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Tony Chiotti/Blue Mountain Eagle

Firefighters tend the line on a prescribed burn in the Malheur National Forest on Wednesday, Oct. 19, 2022. The fire was executed under strict new Forest Service rules, yet managed to briefly escape containment lines later that afternoon.

OVER THE LINE?

Forest Service employee's arrest after fire crosses onto private land sparks larger debate over prescribed burns

Editor's note: Blue Mountain Eagle reporter Tony Chiotti was on the scene of the Starr 6 prescribed burn before it jumped containment and spread to private land on Oct. 19. In reporting this story, he drew on observations made that day as well as multiple interviews with Forest Service officials, burn crew workers and landowners. If you have video footage from that day that can shed additional light on the sequence of events, please contact Chiotti at tchiotti@bluemountaineagle.com.

By TONY CHIOTTI
Blue Mountain Eagle

When Rick Snodgrass approached Grant County Sheriff Todd McKinley, he thought the sheriff was there to help him. According to Snodgrass, he'd called for law enforcement to help control aggressive traffic and to deal with harassment his crews had been receiving while implementing a prescribed burn on the Malheur National Forest in Bear Valley, about 7 miles north of Seneca. That burn — called the Starr 6 — had since jumped the fireline, and now there was active fire on both sides of County Road 63, where Snodgrass and McKinley met: the prescribed

burn operation on Malheur National Forest land to the north of the road — now flaring up in gusts of wind — and an uncontained slop-over on private land to the south. The crews under Snodgrass' direction were now attempting to quell one fire while holding the reins on another, with tempers, smoke, wind and now traffic adding to the dangers to his crew. But instead of assistance, what Snodgrass got was arrested. When the sheriff cuffed Snodgrass, it is thought to be the first time a U.S. Forest Service firefighter has been arrested in the course of performing their job. Snodgrass, the "burn boss" on the day's



Blue Mountain Eagle graphic



Tony Chiotti/Blue Mountain Eagle

Chad Holliday shows the edge of a burned area on his family's Windy Point Ranch in Bear Valley on Thursday, Oct. 20, 2022. A prescribed burn performed on federal land the day before spread across the road to the private land before being contained.

operation, was taken away from the scene and charged with reckless burning, a Class A misdemeanor that carries a maximum penalty of a year in jail and a \$6,250 fine. Before it was contained, an hour after it kicked off, the spot fire burned an estimated 20 to 40 acres of private land owned by members of the Holliday family.

The arrest of Snodgrass on Wednesday, Oct. 19, has drawn national attention and has fanned the debate over Forest Service fire mitigation policies, especially as they pertain to intentional burns adjacent to private lands.

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Squeeze-In looking to make a move

By TONY CHIOTTI
Blue Mountain Eagle

JOHN DAY — The iconic John Day diner Squeeze-In was set to close at its current location at end of business Tuesday, Oct. 24, after decades of serving up diner food, coffee and good-natured backtalk and providing a meeting place for locals, travelers and the occasional campaigning politician. But owner Shawn Duncan hopes it won't be closed for long. After much wrangling and a lot of legwork, it appears Duncan may have been able to line up a new loca-

tion in Canyon City, at 295 S. Canyon Blvd., according to the sign painted in enthusiastically massive letters on the diner's window. Duncan said the current tenants of that space, the Painted Sky Center for the Arts, contacted her after she'd posted on Facebook that her current lease was not being offered for renewal. Painted Sky has been in the process of purchasing another building and thought it could find a solution that allowed a swap, and according to Duncan, the owner was open to the idea. "I'm hoping to be closed for one month," Duncan said. "If that doesn't happen — if it's sooner than that — I will be tickled." Dun-

can hopes the fact that the space used to be a cafe, with a bakery in the back, will ease the transition. And she's grateful to the folks from Painted Sky for reaching out with the offer. Getting up and running so quickly will not be easy, however. Duncan says she is motivated to reopen before the holidays and hopes to be able to continue the restaurant's tradition of serving free Christmas dinners to the community. But the deal depends on having a building to move into, and the space she has lined up is not yet vacant.



Tony Chiotti/Blue Mountain Eagle

The window of the Squeeze-In Restaurant as it appeared on Monday, Oct. 24, 2022, announcing the new location in Canyon City.

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Cities move ahead on plan for regional partnership

By JUSTIN DAVIS
Blue Mountain Eagle

JOHN DAY — A formal agreement is being drawn up to create a partnership between John Day, Burns and Lakeview to allow the three communities to share staffing, capital equipment, software, consulting and professional services. The agreement, which still needs to be approved by all three cities, should be ready for review within 90 days, Interim City Manager Corum Ketchum said during the Oct. 11 session of the John Day City Council. Regional Rural Revitalization Strategies, or R3 for short, looks to pool staff across its member cities through virtual teaming arrangements, according to a white paper on the proposal released in February. These virtual teams would work together on projects for a limited duration, which



John Day City Hall is shown on Friday, May 20, 2022. The city is looking into a partnership with Burns and Lakeview that would allow the three communities to share resources in an effort to cut costs.

would allow the member communities to take on larger projects than they normally would without giving up their independence. Pooling capital assets such as equipment is also a part of the plans for R3. These assets often sit unused in one jurisdiction when they could be

put to use in another. Small cities may lack the purchasing power to acquire expensive equipment for utility line and street maintenance, among other basic needs, the white paper noted. This lack of purchasing power means rural communities often have to contract for these types of services and

may have to pay extra due to the cost of bringing assets to remote rural areas. R3 Strategies looks to break this model by assembling virtual motor pools comprised of all the available equipment of the group's member cities. These virtual motor pools would allow resources to be made available to the entire partnership to use as the need comes up. R3 could also acquire assets on behalf of its members which they might not have been able to afford independently. One example of this would be sharing a street sweeper. Lakeview has a street sweeper and John Day does not. Under the R3 agreement, both John Day and Burns would be able to use Lakeview's street sweeper for community cleanup operations instead of purchasing or renting one on their own.

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