

Crews gain upper hand on Southern Oregon wildfire

BY RYAN PFEIL

Ashland Daily Tidings

Firefighters reached 90% containment on a 110-acre brush fire burning on a steep hillside in Douglas County, fire agencies reported Friday morning.

Douglas Forest Protective Association crews responded to the Mehl Creek Fire, located 3 miles southwest of Elkton near Mehl Creek Road, at 8:25 p.m. Tuesday. The first firefighters on scene estimated the blaze to be about 40 acres and burning in an area that had previously been logged. The flames spread quickly, fueled by heavy brush and logging slash, association spokesman Kyle Reed said.

Wind ignited numerous spot fires around the main blaze, according to a news release.

Accessing the fire proved to be a challenge at first.

"There were (logging) roads into it and around it, but we had to get those opened back up," Reed said. "That was the biggest slowdown, initially, was trying to get those roads opened back up."

Crews from the Kellogg Rural Fire Depart-

"I don't know how long, exactly, it's going to take, but we're going to be out there for a little bit working on this."

— Kyle Reed, Douglas Forest Protective Association spokesman

ment, North Douglas County Fire & EMS, and Oakland Rural Fire Department also responded. The 115 firefighters to respond received aid from multiple water tenders, bulldozers and helicopters.

Mop-up operations could continue for several days.

"A lot of what burned was residual logging slash, so there's a lot of material on the ground that burned. Going through that is a tedious process to make sure it's fully mopped up," Reed said. "I don't know how long, exactly, it's going to take, but we're going to be out there for a little bit working on this."

Reed added crews will almost have to "babysit" the fire over the course of the summer to make sure it doesn't flare back up.



Douglas Forest Protective Association

Firefighters work to stop the Mehl Creek Fire burning in Southern Oregon.

Farmer

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Havstad-Casad, a first-generation farmer, was highlighting concerns raised by others in Jefferson County, whose water allotments this year are so small that roughly half the county's farmland is fallow. When the wind kicks up, the exposed ground creates clouds of dust in the Central Oregon sky as topsoil gets blown off the landscape.

"We watch it happen. We stand in the middle of it. It's like watching your children's future blow away," she said.

She had been invited to speak to the legislators by the Coalition for the Deschutes, a nonprofit that works with both farmers and environmentalists to protect the Deschutes River.

Her stirring testimony compared the topsoil loss in Jefferson County to the Dust Bowl of the 1930s. Havstad-Casad asked legislators to support farmers to plant cover crops, which help to reduce the dust storms.

"The farmers must be supported to cover that topsoil," she said. "It is securing our futures."

In addition to topsoil loss, said Havstad-Casad, farmers are facing financial hardship because their costs remain just as high as a normal season, but their profits are slashed due to the lost acreage.

"While we maintain 100% of our overhead costs, we are only able to farm 40% of our land because of the 40% allotment we have been given," said Havstad-Casad, who practices regenerative agriculture on 200 acres of land. She has been farming near Madras since 2017 after moving there from a smaller property near Bend. The farm's products include organically grown potatoes, onions and winter squash, as well



Ryan Brennecke/The Bulletin

Dust fills the air as Trevor Smith, front, and his mother prepare a field to plant a crop Friday near the town of Metolius in Jefferson County.

as cattle and turkeys.

Drought and low reservoirs are the primary reasons behind the drop in water allotments. Wickiup Reservoir, the source of water for the North Unit Irrigation District, was just 31% full as of Friday. In an average year on the same date, the reservoir would be 79% full.

At its current pace, the reservoir will be empty by early August. A similar scenario played out last year when the water dried up in early September, forcing some irrigation districts to shut off their water prematurely.

The reservoir is draining quickly even though North Unit patrons are getting just 1 acre foot of water. Water pa-

trons of other irrigation districts, including the Central Oregon Irrigation District (COID), are getting three times that amount. That's because districts like COID have older (senior) water rights, so when water resources are restricted due to drought, junior rights holders have to curtail their water usage. Junior water rights holders get cut off in times of shortages.

Gail Snyder, founder of Coalition for the Deschutes, backs Havstad-Casad, saying that too much of Central Oregon's water is being wasted and more of it needs to be shared.

"From watering sidewalks in the city to flooding fields in the county, our current use of wa-

ter is wasteful and unsustainable," said Snyder. "We need a cultural paradigm shift that leads to better stewardship by all of us."

"And we need to address the glaring imbalance in the amount of water available to different groups of farmers so that some aren't left like Oliver Twist, begging for drops while others have more than they need," she added.

Farmers are asking Oregon's legislators to eliminate red tape that makes sharing water difficult.

Tod Heisler, director of the rivers program for Central Oregon LandWatch, said the barriers to sharing water are the result of a lack of legislation.

"In response to drought, COID offered to allow patrons to share their water with farmers in Jefferson County," said Heisler. "But without a program in place to do this, and a concerted communications effort to recruit patrons into the program, it is questionable what can actually happen."

Greg Mintz, legislative director for Rep. Ken Helm, D-Washington County, said state legislators are actively working to resolve the water crisis faced by Jefferson County farmers. House Bill 3103A could make a difference, he said. This bill seeks to "fix Oregon's broken statute for transfers of stored water," said Mintz.

The bill passed out of the

House Committee on Water in April with bipartisan support and it is now awaiting consideration of necessary funding in the Joint Committee on Ways and Means, said Mintz.

"We hope to see the bill pass out of Ways and Means and move to the House and Senate floor for votes," said Mintz.

While North Unit farmers like Havstad-Casad are hoping for a better way to move water around Central Oregon, it's still going to take a fair amount of campaigning to get other irrigators interested in sharing their water.

Shon Rae, the deputy managing director for COID, said just two out of 3,600 of the irrigation district's patrons have expressed interest in sharing their water.

"That is approximately 17 acres out of our 46,000 acres of irrigated land," said Rae.

Havstad-Casad said sharing water is the only short-term option, as current canal piping projects, which will also save water, are years away from completion.

"We don't have time. The piping projects will take years to unroll," said Havstad-Casad. "We are excited to see those projects send water this way, but I promise you, based on last season and the realities of this season, people who are seventh-generation farmers in this district are seriously considering throwing in the towel!"

She also offered the legislators a message of hope and a warning.

"We have the opportunity as a region to improve our management and share water more equitably," she said, "because the farmers of North Unit do not have one more season in them like this one or the one last year."

■ Reporter: 541-617-7818, mkohn@bendbulletin.com

Theater

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And over the past month, Plascencia finished acting in his most challenging and prestigious role yet for Summit: Jean Valjean from "Les Misérables."

Valjean is arguably the most beloved role in one of modern Broadway's biggest musicals — originated by stage icon Colm Wilkinson and famously portrayed by Hugh Jackman in a 2012 filmed adaptation. It's such a towering role that Plascencia admitted he was initially terrified.

"You have a lot of big shoes and expectations to fill," he

Meet the grad

Name: Branden Plascencia

Age: 18

School: Summit High School

Hometown: Bend

Post-high school plans: Study theatre at Cornish College of the Arts

Favorite food: Barbecue chicken pizza

Favorite TV show or movie: La La Land

If you could hang out with a famous person for a day, living or dead, who would it be?: Walt Disney

Once COVID-19 restrictions are fully lifted, where do you want to go?: Ireland

If Hollywood makes a movie about your life, which actor would play you?: Jim Carrey

said. "It's one of those characters that's so iconic, that you want to do it right and you get

scared."
"Les Misérables" is also a tricky musical to perform due

to its format: every line of dialogue is sung, almost like an opera.

"Getting every note correct and moving the scene at the same time, there's a lot of things you have to watch out for," Plascencia said. "But with this cast, it was so fun — we nailed it."

Because of COVID-19 restrictions, Summit High's theater company decided to film the show outdoors, song-by-song, over a 12-day period, said theater teacher Lara Okamoto. The filmed production will be streamed online for two nights only — June 11 and 12, at 7 p.m. — at summittheatrecompany.com.

Plascencia said filming a musical, rather than performing on stage with a live audience, was odd.

But it did allow for the actors to start over and try again if they flubbed a line or missed a note, he said.

"It was an experience that was truly unique," Plascencia said.

Okamoto, who's taught Plascencia on stage for four years, not only praised Plascencia's talent and work ethic, but also his humbleness.

"He would never boast about having any of these roles, and he's very sweet and humble and even shy at times," she said. "It's kind of heartwarming

to see him take on these monstrous roles and still do so with a lot of humility."

This fall, Plascencia will study theater at Cornish College of the Arts, near downtown Seattle. He'll be studying stage performance, as well as the behind-the-scenes aspect of theater.

Plascencia said his goal is to make a career out of theater, and hopefully write his own show someday.

"It doesn't matter if I'm acting or directing, but as long as I'm creating things and making people happy, I'm fulfilled," Plascencia said.

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STATE BRIEFING

Chiloquin men convicted in Nevada homicide, attempted robbery

RENO, Nev. — Nevada prosecutors say two Oregon men face possible life sentences without parole for the killing of a man during a 2019 robbery attempt in Reno.

Daniel Shadow Bear Hutchinson, 24, and Justin Tyrone Jackson, 55, both from Chiloquin are scheduled to be sentenced Aug. 17 in the shooting death of Christopher Dressler, 37, of Sparks, the Washoe County District Attorney's Office said Thursday.

Hutchinson and Jackson were convicted of first-degree murder and attempted robbery with the use of a deadly weapon, the office said.

Montana man sentenced for uploading child porn in Southern Oregon

A Montana man was sentenced Thursday to nearly three years in prison for uploading images of child sexual abuse from an unsecured Wi-Fi hot spot in Southern Oregon.

David Levi Watters, 30, of Dillon, Montana, pleaded guilty in Jackson County Circuit Court to three felony counts of first-degree encouraging child sexual abuse, admitting he possessed child pornography in January 2019 and uploaded the files in Talent. In October, Watters was arrested at his home in Montana and extradited to Jackson County, where he's been held since Nov. 2.

— Bulletin wire reports

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