

Crews pulled off Canyon Creek Complex

Resources are shifted to higher priority incidents

By George Plaven
Blue Mountain Eagle

With so much demand for firefighting resources across the Northwest, some crews have been pulled off Canyon Creek and will likely be re-assigned to higher priority fires in Oregon and Washington.

Slowly but surely, firefighters are making steady progress on the Canyon Creek Complex south of John Day.

The blaze, which burned out of control for more than a week and destroyed 39 houses, was officially 37 percent contained as of Tuesday morning. At last count, 74,744 acres have been scorched.

With southwest winds still expected, firefighters from contained portions of the fire moved to the Norton Fork area near Pine Creek and Dog Creek to be available for additional structure protection, fireline construction, patrolling and other fire operations.

The red flag warning issued for the area over the past two days was lifted. Though temperatures will remain high, southwest winds are expected to be lower and the air more stable.

The total number of personnel now staged in John Day is 832, or about 100 fewer than last week when Canyon Creek was considered the nation's highest priority wildfire.

At the time, more than 700 structures were threatened. That



Photo by Colin Murphy for the Blue Mountain Eagle

Brant Olson of Clackamas walks the controlled burn fire line at the Canyon Creek Complex fire near John Day. Crews are being released to fight other fires in the Northwest.

total has since dropped to about 150 structures. Crews have also buttoned up the Jerry's Draw fire north of Prairie City.

Fire information officer Damon Simmons said the situation appears stable, which means more fire engines and first responders can either be sent home or deployed to other fires where there are still lives, homes and property at risk.

"I won't be surprised if we're re-assigning a lot of those structure units," Simmons said.

"Things have gone well the last couple of days."

State Forester Doug Decker recently said the "pipeline is empty" when it comes to assigning trained firefighters to the sheer number of megafires burning across the West. The Pacific Northwest, northern California and the northern Rockies are all under a fire Preparedness Level 5, which is the highest level issued.

Gov. Kate Brown ordered another 250 Oregon National

Guard soldiers to help in the firefighting effort, but it's ultimately up to fire officials on the ground to determine where the men and women are needed most.

"They look at whether houses are threatened, are evacuations ongoing, are we getting ahead of this fire or are we getting pushed backward," Simmons said. "Every single day, they're having that conversation."

Firefighters made progress

on the Canyon Creek Complex despite ominous weather forecasts late last week that called for gusty winds and continued high temperatures.

Simmons said they are confident their fire lines will hold.

"We'll just keep plugging along to get it more and more contained," Simmons said. "Nothing is a sure thing until the fire is all the way out. But they have a high degree of confidence."

The Canyon Creek Complex

was the nation's highest priority wildfire last week but has since gone down to 10th. The National Interagency Fire Center still ranks the Okanogan Complex and North Star fires in Washington as priorities one and two, respectively.

As fewer structures are threatened, Simmons said firefighters will eventually move elsewhere.

"We'll be here until we're no longer needed," he said. "But it's looking very good."

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Washington fires now at top of list

By George Plaven
Blue Mountain Eagle

When it comes to prioritizing the multitude of giant wildfires raging across the West, the Canyon Creek Complex is no longer on top of the nation's list.

That distinction now belongs to the Okanogan Complex, a four-fire inferno burning nearly 256,000 acres in north-central Washington state.

That's not to suggest help isn't coming in daily to Canyon

Creek — in fact, staff on the fire grew to 941 people at its height, which would make the fire camp the second-largest city in rural Grant County. About 707 personnel are currently assigned to the fire.

However, fire managers recognize the enormous need to protect lives, homes and infrastructure in Washington, where the Okanogan Complex and North Star Fire have burned over 401 square miles.

Determining which fires get preference for resources is a process overseen by state and regional top firefighting officials, based on daily reports filed by incident commanders on the ground level of each blaze.

It starts at the National Interagency Fire Center in Boise, where a team of leadership known as the National Multi-Agency Coordinating Group sets priority by geographic region. Federal agencies represented in the group include the Bureau of Land Management, Bureau of Indian Affairs, U.S. Forest Service, Fish and Wildlife Service, National Parks, U.S. Fire Administration and National Association of State Foresters.

The Pacific Northwest continues to be the highest-priority region in the country and remains under a Preparedness Level 5 for wildfires, which is the highest level issued. But other regions aren't far behind, with northern California and the northern Rockies also at Level 5.

"We help prioritize and mobilize resources to (incidents) based on the need," said Christine Cozakos, spokeswoman with the forest service stationed at the National Interagency Fire Center. "It's not random. There is some strategy in placing those



Contributed photo/Linda Smarr

Air tanker drops retardant over the Canyon Creek Complex fire. The fire was 37 percent contained as of Tuesday morning.

fires in the order they are in."

Fire activity in the Northwest is fluid and reviewed daily, Cozakos said. It's kind of a constant moving around of resources, she added.

Within the Northwest region, another interagency coordination center based in Portland evaluates which specific fires particularly need help. As conditions change on a dime and scatter fires off in new directions, the main criteria boil down to public safety first, followed by protecting homes and protecting other infrastructure, such as bridges and power lines.

Koshare Eagle, spokeswoman with the Northwest Interagency Coordination Center, said incident commanders send in a worksheet every day that details risks to firefighter safety, public safety and homes, among other resources. A second multi-agency team — this one made up of representatives from each agency that par-

ticipates in fighting wildfires across Oregon and Washington — reviews the information and issues a bulletin of priorities.

Though the Canyon Creek Complex, which continues to threaten more than 150 structures, is now 10th on the list, that doesn't mean it couldn't change quickly, Eagle said.

"It really is going to depend on fire activity on that fire, relative to fire activity and communities threatened by other fires in the area," she said.

Nor does it mean, just because the Okanogan Complex tops the list, it is first in line to receive everything. Cozakos said the center does its best to fill all orders for resources, though they are about as stretched as they can get.

"We look at all fires to divvy out resources," Cozakos said.

Incident priorities for the Northwest are posted daily online at www.gacc.nifc.gov/nwcc/

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