

# Baker City man leading effort to stop nation's biggest wildfire

Joe Hessel, a longtime Oregon Department of Forestry employee, is one of the incident commanders on the Bootleg fire, which has burned about 400,000 acres

By Jayson Jacoby  
jjacoby@bakercityherald.com

Joe Hessel remembers when the Dooley Mountain fire, which burned 20,000 acres south of Baker City over several days, was a “giant” blaze.

Today he's coordinating the effort to stem a fire that burned more land than that every day.

For almost two weeks straight.



Hessel

This yawning difference between what was typical early in Hessel's career, and what is commonplace today, illustrates his longevity in a way perhaps more compelling than a couple of numbers can.

Certainly Hessel, who lives in Baker City and is in his 38th summer amidst the smoke and the flames, can attest to the changes time has wrought when it comes to fighting wildland fires in Oregon and across the West.

The Dooley Mountain fire, sparked by lightning in late July 1989, was at the time the biggest blaze in Baker County in several decades.

It was also an abnormally large fire by Oregon standards.

But today, the acreage charred that distant summer would occupy a scarcely noticeable corner of the fire that has kept Hessel away from his Baker City home, and his La Grande office, for almost two weeks.

Hessel, 54, who is the Northeast District forester for the Oregon Department of Forestry (ODF), is one of three incident commanders for the Bootleg fire, a lightning fire burning in Klamath and Lake counties in south-central Oregon.

At 400,000 acres as of Thursday, July 22, it's the nation's biggest blaze, the one responsible for much of the smoke that has clogged Baker Valley at times this month.



Bootleg Fire Camp/Contributed Photo

The Bootleg fire, burning in Klamath and Lake counties, is the biggest blaze in the nation.

The one that has spawned smoke plumes which look, from the vantage point of space satellites, similar to a cataclysmic volcanic eruption.

Hessel said his experience on the Bootleg fire has led him to ponder, as he sometimes has over the past 32 years, the days when he worked on the Dooley Mountain fire as a firefighter with the ODF.

“That was one of the first big fires I was involved in, and it left an impact on my mind,” Hessel said in a phone interview on Wednesday, July 21 from the Bootleg fire camp.

The Dooley Mountain fire affected Hessel in a couple of ways.

He remembers vividly the photograph that S. John Collins, retired Baker City Herald photojournalist, took from Main Street in downtown Baker City on July 30, 1989.

The photo shows the fire's smoke cloud looming above the city's historic buildings, the angle of the lens making the blaze seem much closer

than it was (the fire never got within about eight miles of town).

Hessel calls the photo an “iconic image.”

But that acreage figure — 20,000 — was memorable, too.

In 1989, its size made the Dooley Mountain fire an outlier.

It was a time when firefighters considered even a 500-acre fire a significant blaze.

But then Hessel, who started his firefighting career with ODF at age 16, compares Dooley Mountain to Bootleg.

“This fire grew an average of 30,000 acres for 13 days straight,” he said.

The Bootleg fire is the sort of blaze that requires a group of specialists — what's known as an “overhead team” or “incident management team” — to coordinate the efforts of hundreds or even thousands of people, as well as bulldozers and other equipment on the ground, and air tankers

“We used to go out maybe only once in a summer. One of our teams was out five times last year.”

— Joe Hessel, Oregon Department of Forestry fire incident commander, and Baker City resident

and helicopters above.

Almost 2,400 people were assigned to the Bootleg fire.

Hessel, who heads one of the ODF's three overhead teams, said they have been called out more often, and for longer periods, over the past several years.

He said it has become increasingly difficult for agencies to find employees willing to potentially give up much of their summer, to forego family vacations in favor of traveling hundreds of miles to work on a big blaze.

“We used to go out maybe only once in a summer,” Hessel said. “One of our teams was out five times last year.”

The Bootleg fire is his team's second assignment this summer. The first, also in Klamath County, was the Cutoff fire in June.

Hessel, whose dad was a Forest Service smokejumper and manager of the firefighting air center in La Grande while he was growing up, said incident management teams typically are assigned to a fire for 14 days, with the potential to extend the stay to 21 days.

Team members then return home for a couple days.

Hessel, who was sent to the Bootleg fire on July 10, said he doubts he'll return home before July 27.

And after his time off, he said his team will be “back on the board” — meaning they're available to be assigned to another fire.

And with most of Oregon enduring extreme fire danger, Hessel doesn't expect to wait long for his next job.

“It's become a recurring theme every summer,” he said.



Baker County Sheriff's Office/Contributed Photo

Eric Newman, 18, of Haines, was taken by Life-Flight helicopter to a Boise hospital July 21.

## Haines man released after pickup crash

An 18-year-old Haines man was treated and released from a Boise hospital after the pickup truck he was driving near Haines struck a flatbed trailer parked on the side of Shurtleff Road Wednesday evening, July 21.

Eric Newman was driving a 1998 Dodge pickup, and he had to be extricated after the crash, said Ashley McClay, public information officer for the Baker County Sheriff's Office. The incident was reported at 5:11 p.m.

Newman was taken by LifeFlight helicopter to Saint Alphonsus Hospital in Boise, where he was treated and released, according to Mark Snider, a spokesman for the hospital. The Haines Fire Protection District, Baker City Fire Department and Baker County Sheriff's Office all responded to the scene.

Two Baker City man injured in separate motorcycle crashes on Tuesday, July 20 — David Krieger, 60, and Michael Stephen Blount, 48 — remained in critical condition at Saint Alphonsus in Boise on Friday.

## LOCAL BRIEFING

### Zachary Wise named to president's list at Oregon Institute of Technology

KLAMATH FALLS — Zachary Wise of Baker City was named to the president's list for the spring 2021 term at the Oregon Institute of Technology. To be eligible, students must take at least 12 credit hours. Wise is studying civil engineering.

### Three Baker City students earn academic honors at Pacific University

FOREST GROVE — Three Baker City students were named to the dean's list at Pacific University.

- Emily Black, fall 2020 and spring 2021 terms
- Dylan Mastrude, fall 2020 and spring 2021 terms
- Morgan Stone, fall 2020 and spring 2021 terms

### Rotary Club district governor awards Baker City club members

Rotary Club District Governor Russell Johnson, of the Idaho Falls, Idaho, club, visited Baker City on Monday, July 19 to present the Baker City Rotary Club with an award recognizing that all club members are supporting the Rotary International Fund. That fund develops humanitarian projects around the world, including local projects such as the Literary Coalition.

Anthony Bailey started his term as Baker City Rotary Club president on July 1, replacing two-year president Ken Krohn.



Johnson

## DANGER

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But it's the second line, a series of brown dots, that worries Livingston.

Because that line represents current conditions, not those of past summers.

It tracks the daily energy release component readings for 2021. And for most of July, in each of those six regions, the brown dot line has been higher on the chart than the bright red line.

In some cases the brown dot was higher than the red line has ever been.

Which is to say, the energy release component has been breaking daily records with a regularity that's frightening for Livingston and other fire managers.

“That's what's got us on the edge of our chairs,” Livingston said during a video conference with reporters on Thursday afternoon, July 22. “We've got a long summer ahead of us.”

With the energy release component at record-setting levels, every fire has a higher-than-average potential to turn into conflagration before firefighters arrive, Livingston said.

Crews have doused most blazes on the Wallowa-Whitman pretty rapidly, with a majority of the 36 blazes this season burning less than one acre.

But the statistics don't tell the entire tale, Livingston said.

“The fires that we are dealing with are showing a high resistance to control,” he said. “We've been success-

“We've got a long summer ahead of us.”

— Noel Livingston, fire management officer, Wallowa-Whitman National Forest



ful for the most part but it's taking a lot more resources on initial attack to do so.”

For instance, Livingston said some lightning-sparked blazes — the ignition source for about 80% of fires historically on the Wallowa-Whitman — that in a typical summer would pose no great challenge for one fire engine crew, this year are requiring two or three crews.

Fortunately, Livingston said, almost all of the Wallowa-Whitman's firefighters are here and ready to fight local fires, rather than assigned to fires elsewhere in the state or region.

“We're where we want to be in terms of resources on hand,” he said.

Livingston said the Wallowa-Whitman has also bolstered its firefighting capability by having three bulldozers on contract, as well as additional aircraft.

### The '90-day August'

The recent record-high energy release components are disturbing not only based on the sheer numbers, Livingston said, but also the timing.

Starting in late June, when an historic heat wave descended on the Northwest, energy release components on parts of the Wallowa-Whit-

man didn't merely set daily records — they exceeded many previous daily highs for August.

“We've been seeing August-like conditions since late June,” Livingston said.

That prompted a term that Livingston has adopted, but was quick to credit to a colleague, Matt Hoehna, unit forester at the Oregon Department of Forestry office in Pendleton. “90-day August.”

In other words, fire managers who are accustomed to fire danger that peaks during August and lasts for perhaps a month or six weeks, in 2021, due to its abnormally early start, has the potential to extend for three months.

Or even more. Livingston said fire danger, as expressed by the energy release component, tends to be cumulative, because logs, limbs and live grasses and shrubs all tend to become drier as summer progresses and the weeks with little or no rainfall accumulate.

That's the reason that in most parts of the Wallowa-Whitman, August has the highest average daily energy release component, even though July, in many years, has higher average temperatures.

Unless a major shift in the weather pattern brings much cooler temperatures and widespread rain to the region — and meteorologists aren't forecasting anything like that — Livingston said he expects the energy release component will

continue to run near, or above, the all-time daily records.

### Forest restrictions

The prospect for a prolonged period of extreme fire danger is a primary reason that Wallowa-Whitman officials enacted the most stringent public use restrictions — Phase C — on July 16. In most summers over the past decade the Wallowa-Whitman either never reached that level, or did so in August.

In 2020, for instance, another abnormally dry summer, the Wallowa-Whitman imposed Phase C on Sept. 12 — and reverted to the less-restrictive Phase B on Sept. 25.

The neighboring Umatilla National Forest, meanwhile, took the rare step of closing the entire 1.4-million-acre forest to public entry starting July 16.

According to a press release from the Umatilla, that decision was due not only to extreme fire danger, but also because three large fires were already burning on the forest.

Livingston said the current situation with active fires, which take up some of a national forest's firefighting capacity, is one factor in any discussion among forest officials about potentially closing the entire forest to the public.

Wallowa-Whitman officials aren't having that discussion now, Livingston said.

But they are exquisitely aware that such a conversation could well be necessary before autumn.

Livingston said two key factors, when it comes to the prospect of closing a forest to the public, are whether forest officials are confident that they have sufficient resources to deal with a new, rapidly growing fire, and how high the risk of human-caused fires is.

As he mentioned during the Thursday afternoon video conference, Livingston said the Wallowa-Whitman is well-prepared to deal with new fires now.

As for the risk of human-caused fires, all campfires are banned under Phase C, and Livingston said he has taken the unusual step of having fire engine crews, which usually don't patrol in the evenings, visiting campgrounds and other popular recreation spots at night to check for illegal fires.

Over the past week, firefighters have reported eight illegal campfires on the Wallowa-Whitman.

“We're trying to stay on top of that,” Livingston said.

One policy that has been postponed this summer on the Wallowa-Whitman is the practice of allowing some lightning-caused fires to burn naturally in the Eagle Cap Wilderness. Blazes in the 365,000-acre wilderness — Oregon's largest — can benefit the land by reducing fuel loading.

In 2019 the Granite Gulch fire burned more than 3,000 acres in the Eagle Cap, the largest such blaze since the Forest Service instituted the policy about 25 years ago.

“That's not a risk we're going to take this year,” Livingston said.

## WOLVES

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The rancher brought the injured steer by trailer to a corral, where an ODFW

biologist examined the animal on Wednesday, July 21. The biologist estimated the steer was attacked three to four days earlier. The steer had at least 30 tooth scrapes,

including on the rear of both back legs and in front of the front left leg. Based on location, size, number and direction of the scrapes, the wounds are consistent with

wolf attacks on adult cattle, according to the ODFW report.

On July 14, an ODFW biologist confirmed that wolves from the Lookout Mountain

pack had killed a five-month-old calf on a public land grazing allotment, also in the Manning Creek area.

A wolf from the Lookout Mountain pack that's fitted

with a GPS tracking collar was at the location where the carcass was found at about the approximate time of death, according to an ODFW report.