

'It's going to be a marathon of a season'

■ Fire risk in Eastern Oregon at all-time high

By **ALEX WITTWER**
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LA GRANDE — Simon Driskell stood outside the Grande Ronde Rappel Base under a thick cloud of morning smoke last month as the air was filled with leftover particulates wafting in from the Bootleg Fire raging in Southern Oregon. He summarized the fire situation in Eastern Oregon with one word — “explosive.”

Nearly 50 wildfires have been reported in Eastern Oregon since Aug. 5 — with approximately two-thirds of those events attributed to lightning storms over the weekend according to data from the Blue Mountain Interagency Dispatch Center. In an ordinary year, most of those blazes would register less than a quarter of an acre. This is not an ordinary year.

“It’s imperative,” Driskell said of fighting fires early. “If we can stop it at an acre, we’ve done our job. If you never hear of us, we’re doing our job perfectly.”

The elite group of firefighters is tasked with fighting hard-to-reach blazes via helicopter insertion.

They fight fire with metal; their tools of the trade are chain saws, shovels and Pulaskis — axes with an attached hoe behind the blade. There’s no water, save for their rations of water bottles. There is only a small team — the first load has only four souls — at the heart of a fire.

At the base, each member has a name tag on a thin magnetized strip stuck to a wall in the operations center. Of the nearly 40 firefighters, all but three have their incident commander qualification. Names are shuffled up and down the load list as fires are fought across the region.

Andrew Goshgarian’s name was on the top of that list on Monday, Aug. 9. When a name is at the top, the next fire is theirs. They don’t leave the station. Their bags are packed and ready for the call. Their boots stay on. They wait.

Kyle Johnson answered his phone in the operations center that afternoon. It was a fresh dispatch to a wildfire several miles south of La Grande. He shuffled over to the intercom at the Grande Ronde Rappel Base.

“First load,” he said clearly. Moments prior, Lauren Mills was exercising in the base’s gym. Mason “Eddie” Gustafson was plucking away at a guitar in the equipment bay. They were now scrambling into their firefighting gear. In 10 minutes or less, they’d need to be on a helicopter heading toward the fire.

Crew members quickly donned their helmets, flight suits and belly bags — sacks containing tools, equipment and personal effects. Gabby Casper, a firefighter not on the first load list, asked if anybody wanted a pocket burrito. Tulley Bloom sent a quick text to a loved one before heading out to the helicopter.

Casper then watched from the operations center, radio in hand, as the crew’s Bell 205A-1 flew over the runway and toward the southern horizon.

When it reaches the fire, the chop-

per will make left-hand orbits, allowing the spotter and incident commander to plan from above, sizing up the fire and determining where to drop. When ready, the microphone booms are stowed and the team relies on hand signals. The first two firefighters drop at the same time. Then the next two prepare to drop.

Once every boot is on the ground, the firefighters immediately grab their tools and begin the unglamorous work of digging trenches and containment lines. It is slow, meticulous, arduous work. Often, the firefighters will sleep overnight near the fire.

They stay until the fire is out, which can sometimes mean several days of work. They touch every inch of the fire zone. There’s no room for error this season. A six-hour fire watch is held. If no fire crops up, the firefighters can declare the fire out. Only then can they leave — but the helicopter ride was a one-way ticket.

The firefighters trek out of the blaze covered in soot, carrying nearly 130 pounds of gear each. Each fire leaves its stains on the fabric of their Nomex clothing. They’re picked up, returned to base, and their name returns to the bottom of the list. And then they wait.

Marathon of a season

Nationally, resources remain spread thin as the fire season matures — already, 169 fires have started this year in Eastern Oregon, according to the Blue Mountain Interagency Dispatch Center. The outlook is precarious.

“We already have record overtime hours,” said Casper.

The rappel team in Eastern Oregon consists of two transport Bell 205A-1 helicopters, one Sikorsky CH-54B skycrane helicopter and 37 dedicated individuals whose instincts were trained to run toward danger.

According to Driskell, aerial fire assault vehicles are helpful to battling fires, but it takes the work of firefighters to completely ensure the fire is out.

“If you’re just dropping water on something, you’re not actually stopping it. You’re slowing it down,” Driskell said.

To ensure safety, rappel crews undergo at least four personal inspections prior to entering the helicopter. As well, the team trains bimonthly, though on Wednesday, July 21, that training was interrupted by a wildfire reported northwest of Mount Emily in Union County.

It was a small fire burning less than an acre after overnight lightning ignited the delicate and dry brush on July 20.

The crew shifted mindsets from training to execution. Those heading to the fire grabbed their gear and began inspecting themselves and their comrades before boarding the helicopter.

Casper stood back and took a video of the departing helicopter on her phone.

“It’s going to be a marathon of a season,” she said. “It’s already super



Squad leader Devin Frasier with the Grande Ronde Rappelers prepares to fight a fire northwest of Mount Emily in La Grande on Wednesday, July 21, 2021.



Lightning strikes over a hay field near Island City on Thursday, Aug. 5, 2021. The thunderstorm was responsible for several fires over the weekend, including a fire near Spring Creek and Interstate 84.

wild.”

'It just takes a spark'

“We’ve been experiencing August-like conditions since late June and we’ve been seeing record-breaking August conditions since the second week of July,” said Noel Livingston, the fire management officer with the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest. “That’s what’s in front of us, and that’s what has us on the edge of our chairs.”

The United States entered into National Wildland Fire Preparedness Level 5 on July 14. It was the earliest start date in 12 years, and the second earliest in more than two decades. The preparedness levels are a metric measuring both fire activity and unallocated resources. At Level 5, it indicates that most of the country’s firefighting resources are tied up.

To track the potential for wildfire events, forestry and wildfire experts use Energy Release Components to determine the fire risk of a certain region. The ERCs reflect the contribution of all live and dead fuels to potential fire intensity, according to the Northwest Interagency Coordination Center. The measured ERC levels of most of Northeastern Oregon had been breaking almost every record on the books by the end of July.

On Aug. 1, those numbers had dropped considerably — albeit due to the precipitation that came along with thunderstorms.

“It just takes a spark,” said Peter Fargo, a public affairs officer with the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest. “It really is down to that level, now.”

'The cavalry's not there if we needed to call them'

Resources such as firefighters, tankers and initial attack crews move around throughout Oregon over the fire season — prior to thunderstorms, the area might receive bolstered forces through other firefighting groups such as the Redmond Smokejumpers.

But scrambling wildland firefighters across the state, however, means that less resources are available to fight other fires. With nearly 20,000 firefighters working fire lines across the nation, it’s caused some concerns of shortages.

“The fires we’re dealing with have a high resistance to control,” Livingston said. “We’re emptying the barn to pick these fires up.”

Livingston continued by stating that Eastern Oregon was well-staffed by drawdown, which leaves critical initial attack resources in susceptible regions. In less explosive

years, some forest fires are allowed to burn themselves out. This year, forestry officials aren’t taking any chances.

“Things are just too dry for us. The cavalry’s not there if we needed to call them,” Livingston said.

The picture painted by the senior fire official is alarming — and confirms that this season is unlike any other experienced in Oregon’s history of wildfires.

“Resources are stretched thin across the country,” Fargo said. “At the same time, we need to keep our local resources here so they can respond to lightning strikes, and to campfires that go awry.”

It’s a balancing act between sending help with other agencies throughout the region, and ensuring that enough firefighters and specialists are on-hand to quickly respond to reported fires. And that’s exactly where elite aerial firefighter insertion teams excel.

Even still, aviation resources are dependent on having adequate fuel to keep the fire fighting birds in the air. Aviation fuel shortages across the nation have raised alarms about the potential for critical firefighting activities to be stalled.

La Grande/Union County Airport keeps a supply of around 30,000 gallons of Jet A fuel, which is used by firefighting tankers. That supply quickly depletes as firefighting operations take place.

“We could go through, when it’s a heavy fire season, 10,000 gallons of Jet A, and up to 16,000,” said Doug Wright, airport director for the airport. “(Firefighting operations) can take about half.”

Replenishment of fuel during heavy operations, Wright said, can happen daily, with approximately 10,000 gallons of fuel being shipped to the airport per day.

But with several other airports needing fuel for firefighting operations, that daily delivery could come in jeopardy.

“We’re in competition with everyone for needing fuel, we all need fuel, and we understand that,” Wright

19-year-old Union County woman dies after contracting COVID-19

UNION COUNTY — The Oregon Health Authority on Thursday, Aug. 12, announced a 19-year-old woman had died from COVID-19.

The Union County woman is one of only four Oregonians younger than 20 to die with COVID-19 since the pandemic began, and she appears to be the third person in her extended family to die from the virus in a matter of weeks.

According to the health authority, the teen tested positive for coronavirus July 27 and died Aug. 10 at Providence Portland Medical Center. She had underlying conditions, according to the state. The death is the 29th in Union County since the pandemic started last year.

A family member, reached on Facebook, declined to comment. But people who know the family told The Oregonian/OregonLive that the young woman was the granddaughter of a Union County couple who died from COVID-19 within days of each other.

The Oregon Health Authority last week reported two COVID-19 victims from Union County whose ages and dates of death match: a 78-year-old man who died July 31 and a 78-year-old woman who died Aug. 4.

A GoFundMe page set up in response to the deaths of the elderly couple said the couple’s daughter and granddaughter had also been hospitalized with COVID-19. People

familiar with the family said their granddaughter was a recent graduate of Union High School.

It is unclear if any of the family members were vaccinated, although someone who appears to be part of the extended family posted on Facebook: “Trying to support your wife and family after they lose three family members in such a short time is hard. It’s even harder when it’s preventable by getting a vaccine. Disinformation is Deadly!! Vaccines Save Lives!!”

Fewer than half of Union County’s adults are partially or fully vaccinated against COVID-19, the 11th lowest rate in Oregon, according to state data. State officials have said

about 80% of July’s deaths across the state were among people who were not vaccinated or not fully vaccinated, and they have said vaccination is the best way to prevent severe disease, hospitalization and death.

Before Aug. 12, Oregon had reported only three COVID-19 victims younger than 20 out of more than 2,900 fatalities.

They are a 15-year-old Marion County boy who died in May, a 19-year-old Marion County man who died in December and a newborn boy from Umatilla County who died in January.

The Oregon Health Authority announced 22 new cases of COVID-19 in Union County on both Aug. 12 and

13. That total comes after the state announced 16 new cases on Aug. 11.

The new cases put the county at 1,905 known cases since the pandemic began last year.

The state reported seven new cases in Wallowa County on Aug. 12 and six new cases Aug. 13, raising its total to 286 cases during the pandemic. The county has had six deaths since the pandemic started, according to the state.

Union and Wallowa counties’ total was part of 2,387 new confirmed and presumptive cases of COVID-19 across the state Thursday and 1,785 Friday, bringing the state total to 238,463 cases since the start of the pandemic.

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