

# Shouting match won't solve the forest's problems

Lightning may have sparked the Canyon Creek Complex fires, but many local residents see a larger culprit in the hands-off management of the national forests over the past few decades.

They decry the erosion of traditional forest activities, the environmental challenges that shut down commercial activity and local economies, and the result: vast tree stands clogged with tinder-dry underbrush and ladder fuels.

Throw in climate change and Smokey Bear's admonition to douse every fire, even the natural cleansing ones, over the past 50 years, and the stage has been set for a major conflagration. In some ways, the Canyon Creek Complex was inevitable.

To the families ousted by the fires, this is a personal and life-altering disaster. However, this horrific event also can be seen as an opportunity to draw wider attention to the state of the forests and the need for active management. The eyes of the state, and even the nation, are on these catastrophic wildfires. Americans are watching as their treasured forests and wild lands burn to a crisp.

The harshest critics castigate federal land managers for inaction, but we don't see it quite that way. Ironically, the Canyon Creek fires are raging on the very forest that's at the center of attention nationally for its unusual efforts to break the stalemate in the woods and

heal the land.

In industry and political circles, the spotlight is on the region's accelerated restoration program and the Malheur National Forest's 10-year stewardship contract. But the rollout of large forest rehab projects is in its infancy. These tools, which arose out of nine hard years of labor by broad-based collaborative groups, haven't yet had a chance to show their worth. The backlog and breadth of work to be done is too great to provide a fix in a year, or two, or even three — and in the meantime, there will be more storms and more fires.

A pendulum-like shift in forest practices is in play, just not fast enough to prevent this disaster. That doesn't mean the process is worthless, only that the job is immense and will take time.

The question for this deeply saddened community: Do we focus on the next steps toward large-scale change in our forests, or do we rail at the agencies and point fingers at those who disagree with us? Do we contribute our voices to the collaborative efforts, or do we throw potshots from the sidelines?

We believe a shouting match won't solve the forest's problems or salve our community's pain. In reality, there is no better choice than to get involved, to be part of a sincere quest for change — to be part of the solution for the future.

## WHERE TO WRITE

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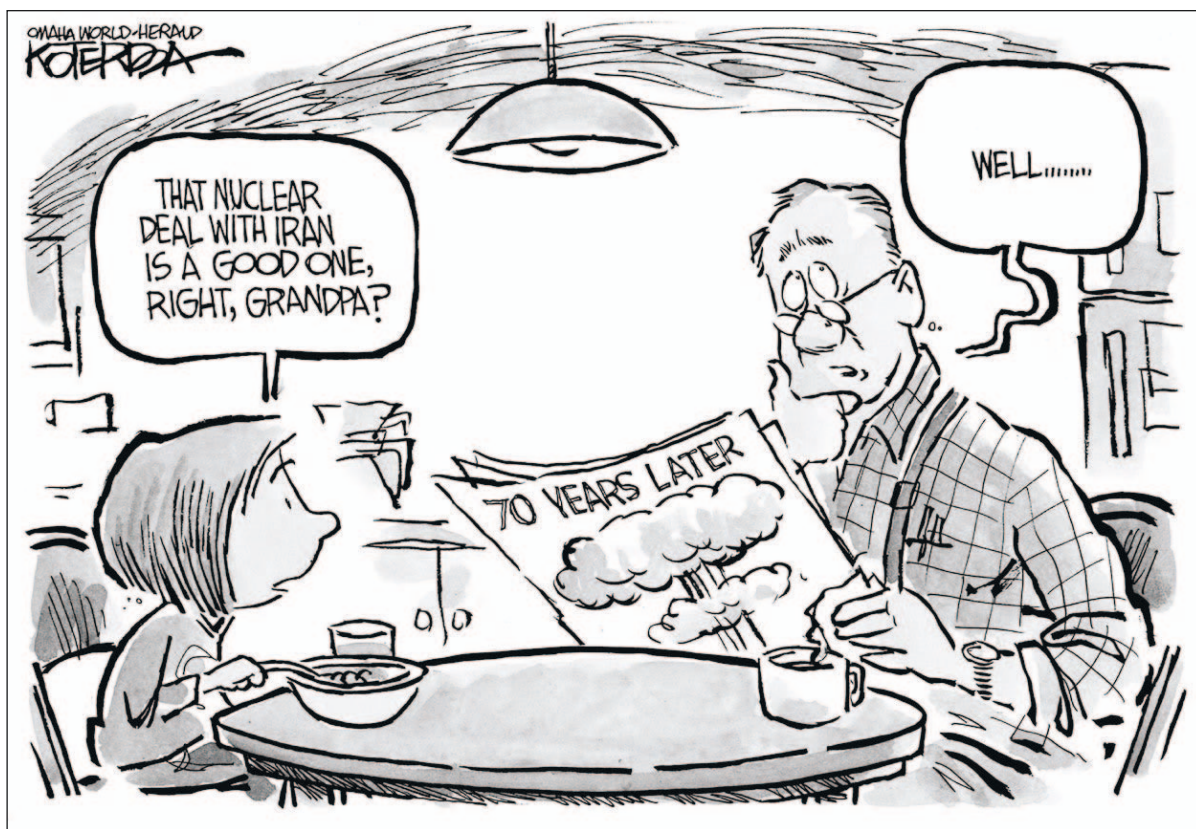
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# Budget meter is running for Oregon wildfire costs

By Hillary Borrud  
Capital Bureau

SALEM — Oregon has yet to burn through its firefighting budget, despite ongoing catastrophic wildfires around the state.

In what now appears to have been a prudent decision, lawmakers and a committee of forest landowners agreed earlier this year to more than double the amount of money budgeted for the Oregon Department of Forestry to fight fires to a total of \$50 million annually.

"I'm pleased we did it," said Sen. Bill Hansell, R-Athena, a member of the budget-writing Ways and Means Committee. "We had been warned that fires this summer, with the kind of moisture that was predicted, could be pretty high."

The size of the Canyon Creek Complex fire in Grant County and the Grizzly Bear fire in northeastern Oregon "are well over 120,000 acres and growing," he said. "And I think we've probably got another several weeks or so at least until we get some good rain."

As of Tuesday, the Canyon Creek Complex near John Day had burned 105,687 acres and the Grizzly Bear Complex had burned more than 68,000 acres in the Umatilla National Forest and private land in

Oregon and Washington state. An additional 17 large wildfires continued to burn in other areas of the state, according to an interagency fire tracking website.

Oregon relies on a unique system to pay wildfire fighting costs. Property owners with land classified as forest pay a state assessment to help cover firefighting costs in addition to money the Legislature appropriates from the general fund. The state has also purchased an insurance policy most years since 1973 to help cover firefighting costs.

After two severe fire seasons, however, the state's insurance deductible more than doubled from \$20 million to \$50 million. When lawmakers and forest landowners decided to purchase the policy earlier this year, they had to prepare to spend up to \$50 million before they could tap into the \$25 million insurance policy.

Rod Nichols, a spokesman for the Oregon Department of Forestry, said this week that the agency estimated its net spending this year at \$26 million, when expected reimbursements from the Federal Emergency Management Agency and other sources are factored in. Oregon spent an estimated total of \$63 million to fight the wildfires, and fire officials so

far expect to receive approximately \$15 million in reimbursement from FEMA and \$22 million from other federal sources.

"The main thing everyone is focused on now is getting the fires out," Nichols said. "We cannot not respond to fires, so we just have to do it. That said, we're spending a lot of money obviously from those figures."

The state has to pay contractors in a timely manner, for example, to ensure they remain in business and can continue to work on the fires, Nichols said.

At the start of fire season, the Oregon Department of Forestry had 500 seasonal firefighters, 220 fire engines, 15 bulldozers and 14 aircraft. The state also had access to 188 private contract hand crews, inmate hand crews from state prisons, three incident management teams and National Guard helicopters.

Oregon has since pulled in resources including additional fire crews, aircraft and fire managers from other states and Canadian provinces to fight the wildfires.

"Basically, the cupboard is bare, though some of the large fires are winding down and resources are starting to return from them," Nichols wrote in an email.

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### We deserve complete disclosure

#### To the Editor:

In the past 20-plus years, the Bureau of Land Management and U.S. Forest Service have been reducing cattle grazing and logging on federal lands to "protect" various supposedly "endangered" species (spotted owl, bull trout, sage grouse, etc).

How many of these "endangered" species managed to live through this current inferno? We have seen photos of deer burned alive and reports of herds of elk and wild horses that didn't manage to escape the fires.

The article in the *Blue Mountain Eagle*, "Forest Service defends Canyon Creek Response" (Aug. 26), provides more questions than answers, in my opinion.

The Canyon Creek Complex was originally two separate fires, miles apart, and separated by Highway 395 and paved county roads. The newspaper account lumps both the Berry Creek and Mason Spring fire together and lists all of the heavy equipment, air tankers deployed, as if they were not two separate fires. No mention was given of the exact timeline for initial attack on each separate fire, even though they remained individual fires until Friday, Aug. 14.

The Berry Creek fire reportedly was ignited first by lightning in the Strawberry Wilderness area in the early morning hours on Aug. 12. What equipment and/or tankers, helicopters, etc. were assigned to the Berry Creek fire in the Strawberry Wilderness and when?

The article also supplies us with the info that "Beverlin signed off on an order granting special permission to use chainsaws for fire suppression in the wilderness area." Just when was this order signed? After the fire was already out of control or when it was merged with the Mason Spring fire?

The Mason Spring fire was reportedly contained by Wednesday

afternoon. Was there a crew and water tenders there when the Mason Spring fire jumped the containment lines? Why was this fire only contained and not put out?

The *Eagle* reported last week that, during the informational meetings, there were "whispers" blaming the homeowners for their loss because they didn't maintain a "defensible space" around their homes. What if the Malheur National Forest had been managed to maintain a defensible space between the forest boundary and private land?

I do know, in my small community, we have at least 39 HOMES burned. Families lost a lifetime of memories and are left with rebuilding their lives — because of mismanagement by federal entities. These homeowners and the community deserve complete disclosure.

Elaine Smith  
Prairie City

### How many owls?

#### To the Editor:

How many spotted owls are deceased during the current raging forest wildfires?

Maybe the remaining live ones should be shipped to Pennsylvania, along with a few forest service technicians and robots.

W. Toop  
Canyon City

### County cannot afford mistakes

#### To the Editor:

On behalf of Ricco Ranch, I would like to thank all the crews, equipment operators and air support for their quick response and hard work on the Jerry's Draw Fire.

Special thanks to Yazzie Voigt, John Sanowski, Jared Lemcke and his crew for going above and beyond and working tirelessly to get this fire contained. We are also extremely grateful for everyone

who came to help, especially Lynn McCormick, William Gibbs, Cody Cole and crew, Brian Hueckman, Leroy Titus, Sam Workman, Travis Bennett and Jonathan Bartov. We cannot thank all the firefighters enough for saving our ranch.

The cooperation of the U.S. Forest Service, Oregon Department of Forestry, structure protection agencies and landowners led to the quick and successful suppression of this fire. However, I am disappointed in the actions of the Oregon State Police troopers in converging on the vehicle I was traveling in, grabbing the wheel to steer us off the road and physically preventing us from getting to the fire through Dixie Creek.

Meanwhile, the troopers allowed reporters and spectators to flood the other route to the fire, through Ricco Ranch Lane. Despite the fact that the fire posed no imminent threat of danger along the Dixie Creek route, we were forced to detour around the troopers' barricade of patrol vehicles and unnecessary traffic on Ricco Ranch Lane, eventually coming out just yards above the roadblock. Valuable time was lost, during which my parents desperately needed assistance to move cattle to safety, put out spot fires and provide crews with directions around the area.

The next morning, an Oregon State Police sergeant informed me that the order to keep landowners out came from the Grant County Sheriff's Office. After speaking with the undersheriff, I learned that the order was to close Dixie Creek but not to restrict landowners' access. Maybe it was a miscommunication or lack of training, but with resources stretched thin, and fires burning out of control, Grant County cannot afford these mistakes.

The next time OSP's assistance is sought in firefighting efforts, I hope the troopers will follow directions and work in cooperation with local agencies and landowners.

Riccola Voigt  
Prairie City



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