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OUR ADDRESS
Street 320 SW Upper Terrace Drive
Suite 200
Bend, OR 97702
Mailing P.O. Box 6020
Bend, OR 97708

ADMINISTRATION
Publisher 541-383-0341
Editor 541-633-2166
Gerry O'Brien

DEPARTMENT HEADS
Advertising 541-383-0370
Brian Naplachowski
Circulation/Operations 541-617-7830
Jeremy Feldman
Finance 541-383-0324
Anthony Georger
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LOCAL, STATE & REGION

BOOTLEG FIRE

How the massive Oregon blaze went from 'campfire to bonfire'

BY TED SICKINGER

The Oregonian

After surpassing 400,000 acres Thursday, the Bootleg Fire in south-central Oregon remained not only the largest active fire in the nation, but it also became the state's third-largest megafire officially recorded since 1900, according to an inventory kept by the Oregon Department of Forestry.

The growth of the fire was spectacular. It began July 6 and quickly quadrupled in size, then doubled on back-to-back days, chewing through 143,000 acres by July 11.

It increased nearly three-fold after that, etching its name higher in the record books.

"A slow day for this fire was 10,000 acres," said Marcus Kauffman, a spokesman for the Oregon Department of Forestry.

But as big as this raging fire is — and it is a leviathan — fire research suggests there were much larger wildfires before the historical record was established in Oregon, such as the Silverton Fire in 1865 that reportedly hit up to 1 million acres.

The Oregon Department of Forestry, for its part, acknowledges it does not keep records before 1900.

Indeed, some of that historic fire research indicates that megafires were frequent occurrences in the ponderosa pine and mixed conifer stands where the Bootleg Fire started in the Fremont-Winema National Forest.

The difference this time, and a cause for significant concern as climate change increases the frequency of drought and extreme weather events like last month's heat wave, is the severity of the fire and the ecological disaster it portends.

Keala Hagmann, an ecologist associated with the University of Washington, and Andrew Merschel, a doctoral candidate at Oregon State University's College of Forestry, were able to reconstruct a precise historical record of fires in a 150,000-acre study area of the Fremont-Winema region back to 1650, and in some areas date fires back to the 1300s.

How did they do that?

Just over a decade ago, Hagmann found 100-year-old timber inventory records covering almost a million acres of the landscape at the National Archives and Records Administration in Seattle. Recognizing that they had rare post-fire tree survival data from earlier fires, the duo set out to determine how fire behaved before the U.S. Forest Service, the state of Oregon and local residents adopted the aggressive fire suppression tactics that have characterized the last century.

By taking cross sections of stumps and logs over a 150,000-acre portion of the Fremont-Winema, they were able to identify fire scars and drought signatures and date them precisely. Replicating the same process over the broad landscape, they were also able to estimate the size of those individual fires within the study area, though many of the conflagrations extended beyond the study boundaries.

The upshot: Prior to the last 100 years, fires of comparable size to the Bootleg have oc-



Bootleg Fire Incident Command via AP

Trees burn at the Bootleg Fire in south-central Oregon. The fire is the state's third-largest megafire officially recorded since 1900, according to an inventory kept by the Oregon Department of Forestry.

LOCAL BRIEFING

Wildfires north of Madras 20% contained

Two wildfires burning north of Madras were 20% contained as of Saturday.

The Deep Creek Fire, 21 miles north of Madras and north of the junction of U.S. Highway 97 and U.S. Highway 197, started Thursday and was 1,219 acres as of Saturday, according to Central Oregon Fire Info, a multiagency fire information resource. The Johnson Ridge Fire, 9 miles northwest of Shaniko, started early Friday morning and was 772 acres.

With minimal precipitation in the area Friday night, the Deep Creek fire continued to spread to the north and east. Firefighters were targeting the northern portion of the fire Saturday to reduce spread.

Both fires have hand crews, engines and dozers operating. Possible heavy precipitation and thunderstorms are predicted again over the area.

There are 135 personnel staffing the fires. A fire camp for the two fires is at Madras Elementary school.

— Bulletin staff report

curred every 15 to 25 years in that ecosystem, typically coinciding with periods of drought, Merschel said.

One of the more recent historic examples of a large blaze in that area came in 1918, a year of severe drought in Oregon, when fire burned some 200,000 acres of the forest, according to the researchers.

That fire is not on the state's list but appears in an annual report from the Department of the Interior for what was then the Klamath Indian Reservation.

Jim Gersbach, a spokesman for the forestry department, expressed surprise that a large fire post-1900 would be missing from the state's list but noted the difficulty in tracking the size of some historic fires with full accuracy.

That fire was almost 20 years before the Forest Service adopted its 10 a.m. rule, which decreed that every fire should be suppressed by 10 a.m. the day following its initial report. Forest ecologists now believe that policy, coupled with logging and grazing practices over the subsequent century, interrupted the natural and healthy cycle of fire in forests throughout the west, leaving a tinderbox of fuels kindling the severe fires being seen today.

There were big fires on the Fremont-Winema, according to the researchers, in 1741, 1773, 1783, 1795, 1822, 1829 ... and on.

said Merschel, who is pursuing his doctorate in forest ecology.

"It's been really alarming that all of this burned up in the course of two weeks," he added. "What is shows is that we're really running out of time to restore these dry forests. We're running out of time to get this right."

Fire projects

"Restoring" the forests, however, remains a controversial topic. Lawmakers in Oregon just passed a bill that makes a tiny down payment on the vast backlog of thinning and prescribed fire projects they suggest are necessary to reduce risks in the most fire-prone forests in the state. The need is vast, they suggest, at as much as 5.6 million acres and a cost of \$4 billion over 20 years. The federal government, meanwhile, which owns some 60% of Oregon's forests, has done little to address the problem.

Conservation advocates, meanwhile, maintain that such projects are generally ineffec-

tive, as the incidence of wildfires encountering areas that have been treated is low; those areas still burn with high intensity when fire intrudes, and the carbon loss associated with commercial thinning and post-fire salvage logging is counterproductive.

Either way, severe fires are hardly unprecedented, though the underpinnings vary according to available fuels, topography and weather.

Take, for example, the first of the succession of fires known as the Tillamook Burn, in 1933. Driven by heavy east winds, that fire reportedly burned through more than 200,000 acres in one 20-hour period. Similarly extraordinary wind conditions during last year's Labor Day fires consumed almost a million acres in a few days in areas on the west side of the Cascades, where fire is infrequent, leading to the most devastating season on record.

Those were wind-driven fires, experts say. The Bootleg, while it saw some big winds, was primarily fuel driven.

"There's only one way to get a 40,000-foot pyrocumulus cloud," said John Bailey, a professor in OSU's College of Forestry, referring to the massive columns of smoke that rose over the Bootleg Fire, then collapsed, stoking the fire with massive downdrafts.

"It requires fuel, and fuel that is ready to burn," he said. "It's like going from a campfire to a bonfire."

The biggest signal the Bootleg Fire is sending, Bailey agrees, is how land management patterns and historical fire suppression efforts have changed forest conditions and fire dynamics, and how much risk that poses during an era of climate change.

"I was a fire suppressor back in the '80s," he said. "We thought it was the right thing to be doing to save the forest, and we were wrong. And we're paying the price now."

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