



The Grant County's newspaper since 1868

The Blue Mountain EAGLE

LET IT! SNOW!

Weather aids firefighters



By Tim Trainor
Blue Mountain Eagle

It was the week firefighters needed. Cool, calm weather combined with a Sept. 4 night of steady rain — even up to 3 inches of snow in the high elevations — to put a serious dent in the Canyon Creek Complex of fires that has destroyed more than 110,400 acres and damaged more than 50 structures.

As of press time Tuesday, fire crews had the blaze roughly 85 percent contained — that's up from barely any containment just a week prior. Only parts of the east flank of the fire, where crews are securing line near the border of the wilderness, remains uncontained.

Canyon Creek Complex nearly contained

All evacuation levels were lifted by the Grant County Sheriff's Office on Monday, including Strawberry Road and all of Prairie City.

Many of the firefighters that have fought the blaze since Aug. 15-16, when it grew larger than could be fought locally, have now moved on.

Great Basin Team 1 transferred overall management of the fire to Oregon Interagency Incident Management Team 4 on Monday, naming Brian Goff as incident commander. The Oregon National Guard, called out in haste to deal with the emergency, has also finished their work. As of Tuesday, 587 firefighters remained on scene.

There is still work to do, however. Crews — including six rapellers — are focusing on spot fires in the Strawberry Lake and Slide Lake area, trying to protect those well-used wilderness destinations.

Looking forward, the weather forecast is good news, too. Autumn is on its way, bringing cooler temperatures and occasional rain showers, according to meteorologists with the fire team. Both will help with efforts to contain and mop-up. Although in the short term, hot and dry conditions will dominate in the next several days.

—Tim Trainor can be reached at trainor@eastoregonian.com

Fire Behavior Analyst Tobin Kelley did not have active fire behavior to observe Friday, as it snowed in the afternoon and evening in the Strawberry Mountains, near the fire line.

Canyon Creek Fire official Facebook page

Flooding could be next crisis

The County Court is seeking solutions to avoid catastrophe

By Sean Ellis
Blue Mountain Eagle

JOHN DAY — Grant County Court has asked an engineering firm to investigate what efforts can be undertaken to ensure the damage caused by the Canyon Creek Complex fire doesn't result in catastrophic flooding.

Grant County Court Commissioner Boyd Britton said the danger of disas-

trous flooding is very real and the issue needs to be addressed sooner rather than later.

A significant amount of the Canyon Creek drainage has been damaged by fire, and there's virtually no vegetation left to stabilize the ground in the event of a heavy rain event, he said.

"I'm just scared to death of what could happen," Britton said. "I am really, really concerned. We don't have any

vegetation now in much of that watershed."

Doug Ferguson of Ferguson Surveying and Engineering will act as a liaison between the multiple local, state and federal agencies that will each conduct rehabilitation efforts in areas of the Canyon Creek drainage harmed by the fire.

See NEXT, Page A10

INSIDE

• Rebuilding after the wildfires
Page 7

• County survey markers destroyed in wildfire
Page 10

Firefighters fill the absence left by tourists, hunters

Business at grocery, hardware stores is up; restaurants are down

By Sean Ellis
Blue Mountain Eagle

JOHN DAY — The Canyon Creek Complex fires have resulted in fewer tourists and hunters visiting the area, but most local businesses say the presence of hundreds of firefighters has made up for their absence.

Chester's Thriftway has seen fewer tourists since the fire started Aug. 12. "But the firefighters are buying a lot of stuff," said T.J. Bremner, a general manager at the store.

Since the fire started, the number of firefighting personnel stationed in John Day has fluctuated between 600 and 1,100, increasing the city's population by nearly 50 percent at times.

"The motels are full ... and the firefight-

ers are shopping locally," said Grant County Chamber of Commerce Office Manager Tammy Bremner. "When I go downtown, the businesses are really busy, and I think it's directly related to that."

In general, grocery, convenience and hardware stores reported a modest increase in business that they credit to the firefighters' presence.

A significant number of locals preparing for the worst or trying to rebuild has also resulted in increased business.

Those who reported an increase in sales to locals were careful to say they wish the fire and sales increase had never happened.

The Ace Hardware store in John Day "sold a ton of hoses and sprinklers," when the fire first started, said employee Brandy Whitmore. The store has also sold a lot of flashlights, batteries and generators and "the firefighters bought all of our socks."

But the store is also giving a lot away to locals impacted by the fire, added manager Darren Pettyjohn. "We're doing a lot of business, but

See VISIT, Page A10



The Eagle/Sean Ellis

A customer buys some hardware supplies at Prairie Hardware and Gifts in Prairie City. The store is among many in the area that have seen an increase in business since the Canyon Creek Complex fire began.

Grant County Fly-In canceled

Blue Mountain Eagle

JOHN DAY — This year's Grant County Fly-In, scheduled for Saturday, has been canceled due to the recent wildfire activity.

Grant County Regional Airport Manager Patrick Bentz said he made the decision after a number of conversations with people and groups involved with the annual event.

"The primary reason is out of respect and sympathy for those who have lost their homes, and for all the volunteers who have been donating their time in support of those suffering loss," said Bentz.

The event will not be rescheduled, although Bentz said they may host an upcoming event with a raffle drawing for free airplane rides. The Airport Commission will discuss that possibility at their next meeting, Wednesday, Oct. 14.

The day Grant County battled its 'Katrina'

Canyon City firefighters recall the Aug. 14 blaze

By Angel Carpenter
Blue Mountain Eagle

CANYON CITY — When fierce winds fanned a blaze of destruction through Canyon Creek on Aug. 14, Grant County's volunteer firefighters put their lives on hold — and on the line — to protect homes and property.

Canyon City Fire Chief Matt Turner and volunteer firefighter Charlie Caughlin were among those who left their jobs and ran to the fire.

"I haven't seen anything like this in my last 26 years of firefighting," said Turner, adding people have referred the Canyon Creek Complex as "Grant County's Katrina."

Turner is a Level 2 firefighter and has worked fires since 1989. Caughlin is also a Level 2 firefighter, who joined in 1995. A Level 2 rating requires 128

hours of training, in addition to classes.

You may know the story by now, but you may not have heard it from the people who were there. A lightning storm blew through the Malheur National Forest, beginning at 4 a.m. on Aug. 12. By the afternoon there were

"I haven't seen anything like this in my last 26 years of firefighting."

Matt Turner
Canyon City fire chief

12 new fire starts, Turner said.

A day later, the Berry Creek fire was burning in the Canyon Creek range of the Strawberry Mountain Wilderness near homes, and incident 270 (later called Mason Spring), east of Starr Ridge Campground, measured at 5-10 acres in size. Turner and Canyon City volunteer firefighter Greg Bremner took a test drive in the city's recently

acquired Type 6 engine, a brush rig, to a spot near Starr Ridge off Highway 395.

They watched as aircraft pilots dropped retardant on the fires.

"From where we were, we could see the Berry fire and the Mason Spring fire, about 7 miles apart," Turner said. "I thought it might grow together in two to three days, as a possibility. We always plan 'what if.'"

Then came Aug. 14. The weather and whipping winds combined perfectly with the topography of the canyon, and there was an immediate

danger to homes along Highway 395 and all of Canyon City.

"We got paged out by the federal forestry," he said. "They called me for structure protection up the canyon — he wanted as many engines up there as possible so that if something did happen, we were in place to protect homes."

See RECALL, Page A10

