

Local & Region

Agencies seek to stem rising rate of suicide among wildland firefighters

By Keith Ridler
Associated Press

BOISE — Shane Del Grosso spent some 30 summers crossing smoke-shrouded mountains and forests to fight increasingly devastating wildfires in the U.S. West.

Toward the end, his skills and experience propelled him to lead a federal multi-agency team that responded to large-scale national disasters. On some days he directed a thousand firefighters and helped coordinate aircraft attacks on massive blazes.

But then came the long offseason lacking the shared-risk camaraderie. Isolation closed in, his family said, along with marital problems that can be exacerbated by first-responder jobs that require missed family events and birthdays.

Del Grosso, 50, killed himself May 9, 2016, not long before the start of another wildfire season.

"I always thought that you'd see it coming, but I guess you don't," said his best friend, Noel Matson, who worked and fought wildfires out of the same U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service office in Huron, South Dakota, as Del Grosso. "It was maybe that male bravado firefighter thing where you don't talk about what's bothering you."

Federal officials at the National Interagency Fire Center in Boise have started making efforts to change that mindset after noticing an increase in wildland firefighter suicides in recent years.

"It's not a profession where

"I always thought that you'd see it coming, but I guess you don't."

— Noel Matson, whose best friend and fellow firefighter, Shane Del Grosso, completed suicide in 2016

people want to reach out for help because they are the help," said Jessica Gardetto, a fire center spokeswoman and former wildland firefighter.

"The federal agencies have realized, whether it's suicidal tendencies or just overall mental health, it's a resource that needs to be available — even out on the fire lines."

No figures on wildland firefighter suicides are available because federal agencies often track only fatalities that occur during work hours, and families don't always release a cause of death.

But Gardetto said the wildland firefighting community is small, "and word spreads quickly." Anecdotal reports suggest many of the suicides are happening outside the wildfire season. A month ago, she said, a U.S. Forest Service firefighter based in the U.S. Southwest killed himself. And she said several suicides occurred in Idaho in 2017.

One of those was a Boise-based U.S. Bureau of Land Management smokejumper, a firefighter who jumps from airplanes.

Reasons for the rise are unclear, though some cite longer and tougher wildfire seasons and an increase in the number of wildland firefighters who previously served in the

military and were already dealing with post-traumatic stress.

In the past several years, the National Interagency Fire Center has bolstered a program that teaches coping skills and offers one-on-one crisis intervention to firefighters dealing with trauma and other issues. Federal agencies also have increased efforts to make firefighters aware that help is available.

It's unclear what kind of help Del Grosso was receiving. His family learned after his death that he'd been diagnosed with PTSD.

"Obviously he couldn't escape whatever demons were haunting him. And that breaks your heart," said his older sister, Stacey Chaney.

Throughout Del Grosso's career with different agencies, his family tracked news reports hoping to get a glimpse of him at work. It was easier after he rose through the ranks to become an incident commander, a job in which he often spoke at news conferences.

He also sent thousands of wildland firefighters into burning forests, and they trusted him to get them out again.

"He relished his role as incident commander," said Matson, Del Grosso's friend and colleague. "He worked well with people and knew just about every position, and everybody respected that."

Friends and family say Hurricane Katrina might have taken the most out of Del Grosso.

He told them it was the worst disaster he'd ever been assigned, but left out the details. Nearly 2,000 people died in the 2005 hurricane and its aftermath, and parts of New Orleans were destroyed.

"I think that's where a lot of his problems started," said his mother, Sharalyn Del Grosso. "Seeing all that death, all that loss, all that death and dying. There were so many people that needed so much, and he couldn't do it. That need of wanting to fix it, to do more, to make it better."

Del Grosso is one of the highest-ranking firefighters to have his name placed on a memorial stone at the Wildland Firefighters Monument at the federally managed fire center in Idaho. The monument honors some 400 firefighters killed by flames, falling trees, vehicle mishaps, airplane crashes and heart attacks.

That Del Grosso's name was included is recognition of some of the challenges wildland firefighters face away from fire lines, said Bill Arsenault, a wildland firefighter and paramedic with the Idaho Falls Fire Department in Eastern Idaho.

"It's huge," he said while walking past the monument's stones, noting the names of some of the firefighters he knew. "Sometimes we only memorialize quote-unquote 'true heroes.' But they were doing the job no different from anyone else. I think it's good that we're recognizing the contribution that Shane made."

OREGON BRIEFING

Oregon Republican Party launches effort to recall Gov. Kate Brown

PORTLAND (AP) — The chairman of the Oregon Republican Party has filed paperwork to launch a recall against Democratic Gov. Kate Brown, citing some of the laws passed in the 2019 legislative session.

The Oregonian/OregonLive reports Chairman Bill Currier in the Monday filing also pointed to Brown's announcement the day after lawmakers went home last month that if necessary, she would use executive powers to implement climate change policies similar to the plan defeated at the Capitol this year.

Senate Republicans boycotted the Capitol for more than a week in June to prevent Democrats from voting on a bill meant to dramatically reduce greenhouse gases by 2050. Democrats later said they lacked the votes.

The Secretary of State's office says organizers have 90 days to gather 280,050 valid signatures from voters. If recall supporters gather enough signatures, a special election could be scheduled in November.

Governor signs bill requiring public schools to teach about the Holocaust

SALEM — Oregon public school students will be required to learn about the Holocaust and other genocides under a bill signed into law by Gov. Kate Brown on Monday, a measure that was in response to spikes in anti-Semitic incidents across the country.

The law was introduced by 14-year old Claire Sarnowski from suburban Lake Oswego. She came up with the idea through an unlikely friendship with 92-year-old Holocaust survivor Alter Wiener, who died last year after he was struck by a car. The two met four years ago when Sarnowski attended one of Wiener's talks about surviving the concentration camps.

Sarnowski told lawmakers earlier this year that Holocaust education should be required in all schools to ensure history doesn't repeat itself. "Learning about genocide teaches students the ramifications that come with prejudice of any kind in society," she said.

Beginning in the 2020-2021 school year, schools must provide instruction to "prepare students to confront the immorality of the Holocaust, genocide, and other acts of mass violence and to reflect on the causes of related historical events." Schools must also encourage cultural diversity and emphasize the importance of protecting international human rights.

Eleven other states require Holocaust education in schools, according to the Anti-Defamation League. Washington state's governor signed a law in April that only "strongly encourages" teaching the Holocaust.

"Today more than ever, we need the learning opportunities that a bill like this will bring to our schools," said Brown at a signing ceremony.

— Sarah Zimmerman, Associated Press

Oregon Senate leaders to bill GOP senators \$3,500 each for walkout

SALEM (AP) — Senate leaders say they are preparing to invoice 11 Republican senators for fines associated with a June walkout, after determining a plan to dock their pay wasn't legal.

The invoices would total \$3,500 for each senator. The total includes \$500 per day for seven of the days Republicans refused to show up for a floor session, Oregon Public Media reported.

Carol McAlice Currie, a spokeswoman for Democratic Senate President Peter Courtney, said this week bills will be sent to each senator who missed work.

"If they refuse to pay, they will be sent through the regular debt collection process," she said.

Dallas Republican Sen. Brian Boquist, who believes the fines are illegal, already sent a check to Courtney for

\$3,500 along with a letter indicating he was paying to allow him to "seek remedy in state and federal court."

The walkout was a way to halt a vote on climate legislation. The measure aimed to dramatically reduce greenhouse gases by 2050 by capping carbon emissions and requiring businesses to buy or trade for an ever-dwindling pool of pollution "allowances." California has a similar program.

Republicans called it a job-killer and wanted it sent to voters for final approval.

Democratic leadership said during the walkout that the plan had lost the support it needed among Democrats to pass and it died in the final days of the legislative session.

Senate Majority Leader Ginny Burdick, D-Portland, indicated during the revolt that she'd seek to garnish

lawmakers' pay. Asked about the change from garnishing to billing, Currie told Oregon Public Media this week: "If anyone said that the Senate would be 'docking Republicans' pay' for the walkout, they were in error. It's not legally possible to dock them."

The Office of the Legislative Counsel, which provides legal advice to lawmakers, declined to answer an inquiry on that matter, or to discuss what mechanism allowed Senate leadership in general to fine lawmakers.

Democrats have suggested there is precedent in other states for such fines.

GOP senators' departure from the Capitol denied the Senate the quorum needed to conduct business. The 11 senators were not fined for the first floor session they missed, and Democrats canceled one planned session after they

received threats from militia members, so the fines were only for seven days.

Republicans have also received scrutiny over how they plan to pay those fines.

On June 26, a coalition including labor unions, Basic Rights Oregon and Planned Parenthood, filed complaints with the secretary of state's office and Oregon Government Ethics Commission. The complaints sought formal rulings that Republicans could not pay their fines using campaign money or a crowdfunding effort that raised more than \$40,000.

State officials said this week that the complaints are still under review. Senate Minority Leader Herman Baertschiger Jr., R-Grants Pass, told reporters last month his members did not plan to use outside cash to pay the fines.

"We're all using our personal funds," he said.

Environmental groups oppose plan to reopen mega-dairy near Boardman

SALEM (AP) — The new owner of a troubled mega-dairy operation that violated hundreds of environmental rules wants to reopen the facility, drawing fresh opposition from environmental groups.

Washington-state based Easterday Farms requested permission from the Oregon Department of Agriculture earlier this month to house over 28,000 animals on the site of the now-shuttered Lost Valley Farm, according to the Statesman Journal. Lost Valley opened in April 2017 to supply milk to the nearby Tillamook Cheese factory. State officials allowed the facility to bypass regulatory requirements, citing potential economic benefits it would bring to the area. The dairy was allowed to operate before construction was complete and

before submitting an official plan on how to handle millions of gallons of animal waste.

Over the next year and a half, the facility racked up hundreds of thousands of dollars in fines for breaking environmental regulations. Over 30 million gallons of manure awaited cleanup when the farm finally closed in February.

Easterday Farms purchased the operation last spring, and agreed to a cleanup plan with state regulators. Owner Cody Easterday did not respond to the Statesman's Journal request for comment. It's unclear how the farm would handle the estimated 173.3 million gallons of solid and liquid manure produced by the cows each year.

Environmental and animal welfare groups decried the prospect of a new

mega-dairy, calling on the state's Department of Agriculture to reject Easterday's bid to reopen the site.

"The Lost Valley site is still polluted with millions of gallons of waste and has cost hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of taxpayer dollars to bring into compliance with the law," read a joint statement from groups including the Humane Society and Food & Water Watch. "Allowing a new mega-dairy in an area with existing groundwater pollution, water scarcity, and air quality issues will only exacerbate these public health, economic, and environmental harms."

If reopened, the facility would become Oregon's second largest dairy operation. The proposed permit to reopen the site will be open to public comment and a hearing.

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