

EDITORIAL

Tranquil fire season so far, but risk is rising

The damp spring brought multiple benefits to Baker County and Northeastern Oregon, among them an easing of the drought, which is a boon for farmers and ranchers whose operations are vital parts of the region's economy.

But the cool and frequently damp weather that persisted well into June also stifled something that has plagued our area the past few summers — wildfire danger.

Last year, by contrast, the spring was drier than usual, and the fire danger was escalating even before June arrived.

This year, as of July 5, one measure of fire danger — the energy release component, which predicts how fast a fire would spread — was below average in each of the six zones that the Blue Mountain Interagency Dispatch Center in La Grande monitors. That area extends from south of John Day into the southeast corner of Washington, and encompasses most of the Blue Mountains. The fire danger in each zone was moderate.

Although dramatically different so far from 2021, this year is actually reminiscent of fire seasons prior to the series of droughts over the past 20 years or so. During the 1970s, '80s and '90s, wildland firefighting crews generally didn't get busy until mid to late July. That coincided with the start of the peak lightning season — lightning sparks about 80% of the wildfires on public land in and around Baker County, although human-caused fires are more common on private property.

As of July 6, the Blue Mountain Interagency Dispatch Center had reported just 14 fires — seven caused by lightning, seven by people — that burned a mere 2.6 acres.

Yet the past week or so has reminded us that although the current fire season has been tranquil compared with its immediate predecessor, the risk exists, and is beginning to rise.

On June 28 a blaze of unknown origin started on private land northeast of Vale. Gusty winds and temperatures that reached 100 degrees combined to spread flames over about 40,000 acres, eventually reaching the edge of Interstate 84 between Farewell Bend and Ontario. Fortunately, the fire burned in remote rangeland country, and no buildings were threatened. (The fire is not within the Blue Mountain Dispatch Center's area, so not included in its tally of fires and acres burned.)

The Willowcreek fire highlighted one of the potential downsides of the wet spring and the lush crop of grass that resulted. Much of that grass — in particular cheatgrass, an invasive annual — is no longer lush. The tall, dry grass readily takes a flame. The range country, which covers tens of thousands of acres in Northeastern Oregon, will remain susceptible to fire throughout summer and into fall.

A few other, much smaller, fires flared during the Fourth of July weekend. Two of those — one in the dredge tailings near Sumpter, the other near Bourne — were started by lightning. Both burned one-tenth of an acre or less.

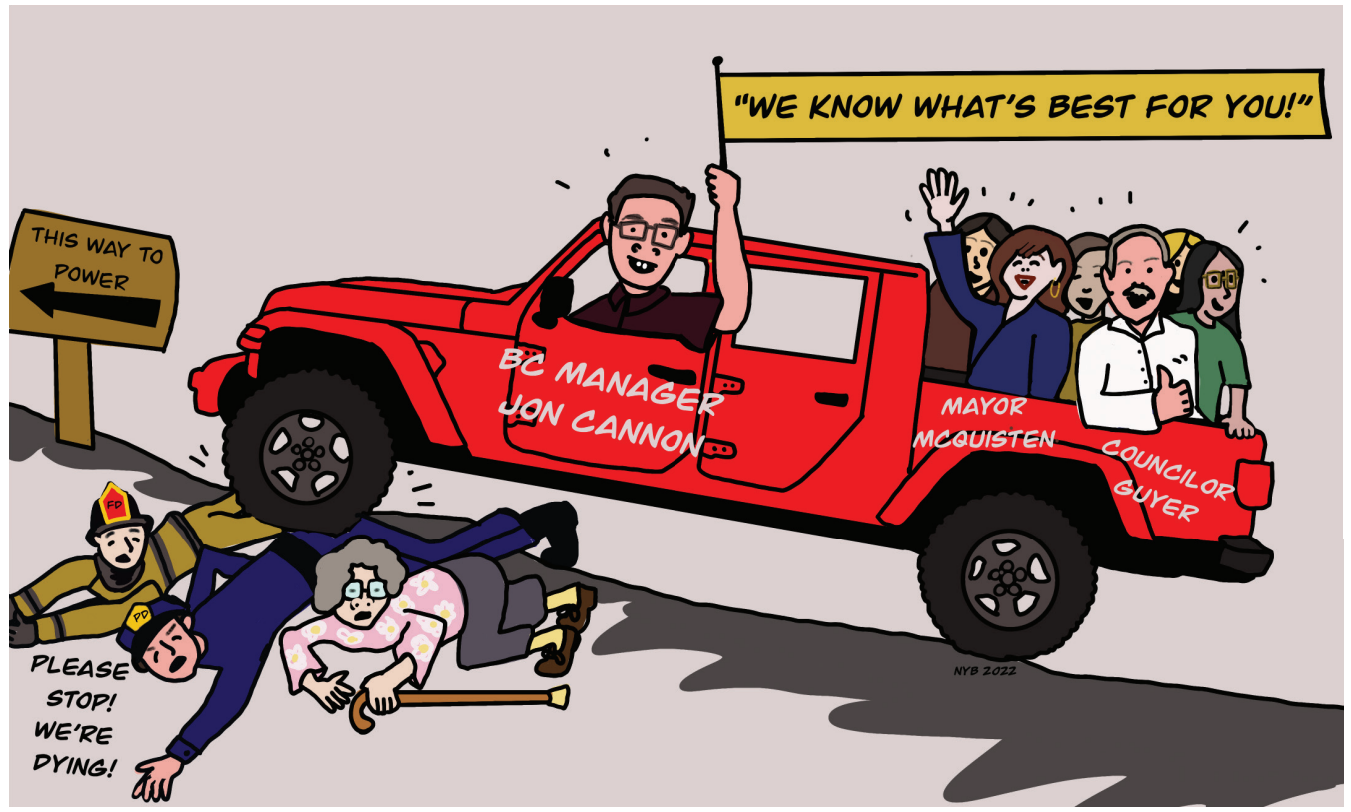
Higher elevation, forested country remains relatively moist, with snow lingering in the Elkhorn, Greenhorn and Wallowa mountains. But a couple weeks of warm, dry weather — typical summer conditions, in other words, which is in the forecast — will increase the fire danger.

Lightning, of course, is beyond our control. But at least fire officials can monitor both the risk of lightning and, through lightning detection sensors, the areas where the most bolts hit the ground. That allows fire managers to respond quickly to smoke reports.

Human-caused fires, by contrast, are far less predictable. No weather forecast can determine when, and where, a careless camper will fail to douse a fire, or toss a still-hot cigarette butt out a car window. The haphazard nature of such blazes can delay the response from fire crews — and with wildfires, even a brief period can be enough for a small fire, easily controlled by a single fire engine, to blossom into an inferno that defies the attack by air tankers and helicopters and hordes of firefighters.

It's gratifying that the 2022 fire season isn't likely to be as lengthy, at least, as last year's. But the risk remains, and if we're careful while spending time outdoors, we can minimize the threat.

— Jayson Jacoby, Baker City Herald editor



YOUR VIEWS

Recall appropriate for councilors who helped dismantle fire dept.

BY CASEY HUSK

Fire the Cannon! Fire the Cannon! Fire the Cannon! The chants echoed off of the stone facade of the Baker City Hall on a pleasant May evening. Hundreds of concerned and angry citizens lined the halls of the old building, right out onto the streets. They were all there, at least based on the 18 speeches given that evening, to tell city council one thing: keep the fire department intact. The way those 18 communicated this point varied.

Former city recorder Katie Lafavor stated that while there may have existed a problem with funding the ambulance, it did not rise to the level of justifying firing a proven provider (Baker City Fire) in exchange for a private ambulance company from out of town. She urged council to send this issue to the voters, as they are the ones who will bear the consequences of the change.

Another woman raised questions about Jon Cannon's commitment to a community where, instead of buying a home and setting up roots like half of the firemen he would soon lay off, he decided to buy a brand-new cherry red \$80,000 Jeep while living in a bumper-pull trailer. Not exactly the actions of a man committed to this community, or one who would likely be around to experience the consequences of his misguided actions.

At the end of the public comment period, I addressed council on the numerous flaws or outright manipulations put out by Jennifer Spencer, the city's finance director, and Cannon in regards to the budget "crisis" they created. How could we be hemorrhaging money when the fire department has been under budget for most of the past decade? If Spencer can't tell us how much it actually costs to run a 911 call or why the city charges the amounts it does for an ambulance ride to the hospital, how can she then say that we're losing money? Remember, they stated that the ambulance service cost the city roughly 85% of the total fire department budget. Without an ambulance, shouldn't the new

budget be that leftover 15% of the previous budget? 85% of \$2.34 million (last year's original adopted fire department budget) is just shy of \$2 million, so the new budget, without the ambulances, should be \$350,000. But it's not \$350,000, the new budget is \$1.67 million. They touted the infamous 20% Medicare repayment as a driving cause, but again, if we don't know how much it costs to run a 911 call, how can they say that the 20% Medicare pays us isn't adequate? It would be like a store owner asking a dollar for a product, getting paid 20 cents for it, and saying they are losing 80 cents even though they don't know how much it cost them to buy! What if it only cost 10 cents?

Despite the protestations of myself and 18 other vocal concerned citizens that evening, our efforts were for nothing. Two weeks later, in the proverbial cover of darkness, council reversed its decision to fight to get the ambulance back. About seven minutes into the meeting, councilor Dean Guyer made a motion that he could "get behind." Guyer stated that the city should not submit a proposal to the county, instead it should wait until after the bid period closed to put Baker City in a better bargaining position with the county. This motion, approved by Guyer, Dixon, Waggoner and Dam-schen, ended the conversation with the county and doomed our community along with the careers of six loyal public servants. To quote the greatest hockey player of all time, Wayne Gretzky, "you miss 100% of the shots you don't take."

Unfortunately, this is not an isolated incident. Our council has shown again and again that it is not deserving of the power it wields. In addition to ignoring massive public outcry, they have a penchant for sneaking important issues through using technicalities in procedure and eliminating any opportunity for public comment.

On April 12, with a relatively mundane agenda, Guyer again made a motion to reverse a previous city council decision. This time it was on the quiet

zone, where council had voted to send the issue to the citizens for a vote. With the support of Alderson, Spriet and Dam-schen, Guyer forced another issue through council that denied the public the opportunity to weigh in on an important topic.

As I write this, yet another pressing issue has come to light. On June 25, social media got hold of the city's plan to eliminate police service in the city between 3 a.m. and 7 a.m., ostensibly for staffing issues and to save money by reducing overtime. The public outcry was swift and in stark opposition to the plan as one would expect.

First Cannon guts the fire department and now he's going after the police. By June 27, the city posted a notice about how this was all a big misunderstanding and that this was just one of many proposed schedule changes that "... need to be addressed in a slow, methodical, and open discussion with council."

In an email to the Herald, Cannon stated that "the idea that you would call police and nobody shows up is an outright fabrication." And yet, in the same article Chief Ty Duby stated that "calls to the emergency dispatch center would be forwarded to the city police department's on-call supervisor (note: it says "on-call," not "on duty"), who would then decide, based on circumstances, whether to call in an officer to respond." The fact that the on-call officer will decide if anyone will respond is a direct contradiction to Cannon's statement. You can call 911 and the officer can decide not to respond! You can interpret that how you will, but as an insider who has worked with Cannon closely for the past 18 months, I can tell you that he is backpedaling after the public outcry.

On June 28, at another council meeting, Chief Duby fell on the proverbial sword and stated that the police scheduling fiasco was all a mix-up and that Cannon was not to blame. He stated that 24/7 coverage is "ideal" and that if we can "get there" that would be great. What the chief did not say is

there will be 24/7 police coverage no matter what. The reason he didn't say that is simple: they are planning on reducing police coverage. This means that schedule changes are coming and that those who will ultimately decide how they look are the very people who have a history of ignoring your voice, aka Cannon and city council.

So here's the deal, Baker City. If you're tired of politicians and bureaucrats destroying your public safety, one fireman and one cop at a time, you need to do something. If you believe that Cannon can't be trusted based on the examples listed above, it is time to rally.

On July 14 at 7 p.m., a meeting will be held at the Baker County Conference and Events Center, "Small Meeting Room" (2600 East St.) in Baker City. The topic of this meeting will be the recall of all eligible councilors who participated in the destruction of the fire department, and the ultimate dismissal of Jonathan Cannon. This is a nonpartisan issue, and is not being sponsored by any group or political party. This letter, the cartoon on this page, and the flyers many of you will find in your mailboxes over the next week are the doing of one man: me. Why am I doing this? Because I believe in democracy and the fair and equal representation of "the will of the people" by those in power. I believe that this council has done irreparable damage to this community and it is up to us, the citizen, to hold them accountable.

For those of you on the fence, or that believe a recall is costly or unobtainable, I offer you this: We only need an estimated 680 signatures to make this happen. Without these steps, this city will continue to bleed public safety professionals. We must send a clear message that council's purpose above all else is to protect and serve our interests. If we fail to do so, council will continue to make decisions for you like the benevolent overlords they have become. Ladies and gentlemen, it's time to fire the Cannon!

■ Casey Husk is a firefighter/paramedic with the Baker City Fire Department.

CONTACT YOUR PUBLIC OFFICIALS

President Joe Biden: The White House, 1600 Pennsylvania Ave., Washington, D.C. 20500; 202-456-1111; to send comments, go to www.whitehouse.gov.

U.S. Sen. Jeff Merkley: D.C. office: 313 Hart Senate Office Building, U.S. Senate, Washington, D.C., 20510; 202-224-3753; fax 202-228-3997. Portland office: One World Trade Center, 121 S.W. Salmon St. Suite 1250, Portland, OR 97204; 503-326-3386; fax 503-326-2900. Baker City office, 1705 Main St., Suite 504, 541-278-1129; merkley.senate.gov.

U.S. Sen. Ron Wyden: D.C. office: 221 Dirksen Senate Office Building, Washington, D.C., 20510; 202-224-5244; fax 202-228-2717. La Grande office: 105 Fir St., No. 210, La Grande, OR 97850; 541-962-7691; fax, 541-963-0885; wyden.senate.gov.

U.S. Rep. Cliff Bentz (2nd District): D.C. office: 1239 Longworth House Office Building, Washington, D.C., 20515; 202-225-6730; fax 202-225-5774. Medford office: 14 N. Central Avenue Suite 112, Medford, OR 97550; Phone: 541-776-4646; fax: 541-779-0204; Ontario office: 2430 S.W. Fourth Ave., No. 2, Ontario, OR

97914; Phone: 541-709-2040. bentz.house.gov.

Oregon Gov. Kate Brown: 254 State Capitol, Salem, OR 97310; 503-378-3111; www.governor.oregon.gov.

Oregon State Treasurer Tobias Read: oregon.treasurer@ost.state.or.us; 350 Winter St. NE, Suite 100, Salem OR 97301-3896; 503-378-4000.

Oregon Attorney General Ellen F. Rosenblum: Justice Building, Salem, OR 97301-4096; 503-378-4400.

Oregon Legislature: Legislative documents and information are available online at www.leg.state.or.us.

State Sen. Lynn Findley (R-Ontario): Salem office: 900 Court St. N.E., S-403, Salem, OR 97301; 503-986-1730. Email: Sen.LynnFindley@oregonlegislature.gov

State Rep. Mark Owens (R-Crane): Salem office: 900 Court St. N.E., H-475, Salem, OR 97301; 503-986-1460. Email: Rep.MarkOwens@oregonlegislature.gov

Baker City Hall: 1655 First Street, P.O. Box 650, Baker City, OR 97814; 541-523-6541; fax 541-524-2049. City Council meets the second and fourth Tuesdays at 7 p.m.

in Council Chambers. Councilors Jason Spriet, Kerry McQuisten, Shane Alderson, Joanna Dixon, Kenyon Damschen, Johnny Waggoner Sr. and Dean Guyer.

Baker City administration: 541-523-6541. Jonathan Cannon, city manager; Ty Duby, police chief; Sean Lee, fire chief; Michelle Owen, public works director.

Baker County Commission: Baker County Courthouse 1995 3rd St., Baker City, OR 97814; 541-523-8200. Meets the first and third Wednesdays at 9 a.m.; Bill Harvey (chair), Mark Bennett, Bruce Nichols.

Baker County departments: 541-523-8200. Travis Ash, sheriff; Noodle Perkins, roadmaster; Greg Baxter, district attorney; Alice Durlinger, county treasurer; Stefanie Kirby, county clerk; Kerry Savage, county assessor.

Baker School District: 2090 4th Street, Baker City, OR 97814; 541-524-2260; fax 541-524-2564. Superintendent: Mark Witty. Board meets the third Tuesday of the month at 6 p.m. Council Chambers, Baker City Hall, 1655 First St.; Chris Hawkins, Andrew Bryan, Travis Cook, Jessica Dougherty, Julie Huntington.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

- We welcome letters on any issue of public interest. Customer complaints about specific businesses will not be printed.
- The Baker City Herald will not knowingly print false or misleading claims. However, we cannot

- verify the accuracy of all statements in letters.
- Writers are limited to one letter every 15 days.
- The writer must include an address and phone number (for verification only). Letters that do not include this information cannot be published.

- Letters will be edited for brevity, grammar, taste and legal reasons.

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