forest Service has not provided physical copies of the plan except upon request. Forest Service officials say they decided on that policy after receiving few requests for paper copies after sending out a newsletter in March 2017.

Officials also point out that printing a complete version of the plans would cost about \$500.

"Interesting that they said they had very little response,"

Matthews said. "I think it was a weak attempt personally, considering they never knew when it was going to be released."

On July 20, the Forest Service sent out a letter after receiving questions about the plan from the public.

Forest Access For All, a volunteer group that advocates for motorized access to public land in Eastern Oregon, has scheduled a series of five meetings to help people who want to submit an objection to the forest plans.

One of the meetings will be in Baker City, on Aug. 8 from 6 p.m. to 8 p.m. at the Sunridge Inn. The first of the meetings will be in La Grande on Monday, July 30 at the Blue Mountain Conference Center, 404 12th St., from 6 p.m. to 8 p.m.

OREGON BRIEFING

Protesters leave Immigration and Customs Enforcement office

PORTLAND (AP) — Police have cleared out the few remaining protesters left at the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement headquarters in Portland with no arrests.

Several news outlets report that police moved into an encampment at 4:30 a.m. Wednesday and that about a dozen remaining protesters left the area.

The activists had been protesting since June 17. They want to abolish ICE and end the Trump administration's zero-tolerance immigration policy.

Authorities on Monday told protesters to leave by Tuesday evening or be arrested, and hundreds did leave by the deadline.

Portland Police spokesman Sgt. Chris Burley says police on Wednesday morning moved "slowly and methodically" through the camp and there were no injuries and no arrests.

City workers will remove wooden structures at the camp and clean up the area.

Bat that flew into person in Jackson County tests positive for rabies

EAGLE POINT (AP) — Public health officials say a rabid bat was found in the southwestern Oregon town of Eagle Point after a resident brought it in for testing.

Jackson Baures of Jackson County Public Health says the bat flew into an unidentified resident on July 13 and then fell to the ground and flopped around.

The bat tested positive for rabies at Oregon State University.

The resident was advised to take rabies prophylaxis treatments as a precaution.

Baures says about eight to 10 percent of bats test positive for rabies every year.

The Oregon Health Authority says so far this year, seven bats have tested positive for rabies.

BLM to start creating more fuel breaks in Southeastern Oregon

BOISE (AP) — More fuel breaks are being constructed as part of a plan by federal officials to stop wildfires in Southwestern Idaho and Southeastern Oregon.

The U.S. Bureau of Land Management said workers this month will start thinning or removing vegetation on 448 acres along roadways in Idaho with the intention of reducing flame length and slowing the spread of fast-moving wildfires. Work is expected to go through mid-October.

"The strategy of reducing vegetation and breaking up its continuity along established road systems will provide a safer work environment for the wildland firefighting community, resulting in more suppression options in the event of a large fire," said Lance Okeson, BLM acting Owyhee Field Office manager, in a statement.

The fuel break project is part of a \$67 million rehabilitation effort following a 2015 wildfire that scorched 436 square miles of sagebrush steppe in Idaho and Oregon that supports cattle grazing and some 350 species of wildlife, including sage grouse.

The project overall will put in fuel breaks on BLM land along 271 miles of existing roadways in Idaho and Oregon.

In addition to having workers clearing brush in fuel breaks, the agency this spring started using targeted grazing as an experimental technique. Targeted grazing has livestock herds grazing in selected fuel break tracks to thin vegetation.

The burned area is also part of a multi-year study examining various rehabilitation efforts. Those efforts could show whether the BLM has the ability to stop the cycle of increasingly destructive wildfires in the Great Basin. Many of those fires have been driven by cheatgrass, an invasive species that uses fire to force out native plants and turn vast areas into monocultures that burn frequently, often in sage grouse habitat.

Between 200,000 and 500,000 sage grouse remain in 11 Western states, down from a peak population of about 16 million. Experts generally attribute the decline to road construction, development and oil and gas leasing.

The males are known for performing an elaborate ritual that includes making balloon-like sounds with two air sacs on their necks. Sage grouse didn't receive federal protection in 2015, but officials are expected to review that decision in 2020.



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prepared by Dan Warnock

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