

Weekend blazes contained as Rail Fire grows

Blue Mountain Eagle

Lightning strikes over the weekend ignited four fires in the Malheur National Forest, while the Rail Fire, southwest of Unity, continues to grow.

Two fires were reported in the Monument Rock Wilderness Area with another two in the Emigrant Creek Ranger District.

A 63-acre fire near Lunch Creek has been surrounded by fire lines created by three fire crews who are continuing mop up efforts. A quarter-acre fire, located southwest of Monument Rock Wilderness Area, is reported as contained.

Both fires in the Emigrant Creek Area have been contained, one at 2.5 acres and the other at half an acre.

The 10,702-acre Rail Fire has entered the Monument Rock Wilderness Area and is being battled by 765 people: 26 crews, 10 dozers, 29 engines, 19 water tenders and seven helicopters. The fire, which started July 31, is 10-percent con-

tained, but cool weather and cloud cover have given firefighters more time to construct and improve fire lines as well as prepare for burnout operations.

A small firefighting camp has been set up near the Sheep Creek Trailhead, and mop up operations will begin in areas where the fire is not expected to grow.

Chainsaw and campfire use are being restricted in the Malheur National Forest as the Industrial Fire Precaution Level is at three, and the fire danger rating remains at high. For more information on the restrictions, contact any of the following forest offices: Malheur National Forest Supervisor and Blue Mountain Ranger District office, 541-575-3000; Prairie City Ranger District, 541-820-3800; Emigrant Creek Ranger District, 541-573-4300.

To report a wildfire, call John Day Interagency Dispatch Center at 541-575-1321 or the Burns Interagency Dispatch center at 541-573-1000.



Contributed photo/U.S. Forest Service

Fire crews have constructed fire line around the entire 63-acre Canteen Creek Fire in the Monument Rock Wilderness Area.

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Ferguson said the threat of massive flooding has subsided significantly since last year and he believes the flood mitigation work done by the county has provided the area some significant protection.

However, the work is only a temporary fix, and the sandbags, dikes and berms will have to be removed in five years. The county will now weigh different alternatives to provide a long-term fix to protect the area against major flooding, Ferguson said.

He believes the best fix is to conduct major dredging in the creek to lower the water table in key areas. That type of project would cost several million dollars and likely be challenged by environmental groups, he added.

But that type of project would provide the most flood protection, and it would also improve fish passage for protected steelhead and bull trout, Ferguson said.

"We can't ever bring that creek back to a pristine mountain system ... but we can solve the hydraulic problems and improve fish passage in there in the process," he said. "We need to keep pushing on this."

A major undertaking by the U.S.

Forest Service to restore vast swaths of forest damaged by the fire is mostly complete, said Malheur National Forest supervisor Steve Beverlin.

The work done in that project was based on recommendations by a specialized Forest Service team known as the Burned Area Emergency Response team.

It included restoring miles of trails and drainage ditches, repairing and modifying culverts and applying wood mulch treatments on severely burned hillsides to absorb and slow runoff.

A major focus of the work was on helping vegetation recover and protecting hill slopes and riparian areas, as well as protecting human safety and cultural and heritage sites.

The BAER team report recommended mulching about 3,410 acres within the burned area but the Forest Service ended up only mulching 329 acres.

When Forest Service staff saw the significant plant growth occurring on hill slopes this spring, they advised that further mulching treatments were not necessary, said Amy Unthank, a Forest Service natural resources and planning staff officer.

"We mulched the high-risk areas, the steepest areas we thought would lead to the most damage from runoff,"

Unthank said. "We only mulched a small area of what we proposed."

A lot of warning signs were posted to warn people of hazards in the burned area and damaged guard rails and trees were removed along roads, trails and campgrounds.

Stream channels were treated to protect fish habitat.

Fourteen log jams were placed in streams to prevent stream blowouts and protect fish habitat.

Some damaged trees that still had their root balls attached were placed in streams to slow the velocity of the water and help catch debris and sediment and improve stream banks.

"That helps put soils back in the creek and build back the stream bank instead of having it all eroding downstream," Beverlin said.

The forest restoration project included replanting thousands of acres.

The money to achieve the work recommended by the BAER team must be spent within one year, a deadline that is coming up next month. The vast majority of that work will be completed within that one-year time frame and an extension can be sought for any work not accomplished due to valid reasons, Beverlin said.

Ongoing forest restoration work involving funding outside the BAER project includes monitoring the suc-

cess of the mulching treatments as well as conducting forest patrols after major storms to check how the improvements are working, Beverlin said.

If necessary, more erosion control work will be conducted, he said.

Invasive weed surveys will continue to be conducted, with treatments occurring if necessary.

A lot of trees will be planted in the burned area this year, Unthank said, and "we will monitor the area to determine where additional work might be needed in the future as the watershed recovers and heals."

The Forest Service's Pacific Northwest regional office provided \$360,000 toward the forest restoration work, while the national Forest Service office provided \$3.8 million for the mulching treatments, though much of that money won't be spent.

Though it will take the forest a generation to return to its pre-fire state, there is new vegetative growth all across the burned area, and the riparian areas are looking better, Beverlin said.

"That's really encouraging," he said.

The Oregon Water Resources Department installed an early flood warning stream gaging station in the Vance Creek drainage.

The fire also damaged parts of Highway 395 South, and a major Oregon

Department of Transportation project repaired damaged pavement as well as signs and guardrails.

The biggest part of that ODOT project was significantly widening and improving the Vance Creek and Sheep Gulch culverts that run under the highway.

Because of the Forest Service forecast showing the possibility of massive flooding during a major storm event, the department was concerned the culverts couldn't handle the water, and debris and would plug and wipe out parts of the road, said ODOT public information officer Tom Strandberg.


The highway was closed for 10 days in November while road crews replaced both culverts with much larger ones.

"It was a huge effort," Strandberg said. "We didn't want to have something that would wash away the roadway and significantly impact traffic for a long time."

The department also coordinated a project to cut down and remove hundreds of trees that were burned by the fire and created hazards.

Beverlin said the entire post-fire restoration effort has been a partnership between the Forest Service, ODOT, local officials and private landowners.

"It's really been a whole community effort," he said. "I think it's been a very successful project."








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More than 1,000 tons of hay donated for livestock

By Sean Ellis

For the Blue Mountain Eagle

When the Canyon Creek Complex fire tore through this area last summer, scorching significant portions of grazing land, Prairie City Mayor Jim Hamsher and others put out an urgent request for hay donations to feed the animals affected by the loss of grazing land or displaced by the fire.

Help poured in fast, and it's still coming in a year later.

"We're still receiving donations," said Hamsher. "It's been really remarkable."

A little more than 1,000 tons of hay has been donated to help feed livestock, horses and other animals impacted by the fire and about 20 tons remain, as well as about \$5,000 in cash donations.

Hamsher plans to use the remaining money to purchase another semi load of hay this fall.

"We were able to help everybody out as much as they

needed," Hamsher said. "Hay is still going out to the victims."

The cattle industry is one of the local economy's most important sectors, and Hamsher said a lot of ranchers were significantly impacted by the fire, which burned 110,000 acres, a lot of it grazing land ranchers use to feed their animals.

Some ranchers lost all of their grazing allotments in the fire, and the need for animal feed was great following the fire, Hamsher said. Many ranchers won't be allowed to return to their allotments for several years while the land heals.

Grant County rancher Alec Oliver said the fire took out a

lot of summer grazing land.

"It affected quite a few people," he said of the fire, and the donated hay "definitely helped a lot of people that needed it."

The response to the call for help was quick, and donations came in from all over Oregon as well as other states. Two semi-loads of alfalfa hay, about 60 tons, was brought in from Grand Junction, Colorado.

"Most of the hay, I'd say about 98 percent, came in from outside the county," Hamsher said. "It was very generous."

Hamsher was also able to get a \$5,000 grant from the Humane Society of the United States to help feed displaced horses and was able to purchase a semi-load of hay with that money.

The need has been great, and people have even picked up feed for goats and sheep, he added.

"When this first started, I didn't think I'd ever receive that much hay or that it would last that long," Hamsher said.

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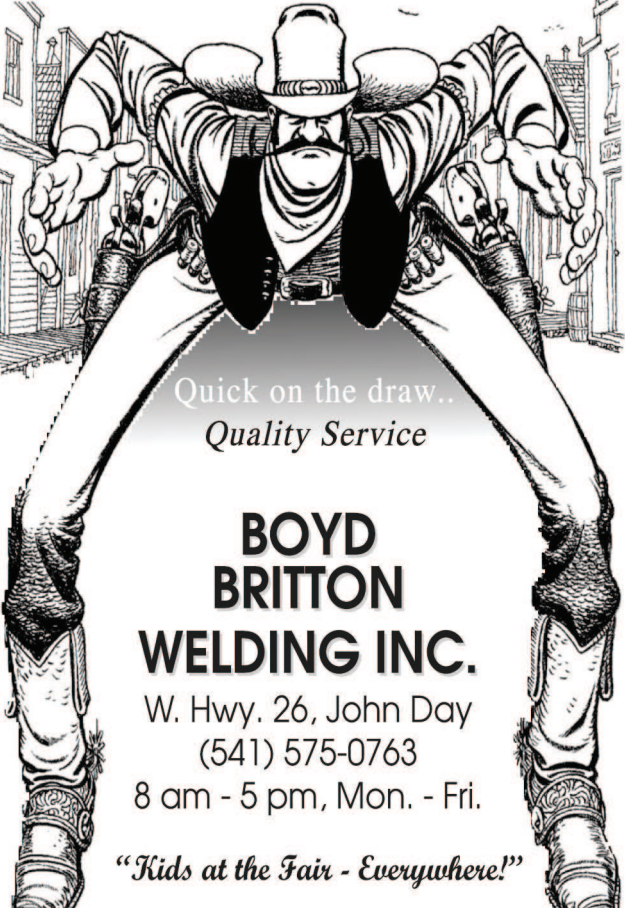
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