

La Pine teens prep for fire season

By **BRYCE DOLE**
The Bulletin

LA PINE — The students gritted their teeth as they pushed and pulled the crosscut saw through a log in the field behind La Pine High School on Wednesday, April 13. Wood shavings fell to the snow-covered ground, mixing with the mud beneath their boots as they worked hard for the day's fastest time.

Nearby, other students hurled axes at targets. Even more were high up in nearby trees, using logging gear to ascend.

The students — Central Oregon's only active team of Future Natural Resource Leaders — were preparing for their upcoming competition in Sweet Home. Students will go head-to-head in forestry-based events, from cutting through trees to identifying wildlife.

But for some students and the group's leader, Cameron Salvitelli, this program meant much more.

As concerns loom over potential wildfires this year amid multiple consecutive years of record-setting drought, La Pine High School's forestry and natural resource program is teaching students about caring and preserving the forests that encompass their town. And at least six of the program's students are using the program to help them prepare for their summer as wildland firefighters.

"We're very focused on fire as a whole, because fire affects La Pine immensely," said Salvitelli, who has taught a variety of career and technical education courses at La Pine like the forestry course, including manufacturing, construction technology and wood shop.

Looking out at his students as they raced each other over logs and up trees, Salvitelli reflected on the logging heritage that has been the backbone of communities across Oregon. He sees his class as a reflection of this industry, which has fueled La Pine's economy and employed the families of several of his students.

"We want to do our best to preserve and honor those traditions here in La Pine," he said.

Now, as fire becomes a yearly part of life in La Pine, Salvitelli says that it's more critical than ever for kids to



Tiernan Ashcraft practices the crosscut saw with a classmate while preparing for upcoming Future Natural Resource Leaders competitions at La Pine High School on Wednesday, April 13, 2022.

understand the complexities of forest management and environmental issues. He wants them to know how, and why, they should care for the land.

Landen Roggenkamp, an 18-year-old senior from La Pine, came to love the forest through hunting, fishing, building forts and riding horses in the woods around La Pine. But in recent years, he has grown concerned about the fires that surround his town, saying, "some summers, you can't even breathe."

That's in part why Roggenkamp wanted to be a part of Salvitelli's team: to learn how he can play a role in preserving the forests he loves. He aspires to a career in natural resources and land management for the Forest Service, and he said he was proud to be on a team of students who care for the land as he does.

"If they can find the passion, they can be the change to keep forests around for generations to come," he said, adding: "This is the future, right here."

Salvitelli's program provides lessons on tree identification, flora and

fauna, map reading, timber cruising, and the Future Natural Resource Leaders team provides hands-on lessons in ax throwing, crosscutting with old whipsaws, pole climbing and choker setting. It even has lessons that examine the complicated opportunity costs between producing timber and enhancing biodiversity, an issue that has proven controversial in communities throughout the Pacific Northwest.

But one of the program's central focuses is fire. Students learn about tree thinning and other practices in fire resistance and protection. And it provides the training needed to go on and connect with private contracting companies that will get them out fighting fires in the summer.

Some of Salvitelli's students are already gearing up for their summer fighting fires.

Among them are Blayze and Blaire Buell, from Gilchrist. The brother and sister duo come from a family of firefighters, with their father, uncle and grandfather running things over at Walker Range Fire Patrol. The 14-year-old Blayze said

he's been around firefighting since he was 5 years old. As a volunteer with the family business, he's taken on a number of roles, most often using "the hose." This summer, he'll be out working from when school gets out in June until it's time to go back in the fall.

Blaire, 16, agreed that fighting fires is part of her family's tradition. She called the adrenaline rush of fighting fires "a blast," adding that, only a few days prior, they had been out on a trailer fire. Though she said she recognizes the inherent danger of being around fires, she feels a certain responsibility to help her community stay safe.

"I feel like I need to go," she said. Those were among the reasons Blaire wanted to be part of the forestry program. That, and: "It's really fun to be outside and throw some axes with somebody."

The students gathered around a large fire in the back of the school, roasting hot dogs. To finish the day, they took turns racing each other in setting chokers, an activity that is meant to simulator cable logging.



Landen Roggenkamp practices the pole climb while preparing for upcoming Future Natural Resource Leaders competitions with fellow classmates at La Pine High School on Wednesday, April 13, 2022.

They sprinted down a small hill, leapt over a log while simultaneously tossing a choker chain underneath, pulled the chain through and around the log, and pulled it tight as they sprinted back to the start.

The students are competitive, and everyone laughed as they fell repeatedly over the log and into the dirt.

Meanwhile, the Buell children's father, Wesley Buell, rolled up in a company truck. He said he's glad to see the kids involved in the La Pine program. He said he's not concerned about his kids being out fighting fires this summer, but conceded that, in recent years, wildfires have gotten more extreme.

"They instantly take off," said Buell, protection supervisor for Walker Range Fire. "You're looking at 100 to 1,000 acre-fire in a few minutes. It's just so dry."

Storm adds little to snowpack in Oregon

By **ALEX WITTWER**
EO Media Group

LA GRANDE — Despite the sudden and unexpected April snowstorms, snowpack levels aren't quite back on track to where they need to be.

Snow has been falling since early this week, breaking records across the state for the latest snowfall in Oregon's history with 1.6 inches falling April 11 on parts of the Portland-metro area, according to the National Weather Service in Portland.

And while snow isn't unheard of this far into spring in the Blue Mountains — the latest snowfall recorded at Pendleton was April 20, 1963, according to the National Weather Service — it is a

hopeful sign for a region still gripped by drought. However, the recent snowfall might not be enough to put municipalities and agriculturalists at ease.

Scott Oviatt, a hydrologist and snow survey supervisor at the U.S. Department of Agriculture Natural Resources Conservation Service for Oregon, said while the recent addition to the snowpack is welcomed, it won't fix the rapid melt-off that started in late March.

"We've started the process, and it's really not going to stop," he said. "We're adding to the snowpack, of course, adding water content to it, but eventually it's going to warm up, and it will melt out rapidly."



A dusting of snow covers the mountain range near Cove and Mount Fanny on Wednesday, April 13, 2022. April snowstorms won't be enough to rectify the region's dwindling snowpack levels, according to experts.

The snowpack had been at healthy, above-average levels for January and February before rapidly declining in March — between March 22-31, the Grande Ronde Valley region lost nearly 25% of its snowpack. Many parts of

the state, including the southeast region encompassing Harney, Grant and Malheur counties, have experienced drastically reduced snow water equivalent levels, having dropped below 40% of the median value for early April.

The current water content in the snowpack for the Grande Ronde-Burnt-Powder-Imnaha region remains at 76% of median as of April 12, while the Umatilla-Walla-Walla-Willow region is at 93% of median values. Nearly 90% of the state remains under drought conditions as of April 12, according to the U.S. Drought Monitor.

Oviatt said that despite the rapid melt-off, chances of flooding are unlikely as temperatures are forecast to

remain below normal until later in April.

Because there isn't enough time for gradual melting of the newly acquired snow and overnight freezing to take place, snowpack levels won't become as dense, according to Oviatt.

That means what fell over the week will likely melt quickly without the chance to develop glacier-like pockets of moisture content.

"We're almost too late to make up the deficit we have," he said. "This didn't solve our problems. It just delayed it. Obviously the additional water content is good, but I don't think it's going to come out in terms of additional volume that's of use to municipalities and agricultural uses."

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