

BLAZES

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The lightning-caused Bootleg fire was encroaching on the traditional territory of the Klamath Tribes, which still have treaty rights to hunt and fish on the land, and sending huge, churning plumes of smoke into the sky visible for miles.

The blaze, which has burned an area larger than New York City, has destroyed about 20 homes and 2,000 more are under evacuation, but much of it was burning in remote areas of the Fremont-Winema National Forest.

But even when the flames don't enter densely populated areas, the impact of the increasingly intense fires around the U.S. West is felt directly by Native American tribes, who have managed the land for millennia.

"We couldn't do ceremonies because of the fire and our hunting grounds, we could not hunt there," said Hockaday of last year's fire. "About 40 square miles of our original territory is closed to us right now."

Members of the Klamath Tribes in Chiloquin, Oregon, are concerned the Bootleg Fire will affect their ancestral territory as well.

"There is definitely extensive damage to the forest where we have our treaty rights. I am sure we have lost a number of deer in the fire," said Don Gentry, chairman of the Klamath Tribal Council in Chiloquin.

Gentry said although the active fire was 25 miles from the tribe's administrative headquarters, the council declared a state of emergency Wednesday, July 14 because of its erratic behavior and rapid growth.

"With the severity of the fire, we're really concerned

about where the fire might go from here, so we have a lot of concern about the future," he said Wednesday.

The Klamath Tribes have been affected by wildfires before, including one that burned 23 square miles in southern Oregon last September 2020. That fire damaged land where many of Klamath tribal members hunt, fish and gather. The fire also burned the tribes' cemetery and at least one tribal member's house.

This year's blaze is another blow for the tribe, which has already seen water levels fall so low in a local lake that federally endangered fish species central to their culture and heritage could not spawn this spring. Farmers who also draw much of their irrigation water from the same lake also got no irrigation this summer as extreme drought reduced flows to historic lows.

Wallowa County fire at 16K acres

The biggest blaze in Northeastern Oregon — the Elbow Creek fire in Wallowa County near the Washington border, was estimated at 16,432 acres on Monday, July 19, with 10% containment.

The fire, the cause of which is under investigation, is burning on both sides of the steep canyon of the Grande Ronde River. Growth over the weekend was mainly on the southwest side. About 350 people were working on the fire Monday, and about 150 structures were threatened, with evacuation orders in place.



Lisa Chambers/Bootleg Fire Incident Command-Contributed Photo

In this photo provided by the Bootleg Fire Incident Command, columns of smoke from the Bootleg Fire rise behind a water tender in Southern Oregon on Friday, July 16, 2021.

HEAT WAVE

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The minor cooling trend was aided in part by smoke from the Bootleg fire in Klamath and Lake counties, which grew to more than 304,000 acres on Sunday, July 18. Smoke reflects sunlight and, if it's thick enough, can reduce surface temperatures from what they would otherwise be.

The interlude was brief, though — Sunday's high temperature was 94.

- The average high temperature for the first 18 days of July was 93.8 degrees. The month is on pace to be the hottest on record at the airport, and by a fair margin.

Warm weather continues, with chance of thunderstorms

Temperatures are forecast to remain above average this week in Baker County, but thunderstorms could bring the first rainfall to the area in more than two weeks.

Storms, which could also spawn fire-sparking lightning bolts, are possible Tuesday evening, July 20, according to the National Weather Service.

A ridge of high pressure isn't comparable, physically, to a mountain ridge, which is a spine of higher ground that typically separates two valleys.

Ridge, when used to describe high pressure, means an elongated area, sometimes extending for hundreds of miles, where the air pressure (measured by a barometer) is

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— Jay Breidenbach, meteorologist at the National Weather Service office in Boise

relatively high, which causes the air to sink.

When air descends it compresses and warms. Because warmer air can hold more moisture without the moisture condensing into clouds or precipitation, high pressure usually results in dry weather.

And in summer, when the sun angle is high, hot weather.

The Four Corners High, as its name suggests, frequently is centered during summer near where New Mexico, Arizona, Utah and Colorado meet.

But the ridge sometimes sprawls across much of the West, spreading far enough to the north and west to influence, and for periods to dominate, the weather in Eastern Oregon and Idaho, Breidenbach said.

High-pressure ridges do act something like their geologic namesakes

in one sense — just as a mountain ridge can divert clouds, a high-pressure ridge has a similar effect on storms that sweep inland from the Pacific Ocean.

Although those storms rarely bring much rain, if any, to Eastern Oregon during summer, Breidenbach said it's common for cold fronts to shove the Four Corners High back to the south every week or so.

Although these are technically cold fronts — the boundary between two air masses of distinctly different temperatures — meteorologists sometimes call the summer versions "cool" fronts to reflect that although they usher in cooler air, temperatures in the 80s rather than the 90s hardly qualify as "cold."

But since the middle of June, the Four Corners High has shunted aside every front — cold or cool — that has initially threatened to move far inland.

"We really haven't had any significant cold fronts move through to give us a break," Breidenbach said.

Nonetheless, Baker County has fared better than much of the rest of the region, due in part to its rela-

tively high elevation — Baker City is about 3,440 feet above sea level.

Breidenbach noted that in the last week of June, when the high-pressure ridge grew to possibly unprecedented proportions, extending as far as northern Canada, Salem posted a nearly unthinkable high of 117 degrees, while Portland reached 116. Both temperatures eclipsed the respective cities' previous all-time records — set in August, not June — by nine degrees.

These stunning temperatures were due in part to air descending from the Cascade Mountains into the Willamette Valley, most of which is just a couple hundred feet above sea level, the descent causing already hot air to gain yet more degrees, Breidenbach said.

Pendleton, Hermiston and other cities in the Columbia Basin in both Oregon and Washington also had temperatures above 115 degrees in late June.

Baker City, by contrast, has so far topped out at 103 degrees, on June 29. That was the hottest temperature ever recorded during June at the airport.



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