

# Bill would give media fire access

By ALEX WITWTER  
EO Media Group

EASTERN OREGON — Oregon wildfire coverage in the news might look a lot different next fire season.

House Bill 4087, which would allow news media professionals to enter the scene of wildfires and natural disasters, passed 48-4 on Thursday, Feb. 17, marking a turning point in wildfire coverage that will allow Oregon journalists to document wildfires similar to the way California journalists have for years.

“My aye vote was representative of transparency,” said Rep. Greg Smith, R-Hepner. “I think we need to make sure the media has access to those types of generational situations, both for informing the public as to what’s going on in their state, and also to capture history. For me, it’s a pretty simple aye vote.”

Previously, news and media organizations often have had to rely on press releases and submitted photos from government agencies. Often, coverage would come in the form of photos of road closures and barricades, or from distant landscapes of the hellish glow from a wildfire. A prior bill that would have changed the laws regarding wildfire access died in committee during the 2021 session.

The language of the bill gives incident commanders the final discretion to bar news media from access to wildfires or natural disasters, as well as the ability to deny access to fires without an escort. If granted access, it is at their own risk and without promise of rescue.

That media escort, at times, can prove a hindrance to getting the stories from the front lines of the fire.

East Oregonian photojournalist and visuals editor Ben Lonergan knows from first-hand experience how public information officers can err on the side of caution and prevent those frontline stories from being told.

In the summer of 2021, Lonergan was on assignment to get photos of the Elbow Creek Fire in Willowa County.

“On that fire, I had an escort, and we went in their vehicle, and they took us to all the areas of the fire that they deem safe to have us in,” Lonergan said. “And we ran into some issues with that. We never made it to any spot where there was active fire-fighting. The only access we were given was to the peripherals. They drove us around and we never saw a crew on a fire line over there. In one case, they drove us to where some hot shots were staging, but they had already left, so the access we were given was very restricted.”

The bill would go a long way toward fostering good will between media organizations and emergency services, and ensuring it is done safely.

Media personnel would be required to provide their own personal protective equipment, such as fireproof clothing and breathing equipment, and would be expected to complete the same basic wildfire fighting training that firefighters go through. The law would apply only to public land.

“I’m shocked that we had limitations,” Smith said. “I just assumed those opportunities did exist, and so it feels like we’re correcting a wrong here.”

The measure passed the Senate on Monday, Feb. 28. The new law will go into effect on Jan. 1 of next year.

# Winter weather leads to flurry of crashes

By BENNETT HALL  
Blue Mountain Eagle

DAYVILLE — Winter weather spurred a flurry of crashes on Highway 26 in Grant County on Tuesday, Feb. 22.

Emergency services responded to four crashes on Highway 26 and at least two other issues on roads around the county following an overnight snowstorm, according to Sheriff Todd McKinley.

“They’re all weather-related,” he told the newspaper.

Many of the incidents involved motorists who were rerouted to Highway 26 after multiple crashes involving nearly 100 vehicles closed Interstate 84 between Pendleton and La Grande and sent 19 people to area hospitals.

No serious injuries were reported in any of the Grant County crashes, McKinley added.

The morning got off to a rough start about 7:15 a.m. when a pickup truck carrying children to Dayville School rolled near milepost 145, the sheriff said. Neither the teenage driver nor the two passengers in the truck, all siblings, were hurt.

A short while later, the Sheriff’s Office was called to a residence on Northwest second Avenue in John Day to check on an unattended death. The deceased, a man in his late 80s, was determined to have died of natural causes.

At the same time, a call came in from the other side of the county reporting another possible dead man slumped over the wheel of a strange-looking car on the side of Highway 19 near Kimberly.

The man apparently was not dead, because before deputies could arrive, he started driving again, heading east on Highway 26 before running out of gas near Mt. Vernon.

While an Oregon State Police trooper was getting



Grant County Sheriff’s Office/Contributed Photo

Highway 26 just west of Picture Gorge was blocked for several hours on Feb. 22, after an 18-wheeler crashed and blocked both lanes of travel.

gas for the stalled vehicle — a kit-built law enforcement officers have nicknamed “the Cruella de Vil car,” according to McKinley — the sheriff spotted a man named Glenn Wadley who was wanted on a Grant County warrant and placed him under arrest.

While Wadley was being taken into custody, yet another crash was reported, a rollover on Highway 26 near milepost 134 with two people trapped inside their vehicle. Multiple agencies responded, and the two occupants were extricated from the wreck and kept warm until an ambulance arrived.

The day’s events were far from over, however.

About 10:20 a.m., a tractor-trailer rig lost control on a slick stretch of Highway 26 near milepost 97, about a mile west of the Highway 19 intersection at Picture Gorge, and came to rest sideways across the highway, blocking both lanes of travel and causing a collision.

“It was T-boned by a van,” McKinley said.

At least five other vehicles, the sheriff added, slid off the icy highway to avoid hitting the truck.

A high-capacity tow truck was dispatched from Burns to pull the 18-wheeler from the scene of the crash, but in the meantime two smaller rigs from Frontier Towing were able to move the truck enough to reopen one lane of travel shortly after 1 p.m.

While Highway 19 remained open during the blockage of Highway 26, traffic was also being rerouted north and south along Highway 395, either to Highway 20 via Burns or Interstate 84 by way of Pendleton, McKinley said.

One enterprising Amazon truck driver, the sheriff said, decided to try a shortcut. Following his rig’s GPS navigation system, the driver attempted to use Forest Road 18 (Keeney Fork Road) to get to Highway 395 at Long Creek but became stuck near the Four Corners rock pit.

Eventually the truck was pulled out of the snow and

made its way back to Highway 26 by the afternoon.

Meanwhile, there was one more crash on the day: A Sysco truck rolled on Highway 26 at milepost 186 near Dixie Summit. The driver was able to get out of his rig without assistance.

“It was a busy day,” the sheriff said. “Dispatch just fielded a pile of calls.”

In addition to the Grant County Sheriff’s Office, other responding agencies included the Oregon State Police, Wheeler County Sheriff’s Office, Oregon Department of Transportation, Dayville Fire Department, Mt. Vernon Fire Department, John Day Ambulance and Frontier Towing.

McKinley offered some words of advice for motorists planning to hit the road when conditions are snowy or icy.

“Take a few more minutes,” he said. “Don’t rush. And if you absolutely don’t need to go, don’t.”

## WHAT’S HAPPENING

### WEDNESDAY, MARCH 11

**Jam session**  
• 6 p.m., Country Preferred Realtors, 121 E. Main St, John Day

The Grant County Jammers will host a jam session every Wednesday starting at 6 p.m. The office will open at 5 for tuneup and setup. For more information, call Ron Phillips at 541-575-1927.

### MONDAY, MARCH 7

**Senior Citizens Advisory Council**  
• Noon, John Day Senior Center, 142 NE Dayton St., John Day

The Grant County Senior Citizens Advisory Council will hold its regular quarterly meeting. The public is invited to attend. For more information, call Rick LaMountain at 541-620-3800.

### FRIDAY, MARCH 11

**Bingo night**  
• 6 p.m., John Day Elks



Lodge, 140 NE Dayton St., John Day

A night of fun and games to raise money for the Grant Union High School Class of 2026. Dinner provided by the Elks Club at 6 p.m., with bingo starting at 6:30. The cost to play is \$5 a card.

### FRIDAY, APRIL 1

**April Fools bingo**  
• 5 p.m., Mt. Vernon Community Hall, 640 Ingle St., Mt. Vernon

A fundraiser for the Grant Union High School Class of 2026. Doors open at 5 p.m., with dinner and drinks available. Bingo starts at 6. The cost to play is

\$10 per multi-game card.

### SATURDAY, APRIL 2

**Lake Creek Youth Camp Gala**  
• 5 p.m., Trowbridge Pavilion, Grant County Fairgrounds, 411 NW Bridge St., John Day

This third annual benefit for the nonprofit youth and family camp in Logan Valley features a tri-tip dinner, games, live music, drinks by Spitfire Cocktails and live, silent and dessert auctions. Tickets are \$25 at the door or \$20 in advance, available at several locations in John Day and Canyon City. For more informa-

tion, call Aimee Rude at 541-206-2421.

### MONDAY, APRIL 11

**Bingo night**  
• 6 p.m., John Day Elks Lodge, 140 NE Dayton St., John Day

A fundraiser for the Grant Union High School Class of 2026. Dinner provided by the Elks Club at 6 p.m., with bingo starting at 6:30. The cost to play is \$5 per card.

*Do you have a community event in Grant County you'd like to publicize? Email information to editor@bmeagle.com. The deadline is noon Friday for publication the following Wednesday.*

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