

Earlier, hotter, bigger and faster fires are fueling historic fire season

By Gary A. Warner
Oregon Capital Bureau

Oregon is experiencing August-like fire danger conditions in mid-July, creating the likelihood of a historic fire season for the second year in a row.

Nearly 500,000 acres have burned from nearly 1,000 fires this year, said Doug Grafe, chief of fire protection for the Oregon Department of Forestry during a Tuesday press call on current fire conditions.

Most fires are caught at under 10 acres, but each has the potential to become a major blaze, fire officials said.

Gov. Kate Brown and state fire response officials warned that conditions were extreme for fire danger that would last for at least three more months. Oregon residents in nearly every point in the state needed to prepare now for how to handle a wildfire emergency, they said.

"Last year's historic fire season taught us that being prepared can truly be the difference between life and death," Brown said.

Brown said the state was facing two big public health challenges this summer, as it had last year: fires with smoke and COVID-19. She said the fires and a recent uptick in COVID-19 infections driven by the new delta variant would not change her plans to have county health

officials be the front lines on the pandemic.

A lack of rain and searing summer temperatures have officials scanning the state for new sparks.

Severe drought conditions cover 90% of the state, with 19 counties under drought emergency declarations. The calendar for fire season was accelerated by the record-breaking temperatures at the end of June that hit 117 in Salem and 118 — a state record — in Hermiston.

As of 1 p.m. on Tuesday, the state reported 22 active fires and a total area burned this season of 405,567 acres.

Oregon is fighting the largest wildfire in the nation, the 387,000-acre and growing Bootleg Fire in Fremont-Winema National Forest in southern Oregon.

The flames have destroyed 67 residences and 117 other buildings. Only one injury has been reported.

The Bootleg Fire is 30% contained, with protection of towns a top priority. But fire officials said it is possible that up to 100,000 more acres could burn.

"The fire is going to be on the landscape for a long time," Grafe said.

If it hits the top end of that estimate, the Bootleg Fire would join two other Oregon fires that have burned over 500,000 acres this century.



Contributed photo/Oregon Department of Forestry

This photo provided by the Oregon Department of Forestry shows a firefighting tanker making a retardant drop over the Grandview Fire near Sisters on Sunday, July 11.

The Long Draw Fire in Malheur County in 2012 burned just over 550,000 acres in 2012. The Biscuit Fire in the Rogue River-Siskiyou National Forest burned just over 500,000 acres in 2002.

Other current blazes around the state remain dangerous, but firefighters are getting the upper hand.

State Fire Marshal Mariana Ruiz-Temple pointed to the Grandview Fire north of Sisters in Deschutes County that has burned 6,000 acres as an example of how the state hopes to contain fires early.

An infusion of state funding and updated strategic plans for deploying forces around the state allowed for the pre-positioning of firefighting units and equipment.

The call for a surge of addi-

tional resources from local and regional firefighting units kept the blaze away from populated areas.

The fire is now 72% contained.

"This is a success story," Ruiz-Temple said. "The threat to the community was pretty significant."

Grafe said he was also confident that firefighters will be able to control the battle against the Elbow Creek Fire in Wallowa County in the northeast corner of the state.

Though it has burned over 16,400 acres, the fire is 15% contained.

"They are feeling a bit more confident," Grafe said. "The next 48 hours will be a turning point."

Progress has also been made

on the Jack Fire in southern Oregon, though it would likely burn for a long time because of the location and the ability of firefighters to get to the flames.

Commanders on the scene feel "comfortable moving in the right direction," Grafe said.

A smaller burn causing concern is the 156-acre Bruer Fire, near Santiam Canyon. The terrain is very steep, making access to the flames difficult. One firefighter was hit in the helmet by rolling rocks, but was not significantly injured. The fire is 10% contained.

"I think this one will also be on the landscape for a while," Grafe said.

Grafe said the fire season had an abnormally early beginning with the Bull Springs Fire near Bend in March.

It was a warning that the state would be in for a protracted battle a year after wildfires burned over 1 million acres and destroyed thousands of homes during the Labor Day fires of 2020.

"We are facing a long, difficult fire season," Grafe said.

Brown said she wasn't considering major changes in her June 30 decision to transfer decision-making on COVID-19 policy and abatement to counties.

"We are moving to a more localized, traditional approach," Brown said.

The Oregon Health Author-

ity reported late Monday that COVID-19 cases statewide were up 30.8% for the period covering July 4 to July 17. The number of cases per 100,000 resident rose to 77.6 from 59.3. The percentage of positive tests rose to 3.8%, up from 3.1%.

Most of Oregon's 36 counties showed an increase in infections on the state's risk management website.

Counties showing a drop in infections included Baker, Curry, Gilliam, Hood River, Jefferson, Polk and Union. Wheeler, Grant and Harney stayed the same.

Some of the highest numbers were in Umatilla County, with the rate of cases per 100,000 rising from 202.5 to 279.8. The positive test rate of 12.4% was more than three times the state average. Only neighboring Morrow County had a higher positive test rate: 14.7%.

Brown said OHA would monitor hospital capacity to ensure no area is strained with COVID-19 patients. State officials are working with local agencies to ensure they have the resources they need.

"The best tool we have for fighting this virus is vaccination," Brown said.

Authorities said to monitor oralert.gov for the latest emergency updates. Information is also available at wildfire.oregon.gov.

Removal of barred owls slows decline of iconic spotted owls

By Sean Nealon
Oregon State University

A 17-year study in Oregon, Washington and California found that removal of invasive barred owls arrested the population decline of the northern spotted owl, a native species threatened by invading barred owls and the loss of old-forest habitats.

The conservation and management of northern spotted owls became one of the largest and most visible wildlife conservation issues in United States history after the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service listed the spotted owl as threatened under the Endangered Species Act in 1990 because of rapid declines in the owl's old-forest habitats. Four years later, the Northwest Forest Plan was adopted and reduced the rate of logging of old-growth forests on federal lands.

Despite more than 30 years of protection, spotted owl populations have continued to decline, with steepest declines observed in the past 10 years. Long-term monitoring of spotted owl populations across the species' range identified rapid increases in the population of invasive barred owls as a primary reason for those declines, the researchers said.

The study published this week in the journal *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* by scientists at the U.S. Geological Survey, Oregon State University and several other entities is the first to look at the wide-scale impact of barred owls on populations of spotted owls in the Pacific Northwest.

The study focused on two sites in northern Califor-

nia, two in Oregon and one in Washington and found that spotted owl populations stabilized in all study areas where the researchers lethally removed barred owls (0.2% decline per year on average) but continued to decline sharply in areas without removals (12.1% decline per year on average.)

The findings in the new paper inform future management decisions about the spotted owl population.

"This study is a promising example of successful removal and suppression of an invasive and increasingly abundant competitor, with a positive demographic response from a threatened native species," said David Wiens, the lead author of the paper who is a wildlife biologist with the USGS Forest and Rangeland Ecosystem Science Center in Corvallis and a courtesy faculty member with Oregon State's Department of Fisheries, Wildlife, and Conservation Sciences.

As a species native to eastern North America, barred owls began expanding their populations westward in the early 1900s. The newly extended range now completely overlaps that of the northern spotted owl.

While barred owls look similar to spotted owls, they are larger, have a stronger ecological impact and out-compete spotted owls for habitat and food. This competition exacerbated spotted owl population declines, which were historically triggered by loss of old-forest habitat.

Mounting concerns about the threat of barred owls prompted a barred owl removal pilot project from 2009 to 2013 in California

that concluded removal of barred owls, coupled with conservation of old forest, could slow or reverse population declines of spotted owls.

The research outlined in the study expanded the pilot project to cover a much wider geographic range and a longer time period. The new research showed that barred owl removal had a strong, positive effect on survival and population trends of spotted owls that was consistent across all five study areas.

The conservation and restoration of old forests, which has been a chief focus of recovery strategies for the northern spotted owl, is a major source of controversy in the Pacific Northwest. The barred owl invasion has exacerbated this issue, placing an even higher premium on remaining old conifer forests.

"While suppression of barred owls can be difficult, costly, and ethically challenging, improvements in vital rates and population trends of spotted owls, and perhaps other threatened wildlife, can be expected when densities of barred owls are reduced from current levels," the researchers write in the paper. "Alien predators are considered to be more harmful to prey populations than native predators, and the dynamic interactions between invasive and native predators can lead to profound changes in ecosystems, often with considerable conservation and economic impacts."

Rapidly replicating delta variant's impact not equal across Oregon

By Gary A. Warner
Oregon Capital Bureau

The highly contagious COVID-19 delta variant has caused a steep increase in the number of infections in Oregon — but with different impacts across the state.

"Oregon is open, but the pandemic is not over," said Oregon Health Director Pat Allen during a press call Thursday.

COVID-19 infections by the delta variant have doubled in the past week, leading to a new spike in total numbers. OHA reported the number of delta variant cases had risen 25% between Wednesday and Thursday alone.

The delta variant now accounts for over half of all COVID-19 cases in Oregon and is likely to rise, mirroring the national average of 80%.

The statistics were rolled out at OHA's first high profile press briefing since Gov. Kate Brown ended statewide COVID-19 restrictions June 30.

The rise in cases comes as vaccinations in the state have slowed to a trickle. While about 2.4 million residents have received at least one shot of vaccine, Allen said the latest daily number of new inoculations was about 2,000. That's down from a peak of over 50,000 on some days in early April.

Allen said COVID-19 cases are surging, up tenfold in the past week. The delta variant spreads up to 75% faster than the original virus that first appeared in Oregon in February 2020.

The spread of the virus is not evenly spread throughout Oregon as in earlier spikes, OHA reported.

Allen singled out Umatilla County, which reported 70 new cases but has vaccinated just under 43% of eligible adults. The 2020 population of the county is just under 78,000.

In contrast, Washington County, near Portland, reported 43 new cases and has vaccinated 75% of eligible adults. It's 2020 population is just over 620,000.

"The pandemic is fading for those that are vaccinated — they can resume activities with relative peace of mind," Allen said.

While significantly more contagious, the delta variant has not been shown to be any more virulent or able to break through vaccines that have been widely available since spring.

While infections and hospitalizations are rising, the number of deaths is expected to be capped well below levels seen last winter when the virus was rampant and no vaccines were available.

Allen said that, despite Thursday's press call to publicize the extent of the delta variant, there were no plans for Brown or OHA to step in and exert control over local decisions.

While OHA was ready to help with additional vaccine and other supports, it is up to county health departments to take a measure of the local impact of the virus and for county commissioners to decide what should be done.

Salem would not issue edicts, but advice.

"Take action now," Allen said of counties with lagging vaccination rates.

Allen pointed to state statistics showing that 15 out of 36 counties had started vaccinating less than half their adult population. Statewide the number is about 70%.

Dean Sidelinger, the state health officer and chief epidemiologist, said the jump in infections should be a "red alert" for those who have not been vaccinated.

"You are at higher risk now than you were earlier in the pandemic, and you are putting the people around you at risk," Sidelinger said.

Not moving to increase vaccination levels would mean the shadow of the pandemic would continue in communities, schools, workplaces and gatherings.

"The virus looms large," Sidelinger said.

OHA again said it was hoping for increased persuasion and for local influential individuals and political leaders to take action. There were no plans for new mandates, or to tell employers they should require vaccinations.

Citing the "highly political" nature of the COVID-19 debate, Allen said efforts to increase vaccinations had to come from trusted local sources, including civic and faith leaders, as well as political officeholders.

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