

Local firefighters return from Baker City blaze

By Dani Palmer
Cannon Beach Gazette

The Oregon State Fire Marshal again called on Clatsop County firefighters to assist on a wildfire Friday, Aug. 21. This time they traveled to northeast Oregon, near Troy, to protect homes and businesses from the Grizzly Bear Fire.

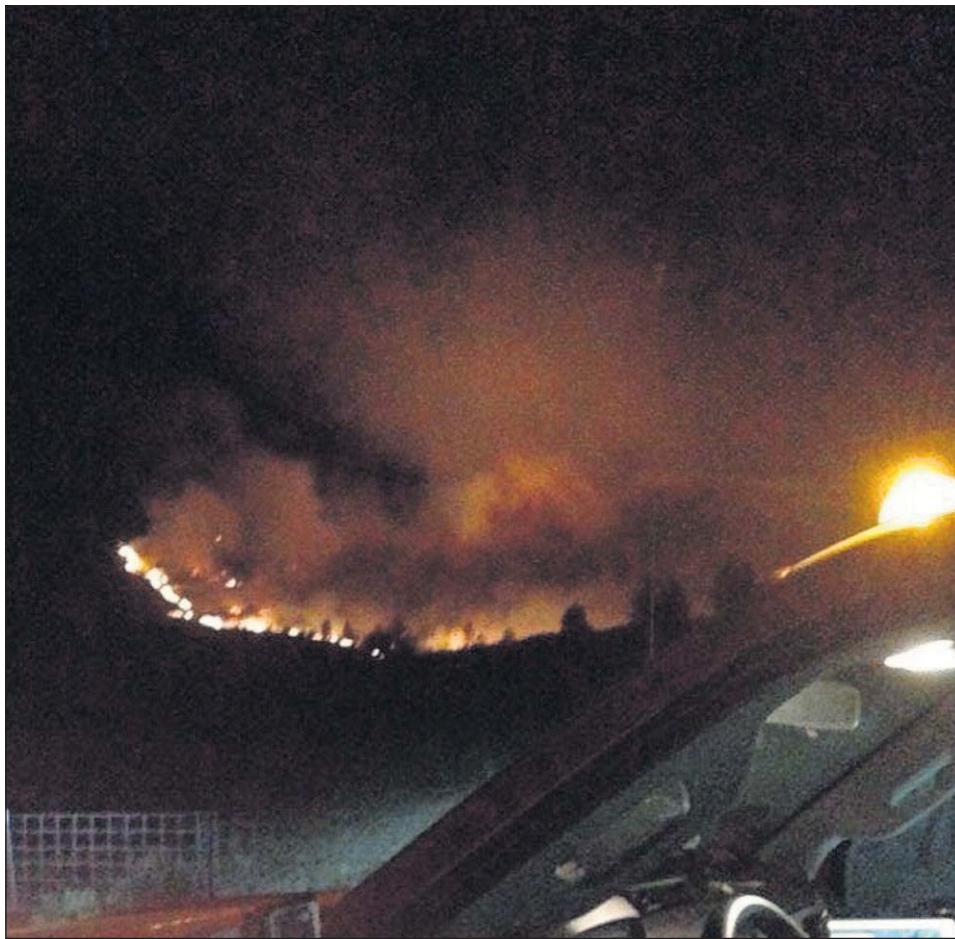
This was the second group of local firefighters to battle the blazes. Thirteen Clatsop County firefighters arrived home as part of a task force responding to the Cornet Fire south of Baker City early Aug. 13. They returned Aug. 16 after houses and buildings in that eastern Oregon area were considered out of danger.

It's "not that often" local crews respond to a fire elsewhere in the state, Cannon Beach Fire and Rescue Chief Mike Balzer said. It's been two years since Clatsop County was called upon — the last the Government Flats Fire in The Dalles in 2013.

With heat and drought conditions leading to fire conditions throughout the state, "They've got a lot going on," Balzer said. "It was only a matter of time before they got out to request assistance from the coast."

Firefighters from out of state, as far as Massachusetts, and out of country, Australia and New Zealand, are also assisting in west coast fires.

Locally, the Knappa Fire District sent four firefighters to help in the Cornet Fire. Warrenton sent three, Seaside and the Lewis and Clark Volunteer Department two and Cannon Beach and Gearhart each sent one. Lewis and Clark Fire Chief Jeff Golightly served as the task force's leader and all but the Gearhart Volunteer



The Cornet wildfire, near Baker City, can be seen behind Cannon Beach's responding fire engine.

Fire Department sent a fire engine or water tender, as well.

The Clatsop County Fire Task Force sent more from Seaside, Gearhart, Lewis and Clark, Knappa and Warrenton on Friday, Aug. 21, to join nearly 400 firefighters from around the state in the Grizzly Bear Fire. Seaside Fire Captain David Rankin served as the task leader in that blaze.

"We like to help out," Warrenton Fire Chief Tim Demers said. "We don't like to see our brothers and sisters fight fires and us not do anything. We like being there, being involved."

Structure protection

Oregon's Office of the State Fire Marshal requested the Clatsop

County Fire Task Force to assist in structure protection on both fires. The Emergency Conflagration Act, authorized by Governor Kate Brown, gives the marshal authorization to mobilize firefighters and equipment to help local resources battle blazes that threaten lives or structures.

When that threat was reduced in the Cornet Fire, Clatsop County's crew was sent home, Knappa Fire District Chief Paul Olheiser said.

His department fights as many wildfires as structure fires per year, but they "burn real different."

Wildfires are "real weather and fuel dependent," Olheiser said. The stronger the winds, the faster the fire spreads.

And hot, dry conditions make a blaze even harder to contain.

Improved weather conditions helped crews make progress on Oregon's largest wildfire, Balzer said. Expected to merge with the Windy Ridge fire, the Cornet-Windy Ridge blaze, sparked by a lightning strike, has burned more than 150 square miles and destroyed six homes, according to reports.

On Monday, Aug. 17, firefighters continued to build containment lines around its perimeter.

The Grizzly Bear Fire, also caused by lightning, had expanded to 65,000 acres by Tuesday.

Special training

Task force members like those dispatched

to eastern Oregon must complete special training that consists of about 130 hours worth of classroom and field work to get wildland certification, Olheiser said.

Knappa's 28 firefighters receive continued training annually at Camp Rilea. The wildfire program provides hands-on experience and the opportunity to work as a crew, he added.

About a dozen of Cannon Beach's 24 volunteers are certified to battle the state's wildfires, as well.

"It's a big commitment from the guys if they want to do it," Balzer said. But, he added, those who do are "excited about the chance to go out and help."

The entire county battled local wildfires near Arch Cape last year. And while a fire is never desired, the Warrenton Fire Department got the chance to "sharpen things up" when it assisted the Oregon Department of Forestry in the Fort Stevens blaze last month, Demers said.

That fire scorched 27 acres and took about three days to control.

According to the Oregon Department of Forestry, more than 620 fires have burned on lands protected by the department and forest protective associations in Oregon this year. The majority, more than 420, were caused by humans, including the recent County Line 2 fire on the Warm Springs Indian Reservation.

As the dry weather continues, the Department of Forestry and the state fire marshal are asking for the public's help in preventing fires by reducing fire-prone activities.

"There is a good chance we will get called out again," Balzer said.

Fire danger spurs burn bans in city, county

Fire from Page 1A

Thirteen Clatsop County firefighters returned home on Aug. 16 after providing protection for homes and businesses near the Cornet fire, south of Baker City, over a weekend. Cannon Beach Fire Chief Mike Balzer said it was only a "matter of time" before they got called out with state fire conditions, and that there was "a good chance" they'd assist again. Another team from the county was mobilized on Friday, Aug. 21.

Balzer said fire danger will continue to rise for the area while the weather remains hot and dry. The department faced a close call when dispatched to a dune grass fire caused by a tiki torch near Whale Park July 29. The fire was extinguished before firefighters arrived.

On Monday, National Weather Service forecasts for Eastern Oregon and near Crater Lake were bleak, with gusty winds and continued dry weather expected to fan flames that have already consumed thousands of acres.

Much of Oregon has been in a drought for three years, with severe fire seasons over the last two. The Department of Forestry had its most expensive season historically in 2013, Public Information Officer Rod Nichols said.

He added that it is normal to see industrial fire precaution levels rise this time of year but "it's not very often we get up to a Level 4 in this state." Level 4 is considered the highest level in the state. While Northwest 1 Zone, containing Cannon Beach and Seaside, is still under a Level 2, 24 other zones have moved into a Level 4, a general shutdown prohibiting all operations.

The fire ban, excluding only portable cooking stoves using liquefied or bottled fuels, is in effect until further notice.

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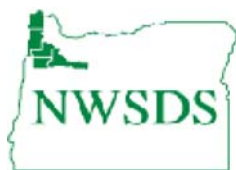
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