

FIRE

Continued from Page 1A

Owen is here to see first-hand the Forest Service's efforts to reduce the risk of a wildfire spreading uphill from here to the city's 10,000-acre watershed, its boundary little more than a mile away.

City officials have worried for decades that a big blaze in the watershed would foul with ash and mud the streams and springs that supply almost all the city's water.

Such a fire could force the city to find a temporary replacement water source, and spend more an estimated \$10 million to \$15 million to build a plant to filter water from those streams.

"Anything we can do to protect the watershed," Owen said as the group looked across the forest.

Crippen, a fire management officer for the Forest Service's Whitman Ranger District, said the agency's long-term strategy, which includes thinning the forest, piling and burning slash and then, as happened in Washington Gulch on May 10, igniting a prescribed fire, creates areas where a summer blaze sparked by lightning or a carelessly discarded cigarette would be easier for fire crews to stop.

The Forest Service has focused on the Washington Gulch area over the past decade and a half not only because of its proximity to the watershed.

The area also borders private land that includes many homes in the strip where the Baker Valley gives way to the Elkhorns — a zone that fire experts call the "wildland-urban interface."

Curbing the wildfire risk in this area not only helps protect the watershed from flames moving uphill, Crippen said, but it can serve as a buffer between a fire that starts higher in the mountains and then moves down onto private property.

Forest Service projects in and around Washington Gulch date to about 2002, said Steve Hawkins, deputy fire staff fuels program manager for the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest.

The area is rather typical of lower-elevation sites in the Elkhorns, he said. Based on historic photos and written accounts dating to the late 19th century, Forest Service officials know that forests in many areas then were dominated by old growth ponderosa pines in what Hawkins describes as a "park-like stand."

That basically means there was considerable open space around most trees — often 30 feet or more — with relatively little underbrush and few young trees.

Hawkins said these forests were maintained in that condition by lightning-sparked blazes that swept through every decade or so on average. These blazes mainly stayed on the ground, scorching the



Jayson Jacoby/Baker City Herald

Willy Crippen, fire management officer for the Forest Service's Whitman Ranger District, examines an area in Washington Gulch near Baker City that was burned in a prescribed fire May 10. The fire partially accomplished the agency's goal of reducing the amount of fuel, both on the ground and in standing trees, that could fuel a summer wildfire that could threaten both the nearby Baker City watershed and parcels of private property.



Jayson Jacoby/Baker City Herald

A prescribed fire May 10 in Washington Gulch burned in a patchwork fashion.

"It burned where there was fuel on the ground, which is where you want it to burn."

— Steve Hawkins, Wallowa-Whitman National Forest, talking about a May 10 prescribed fire near Baker City

layer of pine needles, limbs and twigs, and preventing younger trees from growing tall enough to serve as "ladder fuels" — a route by which flames can climb from the ground into the crowns of mature trees.

But the situation changed dramatically during the 20th century. The combination of logging that removed most of the mature pines, and the Forest Service aggressively fighting fires, allowed younger trees to proliferate.

This "new" forest was much more dense, Hawkins said. In addition, Douglas-fir and grand fir trees — species more susceptible to fire and to insects — were much more common than in the past, he said.

Returning these forests to something closer to their

historic condition is a long process with multiple steps, Hawkins said.

In Washington Gulch the Forest Service has over the past 15 years or so employed commercial logging, "precommercial thinning" — basically, cutting and piling trees too small to be sawed into boards — and prescribed fire.

The logging and thinning were done first because the forests were so dense that even a managed fire, ignited during spring when the ground is still damp and temperatures not yet at summer levels, would burn too hot and likely kill more of the mature trees than Forest Service officials prefer, Hawkins said.

Even if the flames don't spread into tree crowns the intense heat can damage the cambium layer beneath their

bark and doom the trees, said Kendall Cikanek, the Whitman District ranger.

During Tuesday's tour, Hawkins, Crippen and Cikanek pointed out several examples of how the May 10 prescribed fire accomplished some of the agency's goals.

They looked at patches where flames scorched most of the young pines and firs — generally shorter than 5 feet.

In those areas the blaze likely mimicked those lightning fires of the past, Hawkins said, killing fledgling trees before they could become tall enough to become ladder fuel.

The May 10 fire also spread into the crowns of scattered older, taller trees.

Although some of those trees likely will survive despite their currently red needles, Crippen said Forest Service standards allow for up to 10% mortality even among mature trees — the Washington Gulch fire was well below that level.

When a prescribed fire kills mature trees it makes openings in the canopy, a natural component of a healthy forest, as well as creating standing dead trees — "snags" — that serve as habitat for woodpeckers and other wildlife, Crippen said.

The most distinctive feature of the May 10 fire, though, is its patchy nature.

The predominant color within the burned area is the rich green of pine grass, some of which has already resprouted from the black splotches, many of them 20 feet or less in diameter, that litter the landscape.

Indeed, Hawkins estimated that the May 10 fire accomplished only about half of what Forest Service officials hoped, in terms of consuming fuel, both ground litter and live trees.

That's typical of prescribed burns during the spring, he said. The abundance of green foliage, and the damp ground and relatively high humidity, prevents flames from spreading as rapidly as they would during summer.

(This, of course, also explains why prescribed burns are lit during spring or, occasionally, in fall.)

Generally speaking the fire left what foresters call a "mosaic" — a mixture of burned and unburned areas.

"I like what I see here," Cikanek said.

"It burned where there was fuel on the ground, which is where you want it to burn," Hawkins said.

If possible, the Forest Service will try to ignite another prescribed in this area within several years.

Officials will be able to be more aggressive with that next fire, Crippen said, because there will be less fuel and thus less risk of the blaze burning too hot or producing too much smoke.

The May 10 blaze generated a smoke plume visible from much of Baker County. That night smoke settled into Baker City and for about two hours the air quality index was in the "unhealthy for sensitive groups" category.

Cikanek said that day's weather forecast, which called for northerly winds that would have pushed smoke away from the city, didn't materialize.

"It's a real challenge up here, so close to town, to meet our goals without affecting the city with smoke," Crippen said.

The group's final stop Tuesday was a 40-acre parcel where a prescribed fire was done in 2016. The parcel borders the area burned on May 10.

Hawkins said the 40-acre parcel, which had been logged and precommercially thinned several years before the 2016 prescribed fire, is "closer" to the sort of forest his agency hopes to encourage in Washington Gulch.

Most of the trees are ponderosa pines, and the gap between trees is generally 20 feet or wider. There are few small trees, the 2016 fire having killed most of them.

"This is someplace we can make a stand and control a fire," Crippen said.

Owen, who needed only to look east to see a sliver of the watershed, said she was gratified to hear that.

Adoptable Pet Of The Week

GABBY

I'm Gabby, a 5 year old female poodle with "ghost" coloring of black & white. I'm very smart and know basic commands. I'm affectionate, friendly, very confident and quiet. I love car rides! I've never been around small children, but with some guidance I'm sure I'd have no problem. I also know how to use a doggie door... want to meet me?

Please contact Best Friends at 541-519-7987 (no texting, please)



Sponsored by:



We have bulk compost, bark and soil!

3797 10th Street, Baker City (541) 403-1969

Thatcher's ACE Hardware & La Grande ACE Hardware

Miracle-Gro® Moisture Control® Potting Mix, 2 Cu. Ft. 7301609
Limit 2 at this price. **\$10.99**

Miracle-Gro® Garden Soil or Whitney Farms® Organic Raised Bed Mix, 1-1/2 Cu. Ft. 7438286, 7438336, 7505977
Limit 60 at this price. **\$6.49**

SALE ENDS MAY 31st 2019

Thatcher's Ace Hardware
2200 Resort St, Baker City • 541-523-3371

La Grande Ace Hardware
2212 Island Ave, La Grande • 541-605-0152
Monday-Friday 7-6 • Saturday 8-6 • Sunday 9-5

photos for illustration only



Grand Opening!

at 1928 Court Avenue, Baker City

Please join us during our open house from 11 am to 7 pm. Come see our newly remodeled physical therapy space, and NE Oregon's First Float Cabin.

May 31, 2019

Come down to enter for your chance to win a FREE 90 minute float. We will be giving away one float every hour!

THE SHIFT

An Exclusive Screening

Join community leaders in a documentary screening that explores current dynamics and impacts of substance misuse on the youth of Baker County



Panel discussion with community leaders will follow the screening of this impactful 32-minute video

There is no power to change greater than a community discovering what it cares about.

Join the Conversation

Churchill School
Thursday June 6, 2019
5:30 PM

Music after panel discussion
Shannon Gray and Jay Fleming

This program was funded and endorsed by Baker County Safe Communities Coalition and New Directions Northwest