

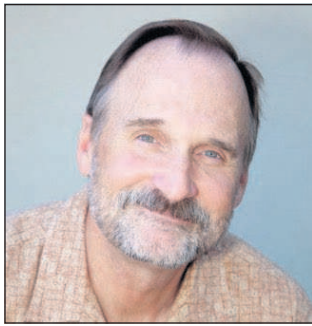
MEGAFIRES

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3,000-acre inferno that destroyed 29 homes and three commercial businesses.

Less than two months later, Eastern Oregon would face a trio of monstrous fires: the Canyon Creek Complex near John Day, Grizzly Bear Complex outside of Troy and Cornet-Windy Ridge Fire in Baker County. All together, those fires would torch nearly 300,000 acres, and another 43 homes would burn in Canyon Creek.

The Forest Service spent \$2.1 billion fighting fires throughout the region, though Hessburg said the toll was much higher in reality. Suppression costs are just one piece of the puzzle, he said. Combined with rebuilding infrastructure, lost property values and business revenue, the



Paul Hessburg

actual cost figures to be more than \$50 billion.

"As taxpayers, this should concern all of us," he said.

Getting to the root of modern megafires requires a look back at history. In 1905, President Theodore Roosevelt and forester Gifford Pinchot created the Forest Service. Five years later, the Great Fire of 1910 burned roughly 3 million acres across northeast Washington, northern Idaho and western Montana.

From then on, Hessburg said the Forest Service pledged to fight fires at all costs. It took about 25 years for the agency to get really good at fire suppression, and by 1934 the agency adopted the so-called 10 a.m. policy, which ordered every fire be put out by 10 a.m. the day after it was first reported.

The result, Hessburg said, has been decades of fire exclusion on the landscape, which has changed the composition of the forests to overly dense and crowded with vegetation. Past logging practices also removed older and larger trees from the forest, encouraging the growth of less fire-resilient species.

"This is when our forests started to become sick and unhealthy," Hessburg said.

Comparing historical and current photos, Hessburg pointed out how forests used to be a patchy mosaic of large

trees and open grassy meadows, which kept fires low to the ground and low in intensity. Now forest fires have much more fuel to consume and climb their way up into the canopy of tree stands.

Climate change is also making summers warmer and extending fire season by months, Hessburg said, turning the forests into a powder keg. By 2050, data show the West could experience two or three times as much fire as it does now.

"Even the most conservative forecasts are pretty darn dire," he said.

Fire suppression alone is an incomplete solution, Hessburg said. What needs to happen is large-scale rehabilitation of the forests and rangeland using a variety of management tools.

It will be an immense job, as Oregon and Washington have a combined 11.6 million

acres in need of treatment to restore better fire behavior.

The first and perhaps most important step, Hessburg said, is restoring fire to its natural role on the landscape. He pointed to things like prescribed burns and managed wildfires, where a naturally caused, low-intensity blaze is allowed to run its natural course.

Fire is the most important natural process for forests in the West, Hessburg said. Not only does it increase future resilience, but some species depend on wildfire for survival — lodgepole pine cones will only open after a fire, while certain types of birds make their habitat in burned snags.

Mechanical thinning can also be a valuable tool if it's done in the right places, Hessburg said. The timber industry has a role to play, using the wood to make products such as lumber, chips and biomass for power plants.

Homeowners who live in the woods also need to consider thinning around their homes in an effort to keep their properties safer, Hessburg said. The general rule of thumb is a 30-foot buffer of defensible space.

"Continued development in the wildland-urban interface is putting a whole lot of stress on our firefighters," Hessburg said.

The Oregon Department of Forestry does have a program to work with homeowners on "firescaping" projects, and reimburse up to 75 percent of the cost.

By being proactive instead of reactive, Hessburg said local agencies and communities can help reduce the trend of megafires and restore forest and rangeland health.

"It's up to us," he said. "The question is, how do you want your fire and your smoke?"



The Eagle/Rylan Boggs

Brynn Elizabeth works on a painting at her studio. The John Day artist sells her work internationally.

ARTIST

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She will sketch with pencil or paint and continue to add layers. Each painting has 12 to 20 layers and can take a week to a couple months to complete.

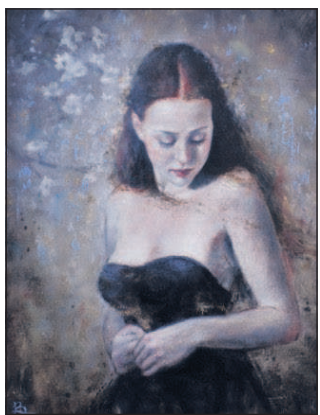
Kim Randleas, another local painter, described Brynn's work as having "a very ethereal quality."

"It's really dreamlike with vibrant colors," she said. "They kind of pull you in and make you want to know this person."

Randleas, who said she met Elizabeth when she was a barista at Station 62, complimented Elizabeth on her use of color and subjects.

"Right from the beginning, she did really well," Randleas said. "I'm excited to see what she does from here because she's so young."

Much of Elizabeth's



"Deliberation" by Brynn Elizabeth.

work is done for herself, but she also works occasional commissioned pieces. While they're not always what she prefers to paint, at the end of the day, it's still painting.

"This is what I've always wanted to do. I feel like this is what I'm supposed to be doing," she said. "It's easier to get out of bed when you're excited to go do what you love to do."

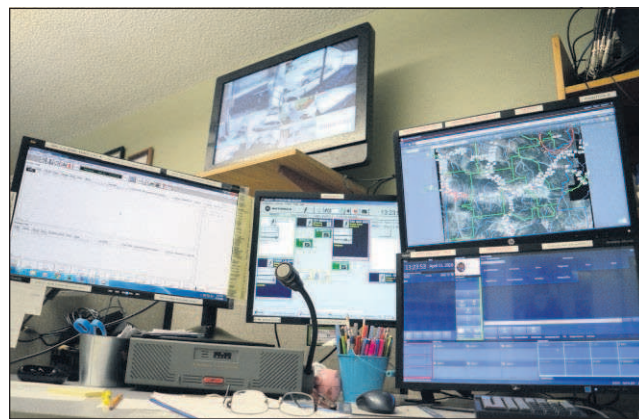
911

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for John Day residents to subsidize regional services for other tax jurisdictions," Green wrote in a memo to the John Day City Council.

He has proposed an inter-agency cost-sharing agreement to maintain the facility until a possible 911 tax reform package could be passed by the Legislature in 2019 to provide more funding to the center.

The three-year cost-sharing agreement would divide the roughly \$200,000 deficit equally among all cities within the county, with Grant County responsible for covering those who live outside of city limits. With the deficit equaling \$26.88 per person, each jurisdiction would pay that amount multiplied by its population. Granite, with a population of 40, would pay \$1,075, and Grant County, with an unincorporated population of 2,805, would pay \$75,403, while John Day would cover its share of \$46,640.



Eagle file photo

A desk in the John Day dispatch center includes a map monitor, a radio monitor, a multi-use monitor, a keyboard, a radio, a telephone and a monitor displaying cameras on the premises.

Green said the League of Oregon Cities and Association of Oregon Counties are lobbying for 911 tax reform and will likely succeed in 2019.

The 911 tax was last increased in 1995. John Day City Councilor Paul Smith described the current rate as a "relic." All phone users pay 75 cents per month per line on their bills each month, and the funds are distributed to dispatch centers based on the number of connections they serve.

If the tax were increased to \$1.50 per line, the dispatch center would receive about \$270,000 in additional funding, resulting in a budget surplus instead of a deficit.

Even if the tax is not increased — or if the other cities and the county decline to participate in the cost-sharing agreement — Green said requesting voter approval for a local option levy, collected with property taxes, could be another way to maintain the lo-

cal center. The levy, similar to a bond, could cover the current deficit by charging about 36 cents per \$1,000 of assessed property value to all county residents. Green said a sunset provision could be included to reduce or eliminate the levy if state tax revenues increased.

County Judge Scott Myers and County Commissioner Boyd Britton voiced support for the levy during a March 1 court meeting. Britton said he also liked the sunset provision.

Without increased tax funding, an interagency agreement or a local option levy, Green said the city would need to evaluate the feasibility of merging its dispatch services into a regional service, such as Frontier Regional Dispatch center in Condon. This would require negotiating agreements with external agencies and improving long-haul radio relays, he said.

Service quality and response time for emergency units could potentially suffer due to a lack of familiarity with the area, Green said, and outsourcing the service would result in the loss of six local jobs.

TAXES

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rate or dollar amount paid in addition to the district's permanent rate and are collected annually at the same time.

Unless the election is held in May or November, at least 50 percent of registered voters must cast a vote in the election.

Local option taxes can be approved for a maximum of

five years for general operations, or for the lesser of 10 years or the useful life of the asset for capital projects.

These taxes are subject to the Measure 5 maximum tax limits of \$15 per \$1,000 of real market property value — up to \$10 for general government and \$5 for education — so no additional taxes would be levied on properties that have already reached the limit. Local option taxes are also the first to be cut when these limits are reached.

General obligation bonds

Cities, counties and some special districts can also request voter approval to enter into debt for capital projects through the issuance of general obligation bonds to be repaid with interest. The district receives the funding upfront and collects additional taxes from property owners each year to make annual debt payments.

Unlike local option taxes, general obligation bonds are not subject to the Measure 5 limits, so the tax levied on

a property may exceed \$15 per \$1,000. Like local option taxes, except in May and November elections, at least 50 percent of registered voters must vote on the measure.

Proceeds from bond levies can only be used for the purpose stated in the ballot measure.

Editor's note: This is the third entry in the Eagle's 2017 "Your Taxes" series, in which we will examine all 27 taxing districts in Grant County so you know where your property taxes are going.

1st Annual CASA St. Patrick's Day Celebration

Prime Rib Dinner

Friday March 17th, 2017

John Day Elk's Lodge

John Day, Oregon

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 Dinner Starts at 6:30

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