

Father and son answer fire call

Steve and Trevor Rhea fight the large Holiday Farm Fire together

By David Sykes

When the call came for help fighting the massive forest fires burning in the Willamette Valley this summer, one Heppner family was certainly affected. Steve and Trevor Rhea, father and son, answered the call and together went to battle the 173,000-acre Holiday Farm Fire on the McKenzie River near Springfield.

While not on the same crew, the two were in the general area at the same time, just doing different jobs. Trevor, a former logger with experience operating equipment, manned a skidder, while his dad, Steve, commanded a team of men with tankers, pumpers and other firefighting equipment. Both described the fire as massive devastation and nothing like they had seen before.

Although Trevor has been fighting wildland and forest fires since he was eighteen years old and been a long-time member of the Heppner Fire Department responding to many home fires and auto accidents, this fire was a scale he had not seen before. "I've been to fires and car wrecks and that's just one little scene," Trevor says. "But here you are talking thousands of people and hundreds of houses. I have not seen anything of that magnitude before. I have never been to war, but it looked like a bomb went off," he said of the devastation.

The extremely high winds through the area also made the fire act strangely, they both agreed. Trevor said there were 60-70 mph winds which caused the fire to jump around a lot. He said in one campground area he was working; the fire went through so fast it didn't even melt a trash can liner. "There was a campground there. You could tell where the camp

MCHD to announce new CEO soon

Morrow County Health District Board Chair John Murray announced at the September 28 board meeting in Boardman Monday night that the district is in the process of selecting a new CEO and expects to announce the selected candidate in approximately seven to 10 days. Current CEO Bob Houser previously announced his upcoming retirement and has indicated that he plans to retire by December.

The board brought three candidates and their “significant others” to Heppner for interviews Monday and a tour of MCHD facilities in Heppner, Irrigon and Ione on Tuesday.

Also at Monday's meeting a representative of the district's accounting firm, Wipfli, was in attendance to present the district's yearly audit report ending June 30 which showed both revenues and expenses up from last year. Wipfli noted that salaries and wages increased by



Half burned flag still flies.

host was because a golf cart melted to the ground. They got out of there as fast as they could. It was going through there so fast in some places it didn't even burn the leaves on the bushes, but would then burn a house not far away," he relates. "Some places burned everything and other places there was spot burning," he says.

One incident that brought home to Trevor the immensity of the fires they were facing was when “cadaver teams” were brought in with dogs to search for victims. He said he lifted trees and debris up with his equipment while the dogs and teams worked the area. They did not find any bodies but did find evidence of people who barely escaped with their lives. Trevor said there were a lot of abandoned vehicles on the highway. “There was so much smoke they couldn’t see, and they probably jumped out and ran for the river.” He says several people jumped in the river and they even found a backpack with a phone with solar pad in it left behind by a person going into the river to escape the flames. He says one guy jumped in the river swam down to town and went up to the Blue River High School football field where a bunch of people from town, who couldn’t



Widespread devastation

get out in time, just huddled there until the fire passed over. The only thing left standing in the town was the high school and a couple of houses, he says.

Meanwhile nearby, Trevor's dad Steve was commanding a firefighting crew with equipment. "Back in Heppner I had been receiving texts for two weeks from the district chief asking me to go to the fires," Steve says of how he ended up there. He remembers how smoky it was in Heppner, and then his wife Molly said, "I think you need to go." "So, I volunteered." However, to begin with he was a task force leader without equipment, until he arrived in Springfield at the fire command center. Once there he was put in charge of a crew of five "resources" including engines, pumpers and a tanker. He says the crew was assembled from all over the state with the equipment coming from such diverse locations as La Grande, Warrenton, Philomath and Seaside. "The guys were good and professional and there to help anyway they could," Steve relates.

Although Steve has been fighting wildland and forest fires for quite some time, he, like Trevor, said this one was different. "I have been on large fires in the past with multiple burned homes. I had been around those kinds of fires," he says. "What got to me on this one was when they told me there were 100 to 140 people missing. That was a whole different thing for me. Never been in that kind

to negotiate a seven-year warranty. Staff training on the system is included in the purchase price.

The board approved the low bid proposal from Mindray in Mahwah, New Jersey, for the bedside monitoring system at \$399,834, plus \$10,000 for a Centriq Interface for a total of \$409,834.65 with expenses to be covered with COVID funds. Another bid, at \$438,359, plus \$10,000 for the Centriq Interface from Nihon Kohden in Irvine, CA. was also received.

In other business, Houser reported the following:

-the district has hired Jenna O'Brien as an EMT intermediate who is close to becoming a paramedic;
-current employee Kris Jones has been named chief operating officer and will be doing "double duty" until a new clinic director is hired.

-Pioneer Memorial Hospital has used COVID grants to purchase 12 IV

of thing where we were going in looking for bodies," he says.

Steve says on first arriving he was told a second task force scheduled to join them was diverted to another fire, leaving them shorthanded. He spent the night making several three-hour round trips on the fire line checking on his guys and didn't get to sleep until 7 a.m. They got four hours of sleep and then went back out on the fire line; he says of the work load. "The first couple of days were a little rough." He says two fire chaplains came to check on the crews and also go through the burned-out structures looking through the ashes for remains.

Steve relates some of the stranger things he saw in a fire of this size with the large number of destroyed homes. "I was checking on a structure that had been missed by about foot from a downed cedar tree. The structure was still standing and I looked down and there were two tricycles there. I thought to myself, 'Man, I hope they got out.'" Steve said he walked further around the house and saw an Infinity 380SE Mercedes Benz sitting at the corner of the house. There were no burn spots and no damage, and right next to it was an F150 pickup burned completely to the ground. Then 50 yards away was a 3,000 square foot home burned completely to the ground.

As more evidence of the randomness of the fire, he said in a shared parking area of several homes there were three fifth wheel RVs completely burned to the

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pumps at a cost of \$20,276. He said the pumps had to be programmed by their pharmacist and COVID funds were also used to pay for the extra hours needed for the pharmacist to program the pumps.

-COVID funds in the amount of \$17,268.71 will also be used to update/re-

-See NEW CEO/PAGE
THREE



Trevor (left) and Steve Rhea both went to the McKenzie River fire.



A common site was just the stone fireplace left from a burned-out home.

ground, and just beyond that another home with cedar siding and shake roof completely untouched. "Sometimes there was just no rhyme nor reason," he says of the burning pattern.

Asked if he met any of the local people who lived in the area, Steve relates how he met one guy named Dave, who lived in a home on an island in the river, along with several others. "I drove in there and saw a hose bigger than a garden hose. Then a guy walked out of the ashes. He had curly hair and had ash all over him. He looked like Art Garfunkel," Steve recalled. He said the man told him he stayed through the whole fire, squirting water on the homes. "He saved every house on that island." Steve said he got to be friends with Dave, who told him about his experiences with the fire. Later Dave got pulled over by the cops for riding his lawn mower down to the market. "I talked to the cop and said give him a break, he saved his neighbors' houses, six or eight of them. Let him be," Steve recalls.

Another 82-year-old homeowner with three cats had been sheltering on the football field and told Steve he awoke in the middle of the night to see flames outside his home. The man jumped up, grabbed his cats and some clothes and ran for his truck. Racing down the highway the man said he looked in his rear-view mirror to see his home on fire. A very close call.

Another encounter with local people was emotional for the long-time firefighter. He said he and his crew came down the road in a fire rig and came upon a line of people waiting to get back into the area to check on their property. "We had our lights on when we got down to the roadblock. All these people got out of their cars and they started cheering, applauding and waving the flag at us," he says. "That was something. I thought, man we aren't heroes, we're just trying to

do our job.” Later he says they pulled into Troutdale and went through a drive through to get some food, when he got to the window to pay, they told him the people in the car in front had picked up the tab for his dinner. “That’s pretty cool,” he said. But he did recall how other fire fighters had a much tougher time. A fire crew from the McKenzie River District not only lost their fire station to the fire, but every fire fighter’s home burned down while they were fighting the fire.

Being on the fire line with your son also was on Steve's mind. "There came over the radio a report of a 35-year-old logger that had been hit in the head by a tree down where Trevor was working," Steve recalls. "I had to go. I drove down to where his crew was, and of course, I was worried." He says he asked the crew boss if Trevor Rhea (who is also 35) was okay. "Trevor? Yeah, he's fine. I saw him a couple of minutes ago right down there," Steve was told.

And what about wife and mother, Molly Rhea? What does she think about having both her son and husband on a large dangerous fire at the same time? Molly says she is used to having them out on fires, as Trevor started going

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