

Saving Prairie City

THE FIGHT TO RESCUE A TOWN FROM WILDFIRE



Contributed photo by Audra Clark

As flames approaches the hills behind Prairie City, buildings in town glow in the fiery light.



Between day and night: The fire never stops

A change in shift for firefighters is also a change in mood

By Sean Ellis
Blue Mountain Eagle

JOHN DAY — Shift change is a critical time for firefighters combating the Canyon Creek Complex fire. It's when vital information on fire behavior, trouble spots and weather conditions is transferred between day and night shifts.

Shift change happens twice a day,

generally around 6 a.m. and 6 p.m., though shifts can be extended based on fire behavior.

"It's a nice, smooth transition, as the incoming folks communicate all the intelligence on what's been done and where the hazards are and provide a situational awareness update to the outgoing folks," said John Kennedy, an operations section chief helping direct efforts to fight the Canyon Creek Complex fire.

There's a significant and visible contrast in energy levels between those returning from the front lines

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Dusty Harris spends time at the Red Cross shelter set up in Mt. Vernon following the evacuation of portions of Prairie City.

Trial by fire

'You could feel the heat of the fire and smell the smoke'

By Sean Ellis
and Nancy McCarthy
Blue Mountain Eagle

After watching a raging wildfire consume their neighbors' properties to the south and west of them for two weeks, Prairie City residents experienced their own trial by fire last weekend.

It took only a switch in wind direction for the fire to turn onto the ridge just above the town, the flames so brilliant against the night sky that the buildings below glowed in the fiery light.

Streets filled with smoke. Early-morning sirens scared residents out of bed. Half the town received orders to evacuate immediately; the other half was told to prepare for evacuation any minute.

In the smoky haze, headlights appeared as a convoy of trucks and cars, filled with prized possessions and ran-



Eagle photos/Sean Ellis

A convoy of vehicles heads out of Prairie City on a smoke-filled Saturday, after officials tell residents to evacuate immediately.

dom household goods quickly thrown into trunks, began moving west, down the highway.

Meanwhile, hundreds of firefighters headed east toward the fire.

The fight to save Prairie City was on. Here is that story, hour by hour:

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Contributed photo/Jim Soupir

A change in the weather Sunday afternoon reveals the blackened hillsides of the Strawberry Mountain Wilderness in this panoramic overlooking the southern section of Prairie City from the east edge of town.

Buses, trucks bring donations from Sandy

Donated supplies come from 19 western Oregon cities

By Sean Ellis
Blue Mountain Eagle

JOHN DAY — A nine-vehicle convoy from Sandy dropped off thousands of pounds of donations Saturday for firefighters and community members affected by the Canyon Creek Complex fire.

The convoy, which included four school buses stocked with basic supplies and goodies, also dropped off eight tons of hay for animals impacted by the fire.

The donations were unloaded at the Canyon Creek Complex fire incident base on the Grant County Fairgrounds.



The Eagle/Sean Ellis

Sandy residents pose for a group photo with firefighters assigned to the Canyon Creek Complex fire. A nine-vehicle convoy from Sandy dropped off thousands of pounds of donations from 19 cities in western Oregon.

Fire officials learned about the convoy and its donations "when they showed up at the back gate,"

said Stacy Weems, Great Basin Incident Management Team public information officer.

"Someone came in and said, 'We have four buses full of supplies for the firefighters and the community, where can we unload them?'" she said.

Sandy resident Pamela Botts started organizing the donation drive last Thursday and enlisted the community's help. She was assisted by her co-workers with First Student, a private school bus contracting company.

After learning about the fires burning in this area, "We decided we needed to help the eastern side of Oregon," she said. "We want to show them we love them. We just want to show them we care on the west side."

Nineteen cities donated items, including clothing, socks, towels, lip balm, sports drinks, snacks, energy drinks, foot powder, multiple food items and 4,000 pounds of snack crackers.

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