



Photo by Colin Murphy for the Blue Mountain Eagle

**A backburn is set by wildland firefighters for structure protection.**

# Firefighters work to contain Canyon Creek, 2 other fires

**Nancy McCarthy**  
Blue Mountain Eagle

This is the timeline for the days following the initial outbreak of the Canyon Creek Complex fire:

**Wednesday, Aug. 19:**

- Number of homes destroyed: 36. More than 50 other structures were damaged and more than 500 were threatened.
- Number of acres burned: 48,201, with 0 percent containment.
- Personnel fighting the fire: 649, including two Type 1 crews, trained to handle massive wildfires.
- Evacuation Level 3 remained South from Dog Creek to Little Dog Creek, as well as the upper end of Pine Creek. Canyon Creek, from the fire perimeter north at Canyon City, south to the 15, 16 junction also remained under a Level 3 evacuation.
- Gov. Kate Brown met with firefighters that afternoon. She announced that the Oregon National Guard would be called in to help.

**Thursday, Aug. 20**

- Firefighters braced for 35 mph wind gusts and dug in to protect the fire from spreading to Seneca, which was placed on a Level 1 evacuation.
- Number of acres burned: 53,876 acres, with 10 percent containment.
- The fire had jumped Road 1530 and headed toward Butterfly Springs, about two miles north of the old Parrish Cabin burn.
- A Level 3 evacuation was placed on the area west of County Road 62, south of milepost 12 and north of Forest Road 16 to the junction of Forest Roads 15 and 16.
- Highway 395 remained closed.

**Friday, Aug. 21:**

- The number of homes destroyed: 39.
- The number of acres burned: 61,631, with 13 percent containment.
- The Jerry's Draw fire on Dixie Mountain, four miles north of Prairie City, broke out and burned 150 acres. Some residents were put on Level 2 evacuation; others were on Level 1. Cause of the fire was under investigation.

- The Level 1 alert was lifted for Seneca and others were decreased.
- The Level 3 evacuations involving the Jerry's Draw fire remained in effect for Ricco Ranch Road, Standard Creek, Dean Creek Road and Dixie Creek.

**Saturday, Aug. 22**

- Number of acres burned: 67,456, with 17 percent containment.
- Number of fire personnel: 902, down from a high of 941.
- Firefighters were able to complete a fire line around the Jerry's Draw fire, suppressing several spot fires as they arose.
- Evacuation levels were reduced or lifted in some areas.
- Highway 395 opened, with pilot cars leading vehicles out of the fire zone during the day only.

**Sunday, Aug. 23**

- Number of acres burned: 69,606, with 23 percent containment.
- Number of fire personnel: 832.
- Drop in national fire priority: From No. 1 to No. 10.
- Number of structures threatened: 150, down from 700.

- The Jerry's Draw fire was contained.

- Immediate evacuations ordered for another 22 homes from Upper Pine Creek and Upper Dog Creek as winds shifted out of the southwest, pushing the blaze back northeast where firefighters had already established a fire line.

**Monday, Aug. 24:**

- Number of acres burned: 73,210 acres, with 29 percent containment.
- Number of fire personnel: 665.
- Firefighters spotted another fire 13 miles northeast of Prairie City. The Frog Pond fire was estimated at 15 acres, about 3.5 miles south of Greenhorn.
- Highway 395 opened unrestricted day and night.

**Tuesday, Aug. 25**

- Number of acres burned: 74,744, with 37 percent containment.
- Number of fire personnel: 707.
- Frog Pond fire contained at 15 acres.
- Jerry's Draw fire contained at 161 acres.

## FIRE

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Forest Supervisor Steve Beverlin said the community had many questions about what happened during those first several days, and the Forest Service wanted to offer a factual sequence of the events leading up to when the fire exploded out of control.

"People just wonder how does it go from here to there," Beverlin said. "We think it's important for local folks in the community to understand the initial attack we did."

The Canyon Creek Complex started as two smaller fires burning in dramatically different terrain: the Mason Spring fire, east of Highway 395, in relatively flat ground and the Berry Creek fire in a steep, rocky portion of the Strawberry Mountain Wilderness.

Both fires started Aug. 12 following a three-day lightning storm that swept over much of Eastern Oregon. A total of 12 new fires were spotted on the Malheur National Forest from south of Seneca to north and east of the Indian Rock area.

The Forest Service deployed one heavy air tanker, three single-engine air tankers, two helicopters, smokejumpers and rappellers, three fire engines, a 20-person hand crew, one bulldozer and two water tenders to fight the Berry Creek and Mason Spring fires. Beverlin signed off on an order granting special permission to use chainsaws for fire suppression in the wilderness area.

By Wednesday afternoon, crews had surrounded the Mason Spring fire with dozer and retardant lines and felt confident enough to reassign one of their helicopters to Berry Creek, where fire activity was becoming increasingly aggressive. One firefighter had to be taken to the hospital with heat exhaustion, but has since recovered and rejoined the line, Beverlin said.

The Berry Creek fire grew to 50 acres by Thursday, Aug. 13, and burning actively to the west. Two more structure protection engines, one dozer and a five-person hand crew arrived from the Oregon Department of Forestry to get a better handle on the blaze.

Meanwhile, the 10-acre Mason Spring fire also jumped its containment line Thursday after high winds ignited a spot fire about 400 feet away. It was at that time when a Type 3 management team assumed control of both fires, with the most diffi-

cult conditions yet to come.

"I believe we did everything we could with the resources we had available to put those two fires out," Beverlin said. "Sometimes Mother Nature has other plans, and that's what happened."

By Friday, Aug. 14 the Mason Spring had grown dramatically to 500 acres and crossed the highway toward Canyon Creek. Wind gusts picked up to 30 mph, spreading flames as quickly as sheriff's deputies could scramble to issue evacuation notices.

With both fires burning actively, the main focus became protecting homes. Fire departments from Canyon City, John Day, Dayville, Mount Vernon, Prairie City, Monument and Long Creek all responded, while the incident commander on the Mason Spring fire worked to determine which structures needed immediate protection.

Mount Vernon firefighters were assigned to guard homes up Corral Gulch and the J-Bar-L Ranch. Another spot fire erupted at Eagle Peak, further adding to the juggling act of assigning resources.

Between noon and 6 p.m., the fires had become too much and 39 homes burned to the ground.

"It's difficult," Beverlin said. "We live here, too. When things like that happen to our neighbors and our community, it's a loss that everybody feels."

Later that evening, local resources were sent home and a Type 1 management team — the most trained and highest staffed team available — was assigned to Canyon Creek. Firefighting resources remain stretched thin across the Northwest as a number of large blazes continue to burn in Oregon and Washington.

Dave Hannibal, John Day base manager for Grayback Forestry, a wildfire and emergency services contractor, said it wouldn't have mattered how many firefighters they had available given the extremely difficult conditions.

"If we'd had 1,000 extra firefighters, we'd have only been more likely to have some serious injuries, or worse," Hannibal said. "The fire still would have claimed what it did. Our hearts go out to all who lost their homes in this fire."

Beverlin said the Forest Service will work on a plan to rehabilitate the landscape burned by the Canyon Creek Complex, and he is thankful for all the support from volunteers and the Red Cross.

**WILDFIRE TERMINOLOGY**

## What did they say?

Blue Mountain Eagle

We're hearing an abundance of wildfire terms and titles lately associated with the Canyon Creek Complex fire.

Here are some definitions for the more commonly used terms:

- **Air tanker:** A fixed-wing aircraft equipped to drop fire retardants or suppressants.
- **Backfire:** A fire set along the inner edge of a fire line to burn the fuel in the path of a wildfire and/or change the direction.
- **Bambi bucket:** A collapsible bucket slung below a helicopter, used to dip water from sources for fire suppression.
- **Complex:** Two or more separate incidents in the same general area, assigned to a single incident commander or unified command.
- **Contained:** A fuel break around the fire has been completed. It might include natural barriers or manually created lines.
- **Controlled:** The complete extinguishing of a fire, including spot fires. The fireline has been strengthened to keep flare-ups within the fire's perimeter.
- **Hazard trees:** Trees with structural defects that might cause all or part of the tree to potentially strike a "target," such as a vehicle, building or a place where people gather.
- **Incident Commander:** The person responsible for the management of all incident operations at the incident site.
- **Inversion:** A layer of stable air where the temperature increases with increase in altitude. It acts as a cover and limits the amount of vertical motion in the atmosphere.
- **Level 1 evacuation:** Be ready. There is an incident in the area, people there should be aware of potential evacuation. Monitor

emergency services sources and local media for information. Voluntarily relocate to a shelter or with family/friends outside of the affected area. If they choose to remain, they should be ready at a moment's notice.

- **Level 2 evacuation:** Get set. There is significant danger in the area, and residents should be ready to leave at a moment's notice. People are encouraged to go to a shelter or with family/friends outside the area as soon as possible. Those choosing to stay should be ready to leave immediately. Residents may have time to gather items, but doing so is at their own risk. This might be the only notice people receive. Emergency services can't guarantee they will be able to notify residents if conditions rapidly deteriorate.
- **Level 3 evacuation:** Go now! Danger to the area is current or imminent, and people should evacuate immediately, quickly and safely, without gathering belongings or attempting to protect their home. Follow any directions from emergency services personnel. Entry into evacuated areas will be denied until the hazard subsides. This will be the last notice given.

- **PIO:** Public information officer. The main responsibility of a PIO is to provide information to the media and public as required by law and according to the standards of their profession.
- **Rappeller:** A crew of specialist firefighters trained to access a fire area by sliding down ropes suspended from a hovering helicopter.
- **Red Flag Warning:** Term used by fire weather forecasters to alert forecast users of an ongoing or imminent critical fire weather pattern.
- **Spotter:** The person responsible for selecting drop targets and supervising the needs of dropping smokejumpers.

**"FROM A TACTICAL STANDPOINT, WE HAVE BEEN WAITING TO BEGIN REBUILDING, SAFELY. THANKFULLY, THE WILDFIRE THREAT HAS SUBSIDED ENOUGH FOR OUR CREWS TO BE ON-SITE, RESTORING POWER SERVICE TO OUR MEMBERS."**

— WERNER BUEHLER  
GENERAL MANAGER

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