

NON-COVID:

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HEAT WAVE — RECORD HIGH TEMPS, FIRE AND FIREWORKS BANS

LA GRANDE — How's the weather? If you were in the Pacific Northwest during the summer, the answer would have been, "It's hot."

Beginning June 26, Northeastern Oregon experienced one of the most historic and unprecedented heat waves to ever hit the region.

During the height of the heat wave, La Grande broke five consecutive daily record highs, from June 28 to July 2, and ultimately tied the daily record on July 3. For La Grande, the hottest temperature recorded was 108 degrees on June 30 and July 1. The reading of 108 degrees also broke the record for the highest monthly temperature recorded in June and tied the monthly record high for July originally set in 2002.

Additionally, the mark tied the record for the all-time maximum temperature recorded in 2002.

The high temps and dry conditions prompted the city of La Grande on Tuesday, June 29, to ban fireworks and outdoor recreational fires, just days before the Independence Day holiday.

"I know it's upsetting to some people or probably frustrating, but I just feel like it's the right thing," La Grande Fire Chief Emmitt Cornford said.

WALLOWA COUNTY WILDFIRES

ENTERPRISE — The Elbow Creek Fire cost more than \$25 million to suppress, according to a spokesperson for the Umatilla National Forest.

"Our records show the cost-to-date is \$25.3 million," said Darcy Weseman, public affairs officer for the forest.

The fire started on the afternoon of Thursday, July 15, in an area along the Grande Ronde River near Troy. The fire ended up burning nearly 23,000 acres in northern Wallowa County. More than 1,000 firefighters were mustered to fight the blaze in steep terrain as it covered the region with smoke for weeks. As of Aug. 2, the fire was 95% contained, and it was extinguished not long after.

Weseman said the cause of the blaze was still under investigation. It was speculated the cause could have been human-related or that it was a "sleeper" — a smoldering tree from lightning strikes about a week earlier.

POISONED WOLVES

LA GRANDE — In early February, Oregon State Police investigators were alerted that a wolf fitted with a tracking collar had stopped moving near Mount Harris, about 10 miles northeast of La Grande in Union County.

They found the entirety of the Catherine Pack, three males and two females, dead along with a nearby dead magpie, according to state police. The animals were sent to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Forensics Lab in Ashland



The Elbow Creek Fire, shown from the air, started Thursday, July 15, 2021, west of Troy, according to David Weaver with the Oregon Department of Forestry. By July 16 it had grown to an estimated 9,000 acres and caused area evacuations.

for testing.

About a month later, wildlife officials again contacted state police to report concerns about a collared wolf in the same area of Union County. Another search turned up a dead female wolf and another dead magpie and a dead skunk. Again, all the animals were sent to the lab for testing.

By April, the toxicology tests confirmed all six wolves had been poisoned.

Two more wolves would be poisoned in the months to come. Later in April, another male wolf, this one from the Five Points Pack, was found dead near Elgin. In July, a young female wolf was found dead northeast of La Grande, state troopers said. That animal had recently dispersed from the Keating Pack.

Testing on both confirmed different types of poison, but investigators believe the young female's death may be related to the six earlier poisonings.

To date, conservation groups have offered nearly \$50,000 for information that leads to a conviction.

MERA FIRE BREAK WORK AND LOGGING

LA GRANDE — The odds of a catastrophic fire someday striking the Grande Ronde Valley were reduced in 2021 by the creation of a pair of two major firebreaks in the Mount Emily Recreation Area.

The largest of the two firebreaks is 6 miles long on MERA's Mainline Trail, which runs north-south starting from the recreation site's parking lot off of Fox Hill Road. The firebreak was created by Reedco Forestry, a company contracted by Union County.

The second firebreak was along Forest Service Road 3120. Gary Wright of Gary Wright Contracting in Union created that break, which is about a mile long and runs on the western edge of MERA.

The firebreaks cost a combined total of \$200,000. A federal National Fire Plan grant, which Union County received via the Oregon Department of Forestry, covered much of the funding. The grant reimbursed Union County for a major portion of its cost of building the firebreaks.

The trunks of all trees in the firebreaks are at least 10 feet



Empty chairs line McKenzie Theatre in Loso Hall on Wednesday, June 16, 2021. The historic performance hall on the Eastern Oregon University campus in La Grande had been under renovations since July 2020.

apart and their crowns a significant distance away.

The distances make it much less likely for a fire to spread from tree to tree.

"They will break the continuity of fuel," Jamie Knight, a spokesperson for the Oregon Department of Forestry, told The Observer in a Feb. 4 article.

The break in continuity of fuel means the firebreaks will help stop the advancement of fires from the Mount Emily area into the Grande Ronde Valley and blazes moving in the opposite direction.

The 400-foot-wide firebreaks also will help stop the fires advancing in the crowns of trees. Sean Chambers, Union County's parks coordinator, said the intent of this step is to keep fires on the ground where they can be controlled.

Much of the timber cut down in the process of creating the firebreaks was sold by Union County to mills. Wood materials not suitable for mills were made available to the public in slash piles. Everyone who purchased a \$10 permit could get five cords of wood from early October through the end of November, according to Union County's website.

EOU PROJECTS: FIELDHOUSE, LOSO HALL

LA GRANDE — The past year has been a productive one for Eastern Oregon University building construction and renovation.

The renovation of Loso Hall was completed in the spring. Many of the improvements focus

Umatilla National Forest/Contributed Photo

Alex Wittwer/The Observer

"Once the siding is up, work on the interior can start," Garlitz said.

He said the fieldhouse, which will cost \$9 million, should be ready for use by students and athletic team practices by the start of fall term in 2022.

Once completed, the field house will be the largest building of its kind at any college or university in Oregon, Washington and Idaho that is not a NCAA Division I school, said Ben Welch, EOU's head men's and women's track and field coach.

LA GRANDE CRIME AND HOMELESSNESS

LA GRANDE — Near the conclusion of 2021, concerns over homelessness and a rise in criminal activities at Max Square and in downtown La Grande became a discussion topic among business owners and city entities alike.

A letter from downtown business owners and comments from councilor John Bozarth brought the issue to light, prompting La Grande Police Chief Gary Bell to write a letter addressing the concerns and opening a dialogue with the community.

"I think it's appropriate to share that our mission at the police department is to ethically protect the lives, property and quality of life of the La Grande community to the best of our ability, while respecting the constitutional rights of all persons," Bell said in the statement.

The conversation continued with community members in early December as the city hosted an open forum on the topic. Bell was joined by City Manager Robert Strope, Parks and Recreation Coordinator Stu Spence, Economic Development Director Timothy Bishop and CHD Mental Health Director Aaron Grigg.

Bell pointed out tactics that law enforcement and the city have conducted to limit loitering and vandalism downtown, but also noted several roadblocks facing the police department. Measure 110 and recent court cases have impacted the way that law enforcement can address homelessness in cities.

The open conversation with business owners took place at Brother Bear Cafe on Adams Avenue and saw a crowd of about 15 business owners in attendance. Many in attendance spoke of observing drug usage at Max Square and of cars being vandalized or stolen.

Ideas ranged on how to address the rise in homelessness over the last several years, but the overall consensus was the need for continued communication on the issue between law enforcement and local businesses. Grigg also detailed how CHD goes about providing resources to homeless individuals and what possible solutions can exist from a mental health standpoint.

"I can assure you that this is felt collectively and we're working on it," Bell said at the November city council meeting. "We need public engagement and I think part of that is the education component so that our downtown, our business owners and people are aware that it's not just going unattended."

NON-COVID TOP STORIES

From our family to yours...

As we reflect on Christmas and the approaching new year, we thank you all for your trust and continued support. May you enjoy a happy and healthy holiday season.

LOVELAND
FUNERAL CHAPEL

1508 Fourth Street
La Grande

BE SAFE! Please don't drink and drive!

happy
NEW YEAR!

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