

FIRES

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Livingston is the Wallowa-Whitman's fire staff officer, McCraw the fire management officer for the Whitman District in the southern half of the forest.

When they consider the threats they'll likely deal with over the next three months or so, Livingston and McCraw worry more about what's going to happen thousands of feet up in the atmosphere, where electrical storms sometimes brew on hot summer afternoons, than what will transpire below, on the ground.

And they have a strong statistical reason to expect trouble from above.

On the Wallowa-Whitman over the past half century, lightning — not careless or intentionally destructive people — has sparked almost eight of every 10 blazes.

That's quite a different situation, Livingston said, than what prevails in national forests that are closer to metropolitan areas — the Mount Hood, for instance, parts of which are less than an hour's drive from Portland, or the Willamette, a similar distance from both Salem and Eugene.

In those forests the percentages are nearly reversed, Livingston said, with human-caused fires predominant.

This difference is reflected in the national forests' disparate strategies during fire season, Livingston said.

The Mount Hood and the Willamette have fire staff who spent much of their time patrolling, particularly in popular areas such as campgrounds, so as to be ready to douse human-caused blazes, he said.

On the Wallowa-Whitman, by contrast, those sorts of



S. John Collins/Baker City Herald File

The McClain fire burned near Oxbow, in eastern Baker County, in 2006.

"prevention patrols" are what Livingston describes as a "colateral duty" for firefighters.

"We don't typically do that except in extreme conditions," Livingston said. "We don't have to do it in a normal year."

He concedes, though, that 2021 isn't likely to be a normal year.

At least not as that word was defined until 2020.

Livingston said the pandemic-driven trend of more people recreating outdoors in 2020, a phenomenon seen across the West, was noteworthy on the Wallowa-Whitman.

"Any time we get more people in the woods, the risk goes up," Livingston said.

"We're going to pay more attention to that."

Despite bigger crowds at campgrounds and other recreation sites on the Wallowa-Whitman in 2020 — and the expectation for similar scenes this summer — Livingston said he was "pleasantly surprised that we didn't get more human-caused fires than we did."

Indeed, the Wallowa-Whitman's total of 12 human-caused fires, which burned a total of just 23 acres, was less than half the yearly average of 30 human-sparked fires from 1970-2019.

Lightning fires were also rarer than usual, with 60 blazes blackening 12 acres.

The annual average is 105 lightning-sparked blazes.

"It was a fairly dry year, but

"It's safe to say we're going to have a long, difficult season — it's just a matter of where."

— Noel Livingston, fire staff officer, Wallowa-Whitman NF

we just didn't get the lightning," McCraw said.

It was the second consecutive tranquil fire season on the Wallowa-Whitman, even as major blazes were spreading across millions of acres elsewhere in the West.

Again, the relatively scarcity of lightning storms was a key factor.

In 2019 the Wallowa-Whitman had 67 lightning fires, which burned 27 acres.

The past two summers illustrate what might seem, to a layperson giving the matter cursory consideration, something of a misnomer.

It's not especially rare, Livingston said, that summers with extreme fire danger actually turn out to be relatively quiet fire seasons on the Wallowa-Whitman.

"In really dry years we often don't get as much lightning," he said.

And to reiterate, lightning is the factor that plays by far the greatest role in a fire season's severity on the Wallowa-Whitman.

The situation is similar on other public land in the state's northeast corner, primarily sagebrush steppe for which the Bureau of Land Management is the chief firefighting agency.

On private and state land, where the Oregon Department of Forestry handles much of the firefighting, lightning sparks 70% to 75% of fires on average in Northeastern Oregon, said Steve Meyer, wildland fire supervisor at the state agency's Baker City office.

"We've had summers when we're setting records for fire

danger but we don't have much of a fire season because we don't get the lightning," Meyer said.

Despite the prevalence of lightning-ignited blazes in this corner of the state, neither Meyer, Livingston nor McCraw is sanguine about the potential for people to supply the spark.

Quite the opposite, in fact.

Although lightning is famously fickle in where it strikes, Livingston said advances in meteorology have made it much more feasible to forecast thunderstorms, with a fair degree of geographical accuracy, at least a few days, and even up to a week, in advance.

Those forecasts can't tell fire bosses where bolts will strike, and potentially ignite a fire, of course.

But Livingston said lightning detectors can pinpoint strikes, which at least gives fire crews — and the mountaintop fire lookouts, of which more than a dozen are still staffed each summer in northeast Oregon — a likely set of places, after the storm passes, to search for the telltale tendrils of smoke.

"It helps us get resources out into an area ahead of time, to focus on areas where we're most likely to have lightning fires," Meyer said.

Human-caused fires, by contrast, are inherently more frightening, officials said, simply because people can go almost anywhere.

And unlike with lightning, there are no sensors to show where a person carelessly tossed a cigarette or left a smoldering campfire or drove

through a patch of desiccated grass, where hot mufflers and catalytic converters can ignite the tinder.

"Human activity is really a wildcard," Livingston said.

"With human-caused fires you never know," Meyer said. "It can be anywhere."

The inherent unpredictability of human-caused fires — when they might happen, as well as where — is one reason the Forest Service and Oregon Department of Forestry institute restrictions on campfires, the use of chain saws and other activities when fire danger is high or extreme.

Livingston said that despite the many factors that determine the severity of a fire season on a specific national forest, he's pretty confident that the 2021 season will be another damaging one.

"It's safe to say we're going to have a long, difficult season — it's just a matter of where," he said.

Wilderness fires could return after 2020 hiatus

Over the past two decades, fire managers have allowed more than a dozen lightning-sparked fires to burn naturally in the Eagle Cap Wilderness, Oregon's largest wilderness at 365,000 acres.

The goal is to allow fire to perform its natural functions, including reducing the amount of fuel on the ground and potentially reducing the severity of future blazes.

The Wallowa-Whitman suspended this program in 2020 to allow crews, who were trying to avoid spreading COVID-19, to focus on other blazes.

Livingston said lightning fires in the Eagle Cap this summer could potentially be monitored rather than doused as soon as possible.

Bentz tours fire dispatch center

By Michael Kohn
The (Bend) Bulletin

REDMOND — At the edge of the Redmond Airport on Tuesday, June 1, a group of around 10 smokejumpers went through a brief preparation exercise on the tarmac, then promptly boarded a propeller plane in preparation to leap out of it.

The Redmond Smokejumpers are getting in their practice flights while they can — further into the summer they are almost certain to be busy fighting live fires. With dry conditions across the region and temperatures heating up, this wildfire season could be one for the ages.

The smokejumpers, and other wildfire officials across multiple agencies, were on hand at the Central Oregon Interagency Dispatch Center to give U.S. Rep. Cliff Bentz, R-Ontario, a taste of the upcoming fire season. Bentz toured the smokejumper facility, a warehouse of supplies and the Air Tanker Field as the mercury climbed in the mid-90s.

"My experience in watching so many fires over the years is that our agencies are doing their best, and I just want to make sure that, if they need something, they can tell me and we can go back and try to help out," said Bentz.

Bentz said fuel buildup on the forest floor is "huge and horrendous" and he supports initiatives to clear brush and conduct more prescribed burns. But Tuesday he was in Redmond to learn more about what officials need to fight wildfire when it appears in the Cascades and the High Desert.

The tour included a visit to the Northwest Incident Support Cache, a 40,000-square-foot warehouse that stores equipment needed for the fire season. Kristopher Strong, assistant manager for the cache, said a challenge this year has been staffing the facility. He currently has 20 workers compared to a typical year of 40 to 60 employees. Part of that is realigning staff assignments and part is the difficulty in getting new workers to come through the door.

"I have advertised these positions more than any other year we have ever done, but it seems like no one is coming in to hand in applications," said Strong.

Strong told Bentz another challenge is the size of the facility. He needs a 130,000-square-foot facility to improve efficiency and cut costs.

Bentz said with Washington, D.C., being more aware of fires in the West, now is the time for fire officials to push for more money to improve facilities.

"We have two U.S. senators who are in a position to help," Bentz told Strong. "With summer coming and possibly one of the worst fire seasons, you would be in a good position to ask again."

In another area of the facility, Bentz was briefed by fire officials on what to expect from this fire season.

"For our seasonal outlook we are in a pretty critical drought," said Kevin Stock, a fire management officer for the Deschutes National Forest.



Bentz

Brown signs bill banning guns at Capitol

■ The law, which takes effects this fall, also requires owners to safely store guns

By Andrew Selsky
Associated Press

SALEM — Legislators have brought guns into the Oregon State Capitol for personal protection. Protesters have carried semi-automatic rifles onto the grounds and into the building.

Later this year, doing so will be outlawed under a bill signed Tuesday, June 1 by Gov. Kate Brown that was earlier passed by the Legislature, with Democrats in favor and minority Republicans opposed. The new law also mandates the safe storage of guns.

"Today, I am signing SB 554 with the hope that we can take another step forward to help spare more Oregon families from the grief of losing a loved one to gun violence," Brown said on Twitter.

The bill was named for Cindy Yuille and Steve Forsyth, who were slain in a shooting at a Portland-area shopping mall in 2012 by a man who stole a friend's AR-15 rifle. A third person was seriously wounded.

Among those who testified in favor of the measure was Paul Kemp, Forsyth's brother-in-law.

"I will never forget the screams I heard when we had to tell my teenage nephew that his father had been killed at the mall," Kemp said.

Backers of the new law, which takes effect three months after the Legislature adjourns this summer, said it will prevent accidental shootings by chil-

dren, suicides and mass shootings.

It requires that firearms be secured with a trigger or cable lock, in a locked container or gun room.

Opponents said a delay in accessing a firearm for self-defense could cost lives.

Jim Mischel, of Sheridan, Oregon, provided written testimony to lawmakers describing how his wife woke up when he was away one night in 1981. She heard a noise, went to investigate and saw a stranger in their home.

She tried to get a pistol that was in a locked gun box in the nightstand out but was unable to before the man got into the bedroom and threatened her with his gun, Mischel said.

"She has never recovered," he said.

The bill also bans guns from the Oregon Capitol, changing a law that allowed concealed handgun licensees to bring firearms into the building.

In a related development, an interfaith movement plans to present signatures Wednesday to the staff of Oregon Secretary of State Shemia Fagan, a step in an attempt to get two initiative petitions onto the ballot.

IP 18 would ban the sale of assault-style weapons in Oregon. IP 17 would ban the sale of large-capacity magazines and require a permit to purchase any gun and a completed background check before a firearm is purchased.

The movement has gathered the signatures of 2,000 voters for each initiative petition and will hand deliver

them to Fagan's staff, said Pastor Mark Knutson of the Augustana Lutheran Church in Portland.

"We hope to get the go ahead by early fall, which will give us almost 10 months to get 140,000 signatures to ... place them both on the November 2022 general election ballot," Knutson said.

The debate over guns is being resurrected as the number of mass shootings climbs again in America, with increased efforts to ban assault rifles and large-capacity magazines.

In Colorado, a gun storage bill was signed into law on April by Gov. Jared Polis, who said: "It's a sensible measure to help avoid immeasurable heartbreak."

Colorado's law creates the offense of unlawful storage of a firearm if a person stores a gun knowing that a juvenile could access it without permission or if a resident of the premises is ineligible to possess a firearm.

Similar bills this session have failed in Illinois, Kentucky, Montana, New Mexico and Virginia, said Allison Anderman, senior counsel at the Giffords gun safety advocacy group.

States that have passed laws requiring some level of firearms safe storage in past years include California, Connecticut and New York, Anderman said. Massachusetts is the only state that requires that all unattended firearms be stored with locking devices in place, according to Giffords.

2021 EASTERN OREGON PHOTO CONTEST

Official Rules:

Photo Contest open now and closes at 11:59 pm Sunday, June 20, 2021.

Staff will choose the top 10. The public can vote online for People's Choice from 12:01 am Monday, June 21 through 11:59 pm Thursday, June 30.

Digital or scanned photos only, uploaded to the online platform. No physical copies.

Only photographers from Oregon may participate.

The contest subject matter is wide open but we're looking for images that capture life in Eastern Oregon.

Entrants may crop, tone, adjust saturation and make minor enhancements, but may not add or remove objects within the frame, or doctor images such that the final product doesn't represent what's actually before the camera.

The winners will appear in the July 8th edition of Go Magazine; the top 25 will appear online.

Gift cards to a restaurant of your choice will be awarded for first, second and third place.

Submit all photos online at: bakercityherald.com/photocontest