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National forest open to public

With recent precipitation and fewer new fires across the Umatilla National Forest, officials have decided to reopen all Heppner and North Fork John Day Ranger District lands effective Wednesday, Aug. 4 the Forest Service announced Monday.

Despite the recent precipitation, fire danger on the Umatilla National Forest is still extreme, the news release says, and the Forest Service emphasized that in the areas reopening certain restrictions will be in effect. Campfires are prohibited on the forest, with liquid and bottle (propane) gas stoves only. No internal combustion engine operation (including chainsaws), except for motorized vehicles will be allowed. Electrical generators operated under the following conditions are allowed in the forest: in the center of an area at least 10 feet in diameter that is barren or cleared of all flammable material, or when fully contained within a pickup truck bed that is empty of all flammable material, or; when factory installed in a recreational vehicle and the generator exhaust discharge is located in the center of an area at least 10 feet in diameter that is barren or cleared of all flammable material.

No off-road or off-trail vehicle travel or travel on roads not cleared of standing grass or other flammable material is allowed. Smoking is allowed only in enclosed vehicles, buildings and developed recreation sites, or in cleared areas.

The public was reminded that violating closures and fire restrictions carries a mandatory appearance in federal court, punishable as a Class B misdemeanor with a fine of up to \$5,000 for an individual or \$10,000 for an organization, or up to six months in prison, or both, the news release said.

Following the hastily called forest closure July 16, Heppner District Ranger Doug McKay attended a July 21 meeting of the Morrow County Commission to discuss what impact the closure has on Morrow County owned forest lands such as parks, and how the county can better partner with the Forest Service on communicating future closure actions.

McKay told the commissioners that the complete and quick closure of the entire Umatilla National Forest was unprecedented and not an action the Forest Service took lightly. "It was a rare and unique and hopefully one-time action to close the forest,"



Umatilla National Forest is back open to the public once again

he said. McKay explained that there were a lot of big fires going on and it was still not an easy decision and one "we did not have a lengthy discussion about." He said the decision was made knowing there would be ramifications to the local communities and knowing also that there would be some people with a legitimate need to be in the forest. His office issued waivers so as to impact the local economy as little as possible. He pointed out that most of the fires in the forest are not started by lighting, but by human activity, so the leadership saw a need to keep the public out and do it quickly.

Commissioner Don Russell wanted to know how the public was notified of the closure. "As I go up there to my favorite meadow, that I have gone to the past four years, how do I know its closed, did you guys have signs?" he asked. McKay said the action was not so much about enforcement, but more informational and letting the public know what was going on. He said signs were put up at larger entrance points to the forest, and also at campgrounds.

Commissioner Jim Doherty asked why the county was not informed of the shutdown. "Our new county emergency manager wasn't informed the forest was shut down," Doherty said. However, he did mention that relations with the Forest Service have improved now. "Ten years ago, you would not have been here at all," he said of McKay's meeting with the commission. "There was no relationship with the Forest Service. But I would like to think we are part of the team," he added. McKay explained that he was notified the county had not been contacted and for the commission to understand it was "an incredible different situation we have been dealing with." He said his own house in southern Oregon was being threatened at

that time by a wildfire. "My house is at the edge of the fire," he related. That Monday night his wife called and told him, "It's time to evacuate," and they went to stay at their son's home in Portland. McKay just recently took over the Heppner Ranger job and previously served as ranger in the Paisley and Silver Lake ranger districts, of the Fremont-Winema National Forest in southern Oregon, where he still owns a home.

McKay told commissioners that one reason they decided to shut down the forest to the public, was with the large number of fires now burning in the west, firefighting personnel and equipment was scarce. He added that most of the personnel on the Heppner District have been sticking close to home to cover in case of a fire in this district, but there would be scant resources to call on if a major fire were to start here.

Commissioner Melissa Lindsay said she was "frustrated there is no communication between the Forest Service and the county" and the county was not notified of the shutdown. She said without the Forest Service the county does not have a response if a fire threatens county property, especially the 9,000-acre off highway vehicle park. "The lack of resources is a very high concern, because with zero resources you are on your own," she said of the county's ability to contain a fire. She pointed to a recent fire near the OHV park that posed a threat to the large county-owned facility.

McKay said the local district is in pretty good shape keeping people here but pointed out that the moisture content of the fuels in the forest are at an extremely low level. "We do the best we can. What we have this year is a fuel moisture very low, and what you see out there as trees, from a fuel standpoint they are matches," he concluded.

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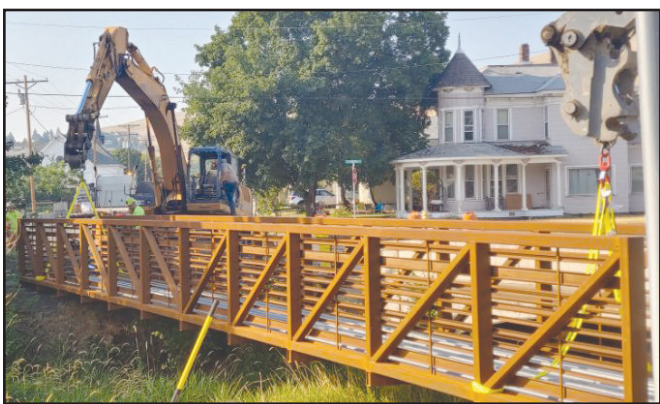
COVID shuts down street project for a week

Two cases of COVID-19 among the construction crew working on Heppner's new street project was enough to shut the project down for a week, the company reported. Todd Johnson of Premier Excavation out of Pasco told the Gazette-Times that under

the state of Washington's COVID rules the company was required to quarantine the crew after the positive tests.

The shut down only lasted a week, however, as crews were back to work on the project Monday morning, placing the new footbridge across Willow Creek and installing new boxes around water meters. Heppner city manager Kraig Cutsforth said other than the layoff things were going well on the work. Cutsforth said the city wasn't able to get cement boxes to go around the water meters needed prior to the sidewalks getting poured, however he said a different kind of box was ordered and will be installed without any delay with construction. Cutsforth also reported that the crews have now completed all the sewer installation under the new streets.

A new pedestrian bridge was placed across Willow Creek at Heritage Park Monday morning. -Photos by Joe Shelley



Fundraiser deemed success



The Heppner Fire Department members assisted with the fundraiser. Pictured (L-R): Trevor Rea, Eric Patton, Katilyn Zinter, Jeremy Cimmityotti, Adam Bergstrom (behind), Steve Rea, Kellie Nelson, Chance Kesterson, Eric Chick and Peter Wenberg.



A large crowd enjoyed dinner, bingo, raffles and a silent auction at the fundraiser.

A fundraiser for the family of Brian Rystedt, who recently passed away, was held Saturday, July 31 at the Heppner Elks Lodge in Heppner. According to one of the organizers for the event, Tonja Lemmon, the event was a huge success. She told the Gazette they fed more than 250 people the taco dinner and over 108 bingo cards were played.

Lemmon noted, "It was beyond my expectations. We live in an amazing community and couldn't have

done it without each and every one that participated."

Many donated items were part of the silent auction at the event, while others were raffled to ticket holders. Janelle Ellis won the gun from the penny raffle and Lacey Hines won the Traeger pellet grill raffle. Some of the silent auction items were presented to the winners who had the highest bids, many that were over \$200. Some of the items and winners included a dump truck load of fire-

wood won by Phil Carlson; a package for a Mariners game that went to Justin Fennern; Kacie Gray got the OTPR tickets with Yeti items and Herman Winter was awarded the dinner for four at TREO.

Members of the fire department mingled with the crowd, served the food and helped wherever they were needed. Organizers of the event were Tonja Lemmon, Rhonda Acock, Mike Alldritt and Michael Haugen.

July much warmer than usual

According to preliminary data received by NOAA's National Weather Service in Pendleton Oregon, temperatures at Heppner averaged much warmer than normal during the month of July. This was the 3rd warmest July on record. The warmest was 76.2 degrees in 1906.

The average temperature was 74.8 degrees which was 5.0 degrees above normal. High temperatures averaged 91.2 degrees, which was 5.5 degrees above normal. The highest was 99

degrees on the 1st. Low temperatures averaged 58.5 degrees, which was 4.6 degrees above normal. The lowest was 47 degrees, on the 22nd. On 19 days, the temperature exceeded 90 degrees.

Precipitation totaled 0.03 inches during July, which was 0.30 inches below normal. Measurable precipitation, at least .01 inch, was received on two days with the heaviest, 0.02 inches reported on the 31st.

Precipitation this year has reached 4.28 inches,

which is 4.71 inches below normal. Since October, the water year precipitation at Heppner has been 7.76 inches, which is 5.29 inches below normal.

The outlook for August from NOAA's Climate Prediction Center calls for above normal temperatures and near normal precipitation. Normal highs for Heppner during August are 85.5 degrees and normal lows are 53.5 degrees. The 30-year normal precipitation is 0.39 inches.

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