

Local & State

NATHAN GOODRICH GREW UP IN BAKER CITY

N.E. Oregon fire manager recalls time working on Australian blazes

By Ellen Morris Bishop
EO Media Group

Wallowa-Whitman National Forest fire management officer Nathan Goodrich is one of 21 Forest Service fire experts who devoted more than a month to helping Australia combat its seething landscape of bush fires.

His work was part of an agreement shared by the U.S., Mexico, Canada, Australia and New Zealand to help one-another control large forest blazes.

Goodrich, the fire management officer for the Wallowa Fire Zone, is based in Joseph. Goodrich, who grew up in Baker City, returned to Wallowa County last week with lots of experiences to share.

Goodrich and the Forest Service team were dispatched to New South Wales, an Australian state that is bigger than Texas, but with the rolling and sometimes cliff-ridden landscape typical of Tennessee and the Appalachians.

"It's rolling hills that are heavily forested," Goodrich said. "The trees are mostly deciduous, and most of them are eucalyptus."

In Australia, Goodrich served as an operation section chief, a job similar to his work with the Forest Service. That included dispatching crews and resources as well as conducting suppression operations.

Along with a persistent drought and a past fire suppression policy similar to ours, the trees themselves contribute to the intensity of the fires, Goodrich said.

Eucalyptus trees contain a lot of oil in their wood and even in their leaves. That makes their crowns burn easily. Their bark is thin and almost paper-like. When a ground fire sets the bark afire, flames can easily climb up the trunk and into the tree. The highly flammable crowns also send off a lot of burning debris, causing spot fires.

"This sort of flammability makes for a very short natural fire-return interval, and also makes the fires more difficult to control," Goodrich said. "It's more like the return interval for our grasslands (about 10 years here.)"

Fire suppression has produced a much more flammable landscape in Australia, just as it has in the U.S.

"The aboriginal people here managed their landscape in a way not unlike



Alex Tigani photo

An Australian fire burns actively during December.

Native Americans," Goodrich said. "When they left a place, or when the time was right, they would set a fire. Those fires burned mostly with low intensity. Now, after a century of suppressing fire, a lot of Australia has a fuels surplus problem."

The number and availability of firefighters poses another problem for controlling Australia's bush fires. The Aussie fire-fighting system relies mostly on volunteers, Goodrich said.

In New South Wales, about 70,000 volunteers are signed up and available to fight fires, but fewer than 2,500 are actually working. The volunteers have jobs and other commitments. Paid firefighters in the Rural Fire Service number about 1,000.

There are additional pros in other agencies that include Fire and Rescue, Forestry, and the Park Service, which is similar to our Forest Service.

Right now in New South Wales, there are 130 large fires burning, and perhaps 40 teams of about 10 to 20 volunteer or professional firefighters available.

"It's a system that was born of the fire brigade days," Goodrich said. "It would be like Troy having a fire brigade, and Flora having one, and there being one in each of all the little communities."

After the large fires of 1994, the Aussies formalized the Rural Fire Service for better oversight of the rural brigades.

"That means that each team has to fight multiple

blazes," Goodrich said. "They have to make choices and prioritize which ones to control, to keep away from structures or ignite back-burns, and which ones to just let go until more resources are available."

Those necessary choices, he noted, may mean that the neglected fires can grow very large. Some of the Australian fires are huge — in excess of a million acres.

On days when the wind comes up, or temperatures are very high, Australian officials impose a ban on burning of all kinds, including back-burning and even burning in your backyard.

"Fires move fast with the wind," Goodrich said. "There's no good way to control them. You just wait. You are on standby and ready to react to fires that might impact structures."

"In the U.S., we have a nationwide total of maybe 50 or 60 fires underway at a time, not the 130 large fires that are burning now just in New South Wales," Goodrich said. "There's a team on every fire in the U.S. In our big fires — which are now considered to be 100,000 acres or more, we have 500 to 700 and sometimes more people fighting them. The Australians are managing more fires with less people than we would ever do."

Fortunately, much of New South Wales' interior is not densely populated.

"The houses are distributed a little like the landscape coming down from Ruby Peak to Alder Slope," Goodrich said, referring to an area in Wallowa County. "There's forest. And then there are homes and small communities. Not many homes in the area are built in the urban-wildland interface."

That helps minimize loss of human life and property. Nor did Goodrich witness many animals deceased or in grave trouble.

"The wildlife all seem to have fled the forest," he said. "With the drought, there's little food or water there, and so animals have generally moved to farmland and open areas where they have more resources."

But things are different closer to the New South Wales' more densely-populated coast.

"That's where there are more koalas that move slowly and might try to take refuge from the fires in the treetops," Goodrich said. "It's also where people have built

homes in forests. There's much more of an urban-wildland interface problem there."

Overall, Goodrich found that the Aussies he worked with managed to keep a positive and often cheerful attitude about things, even when their landscape is in flames. He admires Australia's national fire plan, which he feels has saved lives and provides an orderly way for people who live in fire-prone areas to respond to the threats of fires.

"The national system was developed after the 2009 Black Saturday Fire," he said. "More than 100 people died because they waited too long in their attempts to escape the fire and then the roads were clogged, and they could not evade the flames."

Today, Australians have fire drills, and Goodrich said "each person or family has an assigned escape route to help avoid congestion and peril. It's all well-rehearsed."

Now that the first group of Forest Service fire officers has returned, a new group has headed Down Under from the agency's Region 6, which includes Oregon and Washington. They include Todd Pederson, an assistant fire management officer from the Wallowa Fire Zone.

Goodrich would gladly go back to Australia, though he would rather do it as a vacationer than a fire officer.

"It's a wonderful and really diverse, amazing place," he said.

LOCAL BRIEFING

Church of Latter-day Saints schedule

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints' "Come, Follow Me" lesson for the week of Jan. 27 to Feb. 2 will be based on the Book of Mormon, 1 Nephi chapters 16-22, which is when Nephi is commanded to build a ship and the family arrives on this continent, while being guided by the Liahona.

The second hour will be Relief Society and Priesthood meetings.

All are invited to join at 2625 Hughes Lane. There are three different meeting times. 8 a.m., 10:30 a.m. and noon.

Northeast Oregon Compassion Center fundraising banquet scheduled Feb. 1

The Northeast Oregon Compassion Center's 15th-annual fundraising banquet is set for Saturday, Feb. 1, at 5 p.m. at the Church of the Nazarene Family Life Center, 1250 Hughes Lane.

The Compassion Center provides a variety of free services to people in need in the community.

Tickets are being sold for the tri-tip dinner, which includes four side dishes and dessert. There will also be donation forms and live and silent auctions.

Tickets are \$15 per person, and must be bought in advance at the Family Life Center, the Church of the Nazarene office, or the Harvest Church, 3720 Birch St. A donation of \$200 to the Compassion Center includes two free tickets. Tickets are limited, so people are encouraged to buy early to reserve a seat.

Items available in the silent and live auctions include waterfowl hunting packages from Pre-Dawn Adventures, unique artwork by local artisan Tom Clement, Sweet Wife Baking pies, gift baskets, coupons from local merchants and more.

The guest speaker for the banquet is Karen Bergstrom from the Safe Families For Children movement.

More information is available at Facebook.com/NortheastOregonCompassionCenter and at www.neoregon-compassioncenter.org

Haines Elementary School chili feed Feb. 7

The annual Haines Elementary School Chili Feed and Raffle is scheduled Friday, Feb. 7.

The event, billed as the school's largest fundraiser of the year, will be from 4:30 p.m. to 7 p.m. at the school.

Money raised at the event is used to help pay for technology in classrooms and to support assemblies and field trips that enhance the students' educational experiences, a news release stated.

Items raffled during the evening are donated by local businesses and community partners. To donate, call Chelsea Blatchford, PTCO president, at 541-519-2017.

Tickets are pre-sold by Haines students and also will be available at the door. The cost is \$2 per ticket, three for \$5, seven for \$10, or \$20 for 15 tickets. Winners do not have to be present to collect their prizes.

Dinner tickets are \$5 for adults (11 and older), \$4 for children (ages 4-10), and free to children younger than 3. For more information or to purchase tickets, call Haines Elementary School at 541-524-2400.



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Volunteer firefighter Adam Meyer lights a back burn.