

When wildfire worries abound, make that call

The Oregon Department of Forestry's pre-fire season meeting last week in John Day drew only a handful of landowners, and that's a shame.

The session provided a lot of good information — not just on the fire outlook, which most landowners are already worried about, but on fire agency strategies and the rights and responsibilities of landowners, should wildfire come to call.

Some of the information may seem old hat to folks in this fire-prone area, but practices do change over time. And with a potential barn-burner of a season at hand, an update is a good idea.

For those who couldn't attend — and we get that this is a busy time, on ranches and in town — here are just a few of the takeaways:

- Landowners have the right to attack a fire on their own property. This has been a source of confusion and concern in some past fires, but the rights of the landowner were underscored last week by ODF Central Oregon District Forester George Ponte, who also made that clear in a letter to agency personnel.

- Landowners do have the right to use their own equipment — and many have dozers, trucks, or pumpers that could be put to good use. With resources stretched thin, such rigs may be welcome additions to the fire effort.

- Landowners, who know best about their own terrain and fuel conditions, should share that with responding fire managers, regardless of

which agency is first to show up. That kind of inside info can inform firefighting decisions and make the response safer and more effective. The goal, Ponte said, is communication and coordination, and the more information, the better.

- In any fire suppression effort, things can go wrong. If they do, the time to contact the fire agencies with concerns is sooner, not later. Months or years after the fact, a complaint is apt to be an exercise in frustration for both the landowner and the agency.

One simple but important message from last week's meeting: When fire officials learn of a possible blaze on your land, they will try to notify you. But that's not as easy as it sounds, with people increasingly relying on cell phones, with owners of some properties living out of county or state, and with key managers not identified clearly in the available records.

ODF is setting up a data base of contact information to enhance communications this season, and landowners are urged to provide the best phone contacts for their properties to the John Day Unit office. And they should do it now — when fire season is in its early days, not when the flames are rising on the next ridge.

To be sure, there are a lot of valid reasons for missing a meeting in town. But there's no real good excuse for skipping that one call, and taking a simple step toward better communication in the event of a fire. It's a little thing that could mean a lot, come July, August or September. — SC

CORRECTION

In the "How and What Does Your Garden Grow" article in the Eagle's Home and Garden section, the Bear Valley area's elevation is

actually somewhat higher — 4,800 feet. And in the photo of Jennifer Barker, those are gooseberries she's harvesting.

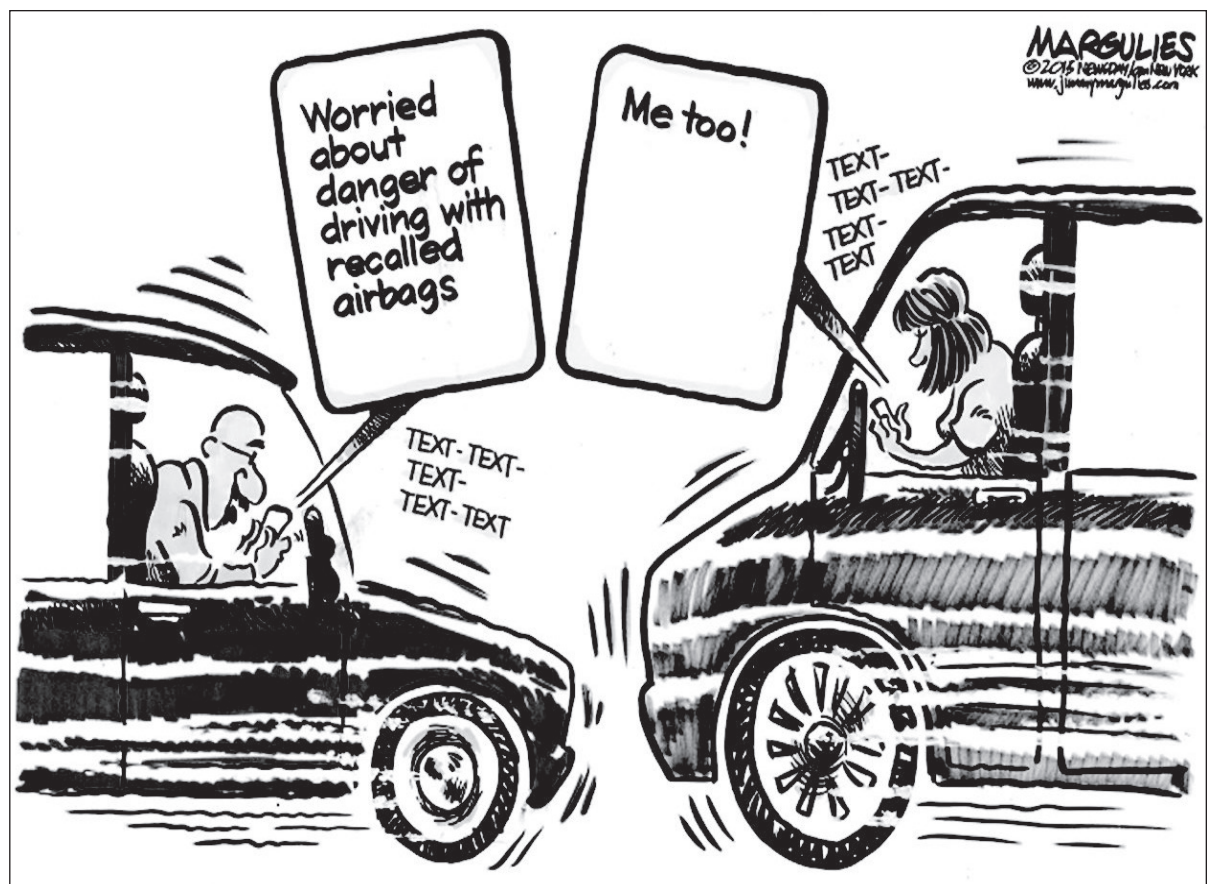
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COMMENTARY

Forest supers say new meetings in the works

By Steve Beverlin, Kevin Martin and Tom Montoya
To the Blue Mountain Eagle

The Malheur, Umatilla and Wallowa-Whitman National Forests are committed to keeping an open dialogue continuing with the communities we serve and as such would like to update you all on our progress in the Blue Mountains Forest Plans revision process. We want to thank many of you for your recent efforts in helping us think through and develop a re-engagement strategy for the communities in the Blue Mountains.

As we announced last month, we have met with a broad spectrum of stakeholders so far this year to discuss the best ways to re-engage with folks in the Blues. Through their counsel and advice, we are exploring a range of re-engagement activities including community, stakeholder and Forest Service hosted meetings.

We want to be clear that these meetings will be open to public. Our hope is that these meetings will provide opportunities to discuss and develop ideas that will help us to improve the final Revised Forest Plans, and provide clarity on our final decisions.

As announced this past February,

we began asking local organizations, including counties, tribes, members of the public at large and special interest groups, if they would be interested in hosting or participating in public meetings in their communities on issues brought forward through the Draft Environmental Impact Statement comment process. We are working with those who have responded to plan and/or participate in a variety of forums to be announced soon. We welcome additional efforts if there is interest. We are open to meet with the public and any entity interested in discussing the draft.

We heard a strong desire for further discussion around forest access, backcountry, wilderness and the pace and scale of restoration, so you can anticipate meetings around these topics, as well as some other more localized issues. We hope to identify some common ground and create solutions. We look forward to these discussions.

It is important to know that while the analysis for the Malheur, Umatilla and Wallowa-Whitman national forests will be included in one environmental impact statement, each forest will have its own unique plan specific to that forest and its communities.

We want forest plans that provide

resiliency for our communities in Eastern Oregon and Washington, plans that support the local economy and the social values of the people who use and depend on them. We also want resiliency in ecosystems that can withstand: drought, floods, wildfire, invasive species, human impacts and have the strength to return to healthy ecosystems in the long run. Our forest plans should provide the vision of how to do just that, and we will continue to need your help in shaping them.

Please come to a meeting. If you cannot come to a meeting, contact your local Forest Service office with your input. If you are interested in discussing or hosting an engagement event please contact Katy Gray, Wallowa-Whitman National Forest public affairs officer, at kathynglgray@fs.fed.us or 541-523-1246.

We look forward to seeing and hearing from you in the coming months as we believe together we can plan for a bright future for our forests.

The authors are the supervisors of the three national forests in the region: Beverlin, for the Malheur; Kevin Martin, Umatilla, and Montoya, Wallowa-Whitman. This column was drafted as an open letter to the residents of the forest communities.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Wood idea in works

To the Eagle:

Firewood has been used in Grant County from the first settlers till the present. From 1862 to the Forest Service's inception and until the early 1970s, firewood was free and unrestricted. First there was a "free" permit just to learn how much was being used. Then came the cost of \$1 a cord to cover the cost of the permit. Further restrictions ensued on the amount of wood, lengths, how it was removed, along with citations to federal court in Pendleton for "violations of the terms and conditions of a permit."

In recent years with the ongoing efforts from citizens, the Forest Service has increased the amount of firewood from 10 to 16 cords and "approved" the use of ATVs in removal, and also rubber-tired equipment in the loading of wood. These changes have helped citizens in acquiring a much needed resource that helps with living expenses.

The Malheur Forest accrues 250 million board feet of dead, dying and blow-down timber each year. About 3,000 cords of firewood is harvested annually, approximately one-half of 1 percent of each year's mortality. At any given time, there is a backlog of a billion board feet or more of dead wood in the forest.

If someone needs wood for fencing and outbuilding, a patio deck, or custom-size timbers for refurbishing an old building, there is no available venue to do so other than a small sale that must be bid on, which is generally too large or unaffordable.

A proposal from citizens that some members of the Forest Service have endorsed is a "personal use wood permit."

Under that proposal, if there is a need for longer than 8-foot wood,

one can pay a higher price for a personal use wood permit and place that tag on a longer length of timber. The remainder of the tree becomes firewood and is affixed with firewood tags.

It makes no sense that a dead tree cannot be converted into useful material for personal use. This proposal will benefit Grant County citizens. Any structure or improvement goes on the tax rolls and benefits roads, schools and the county's overall economic benefit.

On June 19, a decision will be made by the Malheur National Forest supervisor and three rangers. Please call them and voice your concerns: Supervisor Steve Beverlin, 541-575-3000; Blue Mountain District Ranger Dave Halameier, 541-575-3401; Prairie City District Ranger Greg Moon, 541-820-3801; Emigrant Creek District Ranger Christy Cheyne, 541-573-4344.

Dave Traylor
John Day

Flying the flag

To the Editor:

The Elks will hold a ceremony on Flag Day, June 14, at the annual picnic, which will be held at the former Fireside Inn on Dixie pass.

Why is the flag so important? It is the symbol of our country, our military and our citizens.

It stands for all the people that have fought to preserve the Constitution, Bill of Rights and the freedoms and liberties we each enjoy today. It stands for the people, like Martin Luther King, who stood up and said we need to change. It stands for everyday citizens who are fighting to make ends meet and provide a home for their family. It stands for the opportunities given to each citizen to

get an education, a job, and to live as free Americans.

The Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks was the first organization to celebrate Flag Day in 1907. Grand Lodge requires each lodge to hold a Flag Day ceremony on June 14. Allegiance to the flag is a requirement of every member and is how we open all meetings.

So put your flag out June 14 in remembrance of those who fought for our rights and in celebration of our liberty.

Sandie Gilson
John Day

On graduation garb

To the Editor:

Last Saturday my wife and I were in John Day to watch the son of a friend graduate from high school.

It's always nice to celebrate a milestone like graduation, a transition to adulthood, more schooling, or work and responsibility. Although it was a long time ago I can remember what an important event it was in my life.

Which brings me to the point of this letter. When it came time for the handing of the diplomas, one of the presenters was wearing jeans and what I would assume was an untucked work shirt. I found that to be disrespectful to an important day in the lives of 30 graduates. I assume he was a school board member, maybe not. But he might as well have skipped the shirt. He would have looked just as appropriate. The two other presenters were wearing coats and ties and gave the event the respect it deserved.

I believe graduates should be thoroughly honored as they achieve this important milestone.

Tom Thomsen
Aurora



Blue Mountain
EAGLE

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