

Incident commander discusses Elbow Creek Fire strategy

By Ronald Bond
EO Media Group

Link Smith has fought fire in every portion of Oregon except for the northeastern corner.

He's now coordinating the attack on the Elbow Creek Fire burning southwest of Troy.

Smith is the incident commander for the Type 1 Oregon Department of Forestry Incident Management Team 3 that has been on the scene trying to quench the Elbow Creek Fire since Sunday morning, July 18.

Smith, the district forester for the Western Land District west of Eugene, is a veteran firefighter. He said during an interview with the Chieftain July 20 this is his 37th year fighting fire, his 29th with the ODF and his eighth as an incident commander.

He's faced some of the state's biggest blazes, as well. Smith was the IC on the Holiday Farm Fire, which burned more than 173,000 acres east of Eugene and Springfield in 2020.

The Elbow Creek Fire, while just over 1/10th the size of the Holiday Farm Fire at 18,599 acres as of last week, presents its own challenges. While the Holiday Farm Fire was impacted heavily by wind, it's been the terrain, he said, that has been difficult at Elbow Creek.

"Every fire is different just based on the environment and weather conditions," he said. "You look at Holiday Farm last year, it was wind-driven, a very significant wind event, which is challenging in itself because of the rate of spread, but you knew where it was going. The wind's blowing from one direction and pushing on the fire. Here, what's challenging about it is it's fuel-driven and (you face) smoke, and drainages. You don't know which way the wind is going to blow up these drainages."

He said that the deep, steep drainages and canyons in the area where the fire is burning makes trying to attack it



EO Media Group/Ronald Bond
Incident Commander Link Smith, left, and Deputy IC Les Hallman speak in Wallowa Tuesday, July 20, during a community meeting on the Elbow Creek Fire.

difficult.

"The Holiday Farm Fire, you could reach everywhere," he said. "These canyons are so deep, it's really challenging to get people down into them."

The canyons' depth and steepness have even limited one of the tactics Smith likes to employ — fighting fire at night.

"It's a really good time to catch a fire, but it's too steep and too dangerous to put firefighters in a draw at night time here, so that takes away one of our typical strategies simply because of geography," he said.

In explaining firefighting and tactics, he said there is a benefit to having air support, but manpower on the ground is what matters.

"People like to think, 'Just bring in more helicopters or air tankers.' They slow the fire, (but) you have to have boots on the ground to really put it out," he said. "Even if it rains, it buys you an opportunity. I like to tell people we take advantage of opportunities. If we can get an air tanker in there and slow it down, maybe we can chip away at a line. It's all about containment, and in this country it's hard to contain a fire."

A contained portion of a fire, he said, is where a border containment line is holding to the point the crew feels confident they could leave that portion and it would no longer spread.

"We're estimating if we walked away from it, we're estimating 15% of that line we have in, it wouldn't expand," he said when explaining the containment at the time, which was 15%. "As we continue to strengthen those lines, the containment goes up. Before we leave here it will be at 100%."

The terrain, he said, dictates what strategy is put in place, but he added the team will "chisel away" putting a border around the fire until it's handled.

"What's your first priority? Maybe it's a little section of line, but you have to button that up. We have people throughout the fire, we'll really put an emphasis on one of those fronts, catch that one, and (then) we'll put emphasis on another one, and just chisel away at it."

The blaze Smith worked on last year was the largest he had ever been on, yet he's stunned by the current fire situation.

"It's crazy the size of fires right now. Never seen anything like it," he said. "It's more fires, and they're all big fires."

Ukiah wolf pack attacks sheep herd on Mount Emily

By Katy Nesbitt
For EO Media Group

Nine confirmed attacks on lambs were attributed to the Ukiah Pack on private land 8 miles south of Meacham — the first known report of this pack interacting with livestock.

According to an Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife report, a sheep herder in the Kamela area of Mount Emily notified a ranch hand on July 4 that sheep had scattered from around their bedding area near his trailer the previous evening.

That same morning, the report said, a member of the public found two dead ewes and one dead lamb on the same timbered, privately owned pasture and notified the ranch hand. An addi-



Contributed photo/Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife

Nine confirmed attacks on lambs were attributed to the Ukiah Pack on private land 8 miles south of Meacham — the first known report of this pack interacting with livestock.

tional three dead lambs, one dead ewe and two injured lambs were discovered, one of which wasn't found until July 7. All of the animals are believed to have been

injured or killed on the evening of July 3.

Of the dead sheep, one was mostly consumed, two were completely intact, two were mostly intact and two were partially consumed. Tracks of multiple wolves were found near several of the carcasses. GPS data located a radio-collared Ukiah wolf within 150 yards around the time of the attack where three of the sheep carcasses were found.

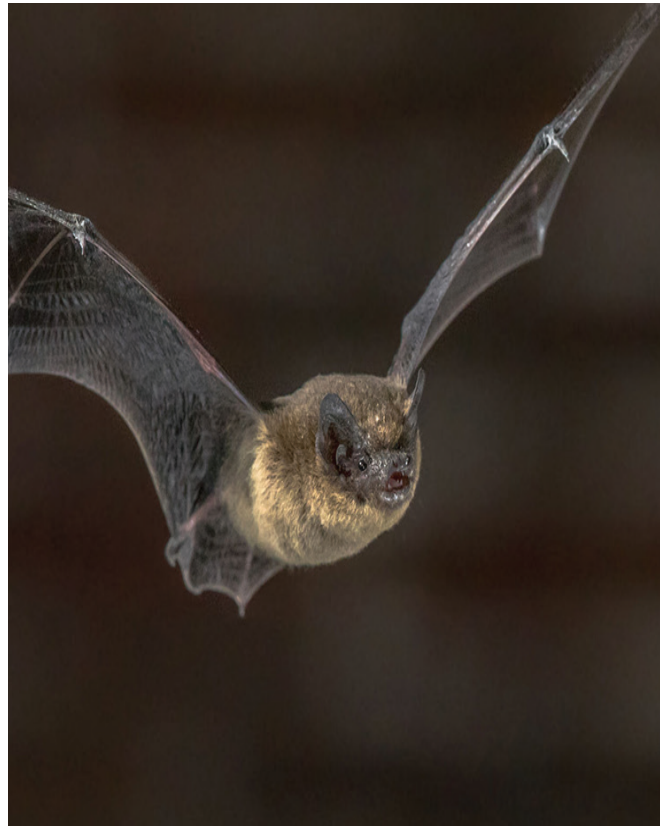
The Ukiah Pack was first identified in 2020 with six members, according to ODFW's annual wolf report. The pack includes the collared breeding male, OR60, and the collared breeding female, OR107. It's yet unknown whether or not the pair had pups this year, according to Greg Rimbach, Pendleton district biologist.

"Our plans are to ascertain this information for breeding status in the next few weeks with aerial flights and trail cameras," Rimbach said.

There have been as many as 25 areas of known wolf activity in the Blue and Wallowa mountains north of Interstate 84 and six areas in the Blue Mountains south of Interstate 84 since wolves moved into Northeast Oregon from Idaho. Rimbach said biologists have worked with the rancher who lost the sheep earlier this month for many years to reduce conflict with wolves.

"We have notified the livestock producer of geographical pack activity and encouraged the continuing use of electrified night penning," he said.

Livestock losses and injuries confirmed by state biologists to be caused by wolves qualify the owner to financial compensation through a program managed by the Oregon Department of Agriculture. Last year, Union County producers were paid \$1,330 for dead or injured animals. The county also received \$16,000 to be used for non-lethal deterrents to protect livestock.



In this stock photo, a bat flies out of a church attic.

123RF

Rabid bat found in Grant County prompts health officials to urge caution

By Dylan Jefferies
EO Media Group

This week, a bat found in Grant County tested positive for rabies, prompting state health officials to urge residents to take precautions against the deadly disease.

Health officials have three recommendations: Keep children and pets away from bats, avoid any physical contact with stray wildlife and make sure to vaccinate all cats, dogs and ferrets against rabies.

Rabies is transmitted through the bites and scratches of an infected animal, according to health officials.

Dogs, cats and ferrets can be vaccinated against rabies at 3 to 6 months of age. After initial vaccination, they need a booster shot after one year and another booster every three years.

Emilio Debess, public health veterinarian for the Oregon Health Authority, said seven bats tested positive for rabies in Oregon this year: four in Lane County, one in Josephine County, one in Grant County and one in Deschutes County.

"There's always an uptick of rabies activity in the summertime," Debess said. "This case is a great reminder not to pick up dead or injured bats due to possible exposure and to keep pets vaccinated."

According to Debess, potentially rabid bats, dead or alive, that come into contact with people need to be sent to Oregon State University's Veterinary Lab in Corvallis for testing.

In order to test for rabies, veterinarians need to look at an animal's brain. It's a quick procedure nonetheless, Debess said.

"We test over a hundred bats every year, and usually 8-10% are positive," Debess said.

Rabies cases in animals other than bats are rare, but they do occur. Two Oregon cats tested positive for rabies in recent years, one in 2015 and one in 2017, according to an annual report put out by the Oregon Health Authority.

Additionally, a couple of Oregon goats and foxes tested positive for rabies between 2010 and 2014, prompting state health officials' enhanced surveillance of those populations.

According to the report, rabies cases in humans are exceptionally rare due to vaccinations, and the disease is 100% preventable with prompt medical care.

But better safe than sorry, Debess said. Once symptoms begin, the disease is fatal.

"If you find a bat during the daylight hours, it is most likely not healthy and should be avoided," Debess said. "Bats suffering from rabies will normally bite in self-defense and pose little threat to people who do not handle them."

If a bat bites a person or pet, promptly report it to Grant County Health Department at 541-575-0429 and report the bite to a medical provider.

Blue Mountain Eagle reporter Steven Mitchell contributed to this report.

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