

# Community



Jayson Jacoby/Baker City Herald

Members of the La Grande Hot Shots firefighting crew use drip torches to ignite dry grass on Thursday, April 15 north of Phillips Reservoir. The torches are filled with a mixture of diesel and gasoline.

## FIRE

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A day when the flames can't be wielded like a tool, when they won't be an ally.

A day when every ember is a dangerous enemy.

Experts in the nuances of the forest, and its relationship with flames, call it a prescribed fire.

It is an apt term.

The second-growth ponderosa forests that grow between the reservoir and Highway 7, from Mason Dam west up the Sumpter Valley aren't sick.

The fire that's prescribed in this case serves more as a tonic, a supplement of sorts to keep the forest healthy.

Trevor Lewis eschews the cliché of fighting fire with fire, but he concedes that's a significant part of the purpose of Thursday's fire, which covered about 535 acres.

Lewis, an assistant fire management officer for the Burnt-Powder Fire Zone on the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest who served as fire boss for Thursday's operation, said the flames will remove accumulations of dry, dead grass and the layers of

desiccated pine needles that could fuel a summer wildfire.

He also hopes the fire will kill the seedling pines that have sprouted between the mature trees. Those fledgling pines can serve as "ladder fuels," Lewis said — in effect, a combustible ladder that flames can climb from the ground to reach the trunks, and potentially even the crowns, of the tallest ponderosas.

"We want to get rid of the majority of those young saplings," Lewis said Thursday morning as groups of firefighters dispersed from the road leading to the boat ramp near Mason Dam.

A total of 61 people worked on the prescribed fire Thursday, some using drip torches to ignite grass, while others patrolled to make sure the flames stayed within the designated areas.

Lewis said a prescribed fire, in addition to killing saplings, can also creep up the trunks of mature ponderosas, pruning some of the lower limbs and, as he puts it, "raising the ladder" of the fuels.

Forest officials fear crown fires not only because those



Jayson Jacoby/Baker City Herald

Nick Schramm of the La Grande Hot Shots firefighting crew keeps an eye on a prescribed fire burning Thursday, April 15 along the road leading to the boat ramp on Phillips Reservoir near Mason Dam.

*"It's exciting to get back to spring burning."*

— Kendall Cikanek, Whitman District ranger, Wallowa-Whitman National Forest

blazes can spread rapidly, but because they can also kill a mature tree.

Thursday's prescribed fire, by contrast, mainly stayed on or close to the ground.

Prescribed fires occasionally scorch the needles of mature pines, turning the green needles to red, said Steve Hawkins, deputy fire staff fuels program manager for the Wallowa-Whitman.

A prescribed fire in October 2007 that included some of the same ground burned Thursday left many ponderosas with that rusty-red appearance. Some people who drove past the trees on Highway 7 complained to the Wallowa-Whitman, wondering why the agency tasked with protecting trees would have purposely killed them with fire.

But almost all of those trees survived, Hawkins said — the needle damage was superficial, not fatal.

### Pandemic prevented prescribed burning throughout 2020

Thursday's fire was something of a milestone, said

Kendall Cikanek, ranger for the Whitman District, which includes the Phillips Reservoir area.

"It's exciting to get back to spring burning," Cikanek said.

Spring typically brings the ideal conditions for prescribed burning — fuels aren't so dry that a fire is likely to burn out of control, but not so damp that flames won't move.

But in 2020, with the pandemic just beginning and rampant uncertainty, the Wallowa-Whitman canceled its spring prescribed burning schedule.

"That was a risk we didn't want to take," Cikanek said.

In addition to questions about the likelihood of spreading the virus among fire crews, Cikanek said forest officials wanted to avoid creating smoke, which could exacerbate health problems for people afflicted with the respiratory illness.

Conditions on Thursday were close to ideal, he said.

With steady winds blowing from the northeast and north, smoke was generally pushed away from Baker Valley, although smoke settled into the Sumpter Valley on Thursday night and Friday morning.

### Frequent fires desirable

Before the Forest Service started fighting fires a little

more than a century ago, fires, mainly low-intensity ground blazes, swept through the pine forests in this part of Sumpter Valley on average every seven to 15 years, Hawkins said.

These estimates are based on studies of fire scars on old-growth ponderosas in similar areas.

Prescribed fires are designed to mimic those historical blazes, which were ignited either by lightning or by Native Americans.

Thursday's fire was the third prescribed blaze the Wallowa-Whitman has lit in the past 40 or so years in the strip between the reservoir and Highway 7, Hawkins said.

He described the fire as a "maintenance burn," one intended to reduce the accumulation of fuel on the ground.

Hawkins said the flames

will have other benefits, including spurring the growth of grasses and shrubs, including bitterbrush, that are important forage for deer and other wildlife.

The area around Phillips Reservoir is an important part of the forest, he said, being a popular spot for hiking and mountain biking.

Thursday's fire will also help protect the Forest Service's Union Creek Campground, Lewis said.

He said the prescribed fire burned through parts of the campground, reducing the fuel loads in that highly-used area (the campground isn't yet open for the season).

Crews burned more acres near the west end of the reservoir on Friday, April 16, Cikanek said.

Workers will patrol the area through the weekend, he said.

## New At The Library

Patrons can reserve materials in advance online or by calling 541-523-6419. Drive-in hours at 2400 Resort St. are Monday through Friday, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., and Saturday and Sunday from noon to 4 p.m.

### FICTION

- "The House in the Cerulean Sea," TJ Klune
- "My Year Abroad," Chang-Rae Lee
- "Mystery of Mrs. Christie," Marie Benedict
- "A Thousand Ships," Natalie Haynes
- "The Thursday Murder Club," Richard Osman

### NONFICTION

- "The YouTube Formula," Derral Eves
- "A World on the Wing," Scott Weidensaul
- "When Stars are Scattered," Victoria Jamieson
- "Custer's Trials," T.J. Stiles
- "Positive Discipline Parenting Tools," Jane Nelson

### DVDS

- "Modest Heroes" (Animation)
- "Thank You For Playing" (Documentary)
- "The Captain" (Drama)
- "The Rhythm Section" (Action)
- "The Square" (Comedy)

## HEART TO HEART

### Barbara Wendt's family grateful for thoughts and prayers

The family of Barbara Wendt would like to thank everyone for their thoughts and prayers during this difficult time. We truly appreciate the visits, food, flowers, cards and condolences. There are no words to express our heartfelt

thanks for the friendship and understanding that has been extended to our family. To the wonderful friends from Heart 'N Home Hospice, thank you too! Your professional, compassionate, caring staff is amazing. Without your aid and support we could not have kept mom with us to the end.

## Firewood permits available

The Vale District of the Bureau of Land Management is selling firewood-cutting permits online starting May 1. The cost is \$5.50 per cord, with a two-cord minimum per transaction, and a maximum of 10 cords per household. The firewood-cutting season is May 1 through Nov. 29.

To buy a permit online, go to <https://forestproducts.blm.gov>. Permits are also available using a credit/debit card by calling the Baker Field Office at 541-523-1256 or the Vale District Office at 541-473-3144. Office hours are 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., Monday through Friday.



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