

Local & State

State Forestry officials pleased at drop in human-caused fires

By Stephen Hamway
WesCom News Service

It's been an up-and-down summer for Oregon fire managers trying to limit the number of wildfires caused by people, but one agency is optimistic about a trend.

The Oregon Department of Forestry, which protects about 16 million acres of public and private forested land across Oregon, announced earlier this week that the number of human-caused wildfires during August was about 10 percent lower than the average total for the month over the last 10 years.

Still, Tom Fields, fire prevention coordinator for the state forestry agency, said a dry start to fire season put Oregon's state and private forest lands at a disadvantage early on, and Oregonians need to stay vigilant as long as the weather stays dry.

"I think we need to remind people that the risk is still out there," Fields said Friday.

While Fields and other fire officials emphasize that fire seasons are getting longer and drier, Oregon's wildfire season typically gets going around the Fourth of July and wraps up in mid-to-late September.

Human activity is one of the most common ways for Oregon wildfires to begin, though Fields said the frequency of the fires and the activities that spark them vary depending on location and management of the forest.

He said portions of the state to the east of the Cascades, which see fewer visitors and more lightning than areas west of the mountains, see about 40 percent of their wildfires start because of human activity. In Southern Oregon, the breakdown is closer to 50 percent.

Fields said ODF's biggest challenge is people burning piles of debris, even more than unattended campfires or sparks from idling cars in tall grass. So far this year, 99 fires on ODF land have begun from people burning illegally, which can easily spiral into a wildfire during dry conditions.

"The last thing people want is for something they're doing to get out of hand,"



Photo by Seth Klassen

An abandoned fire burned about half an acre Sunday evening just south of Phillips Reservoir.

Abandoned campfire burns half-acre near Phillips Reservoir

By Jayson Jacoby
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An apparently abandoned illegal campfire spread into adjacent dry pine needles Sunday evening and burned about half an acre on the south side of Phillips Reservoir.

The blaze, which was contained Sunday night, is under investigation, but "all indications are that it was a campfire or warming fire," said Willy Crippen, fire management officer for the Forest Service's Burnt-Powder Fire Zone.

A passer-by reported the blaze at about 5 p.m.

The fire was just west of the dispersed camping area along the reservoir near Mason Dam, Crippen said.

Fires are not allowed in that area, as Phase B of public use restrictions are in place for the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest.

Campfires are allowed only in designated recreation sites, such as campgrounds, and in federal wilderness areas.

Crippen said that although the ground is extremely dry near Phillips Reservoir, the fire burned in an area where Forest Service crews over the past several years have thinned trees and used prescribed fire to reduce the amount of fuel on the ground and increase the distance between trees.

That, combined with light winds on Sunday evening, helped fire crews stop the blaze, which stayed on the ground.

Two Forest Service fire engines, one engine from the Oregon Department of Forestry, a 10-person Forest Service crew and an engine and water tender from the Greater Bowen Valley Fire Protection District worked on the blaze Sunday, Crippen said.

Crews were mopping it up today.

The fire did not affect access to nearby roads or to the Shoreline Trail around Phillips Reservoir, Crippen said. "We just need to be careful as things are extremely dry," he said.

Crippen said he expects the Phase B fire restrictions will remain in effect for a while. Cooler temperatures are forecast this week, but with little chance of widespread rainfall.

Fields said.

While many of the large fires have taken place outside Central Oregon, the state overall has had a tough wildfire season so far, with

about 748,000 acres in the state affected by wildfire. The state experienced dry conditions during April and May, which helped put ODF and other agencies behind

the curve before the state's fire season began in earnest, Fields said.

Before the start of June, ODF saw 100 more fires caused by humans than usual, which prompted concern that the state could be in for a record-breaking fire season, Fields said.

June and July were relatively similar to normal for the state agency, but August, traditionally the heart of Oregon's wildfire season, brought good news. People were responsible for 138 fires during the month, compared to the 10-year average of 153. Of note: Just two fires during the month began from burning debris, 85 percent less than during a typical August. Fields said he was "pleasantly surprised" by the figure.

"That goes to show that, since we started fire season, we kind of leveled off," he said.

This matches the trend from Central Oregon's federally managed land. Cassidy Kern, acting public affairs officer for the Deschutes National Forest, wrote in an email that the Deschutes and Ochoco national forests, along with the Crooked River National Grassland and the Bureau of Land Management's Prineville district, have seen 158 human-caused fires this year, compared to an average of 192.

Fields credited more coordination around fire prevention from state and federal land managers, as well as newer stakeholders like the Oregon Department of Transportation and Travel Oregon, the state's tourism agency. He noted that working together on management issues during last year's solar eclipse helped bridge those gaps in 2018. Fields added that this summer's smoky conditions have kept fire issues top of mind for many Oregonians.

"People are out in smoke every day, and it serves as a reminder," he said.

Still, Fields said the state is not done with fire season, and encouraged people to remain vigilant to build on the progress seen in August.

"People are under the impression that the fire risk is diminishing, and that's just not the case," Fields said.

LOCAL BRIEFING

Downtown projects nominated

Baker City Downtown has nominated several projects and businesses to the 2018 Oregon Main Street Awards, which will be announced Oct. 3.

Nominees from Baker City:

- Best New Business: The Trailhead
- Best Placemaking: Movies in the Park
- Outstanding Partnership: Baker City Downtowin and City of Baker City
- Best Façade Improvement over \$7500: The Haskill Building

- Best Special Event: Baker City Cyding Classic
- Best Image Event: First Friday: Little Big Show
- Board Member of the Year: Jenny Mowe-Joseph
- Business of the Year: Barley Brown's Brew Pub

"BCD is proud to play a part in the downtown district and will help to support businesses and property owners as they invest in our community," Carol Phillips, president of Baker City Downtown, said in a press release.

Rep. Findley plans coffee hour in Baker

State Rep. Lynn Findley, the Vale Republican whose district includes Baker County, has scheduled a public "coffee hour" event to meet constituents in Baker City on Friday, Sept. 14.

The event is set for 9 a.m. at Mad Matilda's Coffee House, 1931 Court Ave.

Findley was chosen by county commissioners in House District 60 in January 2018 to replace Cliff Bentz, who replaced Ted Ferrioli as state senator for this region.

Findley is a member of the House Committee on Revenue and the House Committee on Energy and Environment. He can be reached by phone at 503-986-1460 or online at www.oregonlegislature.gov/findley. His email address is Rep.LynnFindley@oregonlegislature.gov

DEBATE

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Nichols said he has more experience working with government than Harvey does.

Nichols, who has worked as a CPA for more than 30 years, has performed financial audits for many counties in Eastern Oregon.

"The difference between Bill and I is I have a lot more experience managing governmental entities," Nichols said.

Harvey said his life experience prepared him for the position and that if he is re-elected he would serve another four-year term but not seek a third.

"I ran for county chairmen because I believed the direction the county was going in was not conducive to preserving our rights," Harvey said. "I like to get input from the citizens because I serve the citizens of Baker County, I serve their needs."

Government transparency is an issue for Nichols, who said that the county need to be managed in a different way. He also said that the county has an issue that he can't disclose yet, but the public will be notified eventually.

Both candidates addressed the Blue Mountain Forest Plan Revision. Harvey said coordination, a federal law that requires federal agencies to try to tailor their projects to county priorities, is the right option. He said that if the new forest plans, which were unveiled in late June, are not changed to address the concerns that officials in Baker County and other Eastern Oregon counties have expressed, he is not opposed to pursuing litigation against the Forest Service in coordination with other counties.

Nichols said that he is in favor of cooperating with the Forest Service and other agencies, but still pushing back when they try to do something that hurts the county. He said any litigation would need the support of the state to be successful.

Nichols and Harvey are also scheduled to debate during an event sponsored by the Baker County Republican Party on Monday, Oct. 1 at 6 p.m. at the Baker Elks Lodge, 1896 Second St. in Baker City.

The meeting agenda also includes Measure 1-84, the Second Amendment Preservation Ordinance also on the Nov. 6 ballot.

The Oregon Republican Party will have its state central committee meeting Saturday, Sept. 15 in Baker City.

For more information on either the Sept. 15 or Oct. 1 events, call Suzan Ellis Jones, chair of the Baker County Republicans, at 541-519-5035.

Man accused of assault his mother

By Chris Collins
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A transient is being held at the Baker County Jail on charges of assaulting his mother at her Huntington home Sunday morning in an incident in which a rifle shot was fired in an attempt to warn him off.

Kelly Allen, 41, is charged with one count each of third-degree assault, fourth-degree assault, strangulation, harassment, second-degree criminal mischief and felon in possession of a firearm.

Deputies from the Baker County Sheriff's Office were dispatched to Huntington at 8 a.m. Sunday on a report that Allen was assaulting his mother, Cynthia Vermillion,

64, of Huntington, a press released stated.

When deputies arrived, an Oregon State Police trooper had detained Allen in the back of his patrol car.

After interviewing the parties involved in the incident, deputies determined that Allen had been walking around Huntington Saturday without clothing. He came to Vermillion's home about 2:30 a.m. and she gave him some sweatpants and allowed him to sleep at her house.

Later that morning according to the press release, Vermillion was in the bathroom when Allen came into the room and pulled her off the toilet by her hair.

Allen then began spraying her with the

shower head and holding her head out the window while saying that he needed to cleanse Vermillion, the press release stated.

Elmer Driver, who also lives at the home, struck Allen with a large piece of wood, that had no effect on him, according to the press release.

Driver fired a warning shot from a rifle inside the home and the round struck a wall. At one point during the incident, Allen took the rifle from Driver, according to the report. Next, Driver's son and a passerby ran into the home and pulled Allen off his mother before he was taken into custody and jailed.

Weekly Specials Sept 10-16

Monday	Meatloaf.....	\$8.95
Tuesday	Bourbon Chicken.....	\$8.95
Wednesday	Beef Stroganoff.....	\$8.95
Thursday	Chicken Fried Steak.....	\$9.95
Friday	All You Can Eat Mini Shrimp.....	\$9.95
	Steak & Shrimp.....	\$10.95
	Pan Fried Oysters.....	\$10.50
	Prime Rib.....	\$13.95
Saturday	NY Steak.....	\$13.95
	Prime Rib.....	\$13.95
Sunday	Pot Roast.....	\$9.50/8.95 sr

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