

# Fire breaks curbed June blaze

By CLAYTON FRANKE  
Baker City Herald

VALE — A tractor that plowed swathes through rangeland in northern Malheur County more than two decades ago is a major reason why the Willowcreek Fire, the biggest blaze in the area so far this year, stopped when it did in late June, according to officials from the Bureau of Land Management's Vale District.

A series of fire breaks dug 22 years ago made "all the difference with suppression efforts on the Willowcreek Fire," according to a July 15 press release.

The blaze, which started on private land north of Vale on June 28 and burned 40,274 acres, mostly on that day and the next, was fully contained as of July 11, said Larisa Bogardus, public affairs officer for the Vale District.

The cause of the fire is still under investigation, Bogardus said on Thursday, July 21. The fire didn't burn any structures, and no one was hurt. The fire burned about 24,400 acres of private land, 15,300 acres of public land managed by the BLM and about 572 acres of state ground.

Flames likely would have spread across more of the sagebrush and grass range if not for those fire breaks, said Marcus Johnson, who was incident commander on the Willowcreek Fire.

"As an incident commander, it's a huge benefit for us because a lot of us know where these lines are and have a good idea of where we can catch them when the fires start to go extreme," said



Kristen Munday/Bureau of Land Management

**An aerial photo shows how the Willowcreek Fire in late June 2022 was stopped when it reached a fire break that was made about 22 years ago and is maintained annually.**

Johnson, who's a wildland fire technician for the Vale District.

"Any fire that started on your urban interface area, we're just trying to keep it off federal land and vice versa — if we have a fire on federal land, we really don't want to push it onto the urban interface," Johnson said.

The fire breaks are created using tractors with metal disk attachments that remove vegetation and expose bare dirt, which deprives flames of fuel. Workers also mow grass and use herbicides to control grass.

When built near roads, the breaks create a 50-foot buffer — a zone where fire crews have a better chance to stop advancing flames.

Each spring or summer, typically in May or June, BLM workers maintains the fire breaks, Johnson said. They bring in heavy machinery to clear out vegetation in preparation for fire season. Johnson said they completed this year's maintenance on the breaks in the Willowcreek Fire area just two weeks before it ignited on a 100-degree day with gusty west winds.



Kristen Munday/Bureau of Land Management

**A fire break, built along a road, helped stop the Willowcreek Fire in late June 2022 in northern Malheur County.**

"We've been maintaining these manmade fuel barriers over the last two decades," said Justin Robinson, fuels technician for the Vale District. "We're making it safer for our firefighters and our communities."

### Fire break history

The idea for the fire breaks that helped stop the Willowcreek Fire dates back almost 22 years.

In 2000, the Jackson Fire burned about 80,000 acres — twice as many as the Willowcreek Fire — of simi-

lar terrain in Malheur County.

That fire prompted local residents and BLM officials to talk about wildfires, and residents created the Malheur County Community Wildfire Protection Plan.

That plan included building fire breaks across public and private land.

Johnson said the system of fire breaks "gives our personnel something to work off of," but it's not guaranteed, because of varied weather patterns, that the breaks will stop a blaze dead in its tracks.

"It's all dependent on fire activity, because you can have fire whirls that bring embers across the road," Johnson said.

But with the Willowcreek Fire, the breaks fulfilled their purpose despite the gusty winds.

"Being proactive saved us from having a fire twice as big," said Toby McBride, a volunteer with the Vale Rangeland Fire Protection District who helps maintain the fire breaks and was on the ground during the Willowcreek Fire. "The wind was blowing pretty good, but the fire burned right up to the lines and went out. I don't think we would've held it at the road without them."

Robinson agreed. "Fuel breaks helped firefighters contain the Willowcreek Fire without bulldozers or other heavy equipment," he said. "This project's success shows us how important collaboration can be to protect local communities from wildfires."

# OSP delves into Finley Creek case

By DICK MASON  
The Observer

UNION COUNTY — A four-decade-old Union County mystery may be on the verge of being solved or taking another unforgettable twist.

The Oregon State Police are set, next month, to conduct an examination and possible excavations at a site near Finley Creek, 18 miles north of La Grande, where the remains of an unidentified woman were found in August 1978.

"We are planning on mid-August or late August," said Sgt. Sean Belding, a member of OSP's major crimes division.

Belding will be joined by Calvin Davis, director of the OSP's crime lab in Pendleton, and Dr. Nici Vance, from the State Medical Examiner's Office, plus members of the Finley Creek Jane Doe Task Force.

Belding, Davis and Vance recently decided to conduct the examination and possible digs after learning of how a pair of cadaver dogs responded on Thursday, June 23, at the Finley Creek site. Each dog, trained to smell human bones and brought there by the task force, indicated they had found buried human bones at the same two places while operating separately.

Belding, who accompa-



Suzanne Timms/Contributed Photo

**Cadaver dog Brynn and a team of volunteers including Suzanne Timms, seated, in August 2021 investigate the area where the Finley Creek Jane Doe was discovered near Elgin in 1978. With Timms are her relatives Jennifer Harrington, center, and Wenda Parr, left, plus Karin Anderson of Dallas, Texas, who is a member of a Reporter's Notebook group that is producing podcasts about the search for the identity of the Finley Creek Jane Doe.**

nied the task force on its June 23 visit, said he was impressed with the interest each dog showed in the two sites. The canines laid down at the same place, an indication they were positive human bones were underneath the location, said Melinda Jederberg of La Grande, a leader of the Finley Creek Jane Doe Task Force, which she founded in 2019.

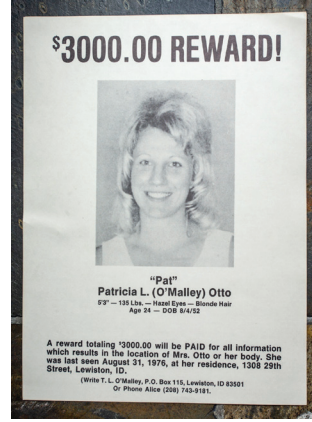
This was the second time the cadaver dogs were brought to the Finley Creek site by the task force. They were also brought there in the summer of

2021, when they also indicated they detected human bones there.

The task force members have never dug at the Finley Creek site because it is a crime scene and thus it would be illegal to disrupt it.

**A daughter who will not give up hope**

Suzanne Timms of Walla Walla, Washington, who is assisting with the search as a volunteer, is elated that the OSP investigators will be examining the site because



Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian

**A missing person poster for Patricia Otto sits on the coffee table of her daughter, Suzanne Timms, on Oct. 26, 2021, at Timms' home in Walla Walla. Timms believes the Finley Creek Jane Doe, found near Elgin in 1978, is her mother.**

she is certain the Finley Creek Jane Doe is her mother, Patricia "Patty" Otto, of Lewiston, Idaho, who has been missing since Aug. 31, 1976.

"Oregon is giving resources toward the case. It gives me hope," she said.

Timms first suspected that the Finley Creek Jane Doe was her mother in 2021 when she saw an image created by a forensic artist in Massachusetts, Anthony Redgrave, the operator of Redgrave Research Forensic Services. Redgrave was assisting the Finley



**Anthony Redgrave of Massachusetts in the spring of 2020 created this reconstruction of the face of a Jane Doe hunters found more than 40 years ago near Elgin.**

cremated by the state after they were found, Timms said.

Other details have contributed to Timms' belief that the Finley Creek Jane Doe is her mother. The remains were found with a white shirt and red pants, which is what Patty Otto was last seen wearing before she disappeared in 1976.

**A possible Lewiston, Idaho, murder**

Timms believes her mother was murdered in Lewiston by her father and then taken to Finley Creek where he buried her in a shallow grave.

The OSP's autopsy records for the Finley Creek Jane Doe, however, do not match those of Patty Otto.

Creek Jane Doe Task Force, and the image he created looked very similar to Timms' mother. The images were based on photos of the skeletal remains found in 1978 — those bones are believed to have been

found in 1978 — those bones are believed to have been cremated by the state after they were found, Timms said.

Timms is striving to keep the memory of her mother alive with a ceremony in Lewiston, Idaho, set for Aug. 4, which would have been her 70th birthday. Seventy signs with Otto's name will be carried by 70 people for 24 minutes down main street in Lewiston. The time will symbolize Otto's age, for she was 24 in 1976 when she disappeared.

Timms is touched by the number of people who are volunteering to participate in the memorial.

"It shows that my mother is not forgotten," she said.

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