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Gordon Larson watches a stream go by on his Grant County ranch.

OPB Photo/Emily Cureton

Gabbard new John Day fire chief

By Rudy Diaz
Blue Mountain Eagle

Don Gabbard is the new John Day Fire Chief, replacing Ron Smith.

Gabbard has more than 20 years of experience in the field and has spent 13 years at the John Day Fire Department. He has held several positions in the department, including lieutenant and assistant chief.



Don Gabbard

"I was first interested in the fire service when I was in the Navy," Gabbard said. "I was a member of the shipboard firefighting squad on the USS Enterprise and then I worked on a reserve in California for several years after I got out of the Navy."

After his time in California, Gabbard joined Grayback Forestry and worked for 18 years as a wildland firefighter.

Many volunteer firefighters in John Day have not had much experience with structure fires since few happen each year, said Smith, who retired from the position as chief. But Smith is excited Gabbard has a background in fighting structure fires as well.

"If I was walking away with nobody to take my place, I probably would have stayed chief another two or three years," Smith said. "I can't walk away from my community, leaving the department without the leadership that it needs. But Don is great at all of it."

One fire in the most testing moments of Gabbard's career was the 2015 Canyon Creek Complex Fire. That fire destroyed 43 homes, burned more than 110,000 acres and cost about \$31 million to suppress, according to the U.S. Forest Service.

Smith prioritized firefighter safety and Gabbard said he plans to continue that legacy.

"I am really honored to be able to serve the community," Gabbard said.

The HIGH COST of DISSENT in GRANT COUNTY

By Emily Cureton
Oregon Public Broadcasting

JOHN DAY — Gordon Larson's world burned in 2015.

His ranch lost timber, livestock and infrastructure. His family's house narrowly escaped the Canyon Creek Fire. Forty-three other homes in his community weren't so lucky.

More than four years later, Larson's property shows a resolve to stay: new fences, a new water system and charred stumps in every direction.

"What we love about it is a sense of solitude and a sense of belonging to something bigger than you," Larson said.

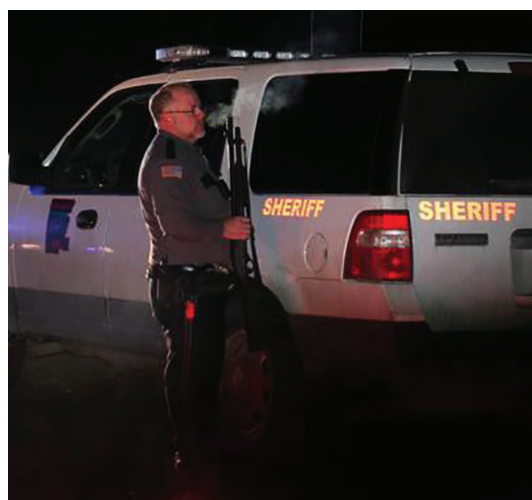
But after all the effort to recover, he and his wife have talked about leaving their home of more than 20 years.

And not because they're afraid of wildfire. "The only reason is because we have a group of extremists led by a sheriff," said the 55-year-old former police officer.

In 2014, Larson retired as an area commander for the Oregon State Police after a 27-year career. He volunteered for 12 years on the Grant County School Board. Last year, he ran for a seat on the county commission, "and I've regretted it every day since then because it began this nightmare," he said.

His opponent was Sam Palmer, younger brother of the most controversial law enforcement official in the region, Grant County Sheriff Glenn Palmer.

Larson lost the election decisively. During the campaign, the sheriff reported Larson for a timber theft that forest managers say never happened, and the sheriff's supporters chal-



OPB File Photo

Grant County Sheriff Glenn Palmer stands at a roadblock on Highway 395 near Seneca in a 2016 file photo.

lenged his water rights.

It's not the first time this sheriff stands accused of using the power of his office, and the zeal of his supporters, to target people who criticize his activism. Larson is the latest to have a bitter feud with Palmer in an isolated community, where three out of four voters voted for President Trump in 2016, and many express disdain for state regulations. Heading into the next election, the space for dissent in Grant County has narrowed around its own polarizing figure: a sheriff elected by a few thousand voters, but

supported by anti-government groups across the West, known as the Patriot Movement.

Larson said he clashed with this broader political shift to the right. Like Sheriff Palmer, he registers to vote as a Republican.

"But they want to portray me as not a good enough Republican ... or a Democrat," Larson said.

Palmer denied targeting his former law enforcement colleague.

"I've always considered Gordon a friend. When he retired he did an about-face. I don't know what I did, or whether it was the occupation tie-in," the sheriff said.

'You will all be judged in time'

The rivals agree on one thing: 2016 was a turning point. The year opened with anti-government groups taking over the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge in next-door Harney County.

In January, both Larson and Palmer went to a meeting in Grant County where occupation leaders Ammon and Ryan Bundy were invited to speak. Confusion and tension filled a packed room at the John Day Senior Center as people waited for the Bundys to arrive.

Soon, information trickled in about a confrontation with law enforcement on a snow-covered highway, 60 miles away. Instead of the invited speakers, there were prayers, and an open mic for people to state their grievances, recorded by a reporter with the Blue Mountain Eagle.

Larson was the only person to speak against

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Unemployment ticks up in Grant County

A change in direction after years of decline

By Rudy Diaz
Blue Mountain Eagle

The seasonally adjusted unemployment rate in Grant County has increased for the second straight year.

So far the average unemployment rate in 2019 for the months of January through September is 7.6%. That's a significant increase when compared to the average rate of 6.9% for the first nine months of 2018.

Unemployment rates every month in 2019 have been

worse than their counterparts a year prior — with the exception of September. That's on the heels of a period of growth from 2013-2017 where nearly every month saw gains from the year prior.

"While unemployment is on the rise, this may or may not point to the worsening of the economy," said Chris Rich, the Regional Economist. "It is too early to tell what is going on. Grant County is in a seasonal trend where it could fit into past trends."

The monthly unemployment rate in Grant County can be affected by several factors such as the time of year,

a government shutdown, the timing of when an employer hires or lets go of a seasonal worker, an increase in retirements or people entering the work force. In a small county, the small amount of people in the workforce leads to rates that can be easily swayed.

The number of employed people in Grant County was on a steady decline from 1992-2008, when the number dipped from 3,951 to 2,900. Over the last decade, those losses have steadied.

But a rise in the unemployment rate isn't always a bad thing. There are several silver linings to consider, said Rich.

"Historically, the Grant County unemployment rate is still low when compared to the past," Rich said. "The numbers aren't speaking to a large upswing in unemployed people. Higher unemployment rates also lead to more employment opportunities."

Grant County gained 70 jobs from August 2018 to August 2019. The public sector added 10 jobs in federal government while the private sector added 60 jobs, led by gains in mining and logging.

The monthly employment numbers and unemployment rates for 2019 are subject for revision at the end of the year.

