



Contributed photo by Umatilla County Fire District

Firefighters battle a fire near railroad tracks northeast of Hermiston on Wednesday afternoon.

# Brush fire near Hermiston kicks off fire season

By JADE MCDOWELL  
NEWS EDITOR

Fire season is officially here.

The official start to the season was Monday, but Hermiston got a head start with a series of brush fires on Wednesday.

The five fires, which started at roughly 11 a.m., burned between Walls Road and Highway 730 northeast of Hermiston. Umatilla County Fire District Chief Scott Stanton said the cause of the fires were under investigation, but looked like they had likely been sparked by a train.

Stanton said the fires were not large — the one he was supervising on Wednesday looked to be about five acres — but could have spread quickly.

“They were in heavy brush and trees, not just grass, so that made it more difficult,” he said.

Umatilla Rural Fire Protection District, Echo Fire Department and Boardman Rural Fire Protection District assisted in the effort.

Stanton cautioned area residents to be extremely careful during what he predicts will be a dangerous fire season.

“The grasses are cured and ready to burn,” he said. “It’s going to be a windy

day tomorrow, and it’s getting hot and dry.”

During fire season, people can do their part by following rules for controlled burns and campfires, keeping their vehicles well-maintained, clearing flammable brush from around structures and not being careless with fire hazards, such as cigarettes and fireworks.

Fire season is also smoke season. Last week Senators Jeff Merkley and Ron Wyden introduced a package of four bills to help communities deal with the heavy wildfire smoke that has clouded Oregon skies in recent summers.

The Smoke-Ready Communities Act would make grants available for schools, public buildings and vulnerable households to make upgrades to “smoke-proof” their buildings and better filter smoke from indoor air. Other provisions in the bill include requiring farms to provide respiratory protection to farmworkers exposed to hazardous air conditions and authorize the Small Business Administration to provide financial relief to businesses that lose revenue due to wildfire smoke.

“Last August in the Rogue Valley, I looked up at a sun that was neon pink

through the thick haze of smoke from wildfires,” Merkley said in a statement about the need for the bill. “Business owners and organizations told me how the smoke caused lost reservations, canceled shows, and even irreparable damage at a furniture store after the fabrics absorbed the smoke smell. Folks told me about respiratory problems even indoors because HVAC systems weren’t equipped to handle the level of pollution they were experiencing.”

SAIF, Oregon’s not-for-profit workers’ compensation insurance company, recommends that businesses have plans in place for evacuations during fires, but also for protecting employees or sending them home when smoke pushes air quality to hazardous levels.

The Department of Environmental Quality now has an OregonAir app for mobile phones to easily check its air quality index, which can also be found online at <http://oraqi.deq.state.or.us>. When air reaches unhealthy levels, homes and businesses should clean HVAC filters, set air conditioners to recirculate air in buildings and vehicles, keep windows and doors closed, and keep people indoors as much as possible.

# Umatilla prison superintendent under investigation

By PHIL WRIGHT  
STAFF WRITER

The superintendent of Two Rivers Correctional Institution is out of the office pending a human resources investigation in the wake of scathing accusations.

Jennifer Black, communications director for the Oregon Department of Corrections, reported that Troy Bowser is “duty stationed” at home as of June 12. The investigation began April 15, Black reported, due to an employee complaint.

Three days before, corrections director Colette Peters received an email from Robert Hillmick, president of the non-security unionized employees at the prison in Umatilla, accusing Bowser of disparaging veteran employees, making a sexist comment to a woman employee and ignoring the sexual assault of another employee.

Hillmick sent the message to fellow members of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, as well as to other corrections staff and to eight state lawmakers, including Rep. Greg Smith, R-Heppner, and Sen. Bill Hansell, R-Athena.

“Mr. Bowser stated in a meeting in front of approximately 15-20 employees that our Military Veterans are the cause of the problems here at TRCI,” Hillmick wrote, “and they are also the reason we have so many problems here at TRCI.”

Hillmick did not get into what the “problems” are, but he defended military vets, calling them “an undeniable asset” to the prison, the department and the state. He explained staff upset with Bowser’s

comments prompted him to send the complaint.

On another occasion, Bowser said older staff need to retire, according to Hillmick’s message, and the prison boss told one woman employee who missed work to care for her children, “When my kids were little, my wife stayed at home.”

Hillmick further asserted Bowser was aware an executive manager sexually assaulted a staff member, yet he planned to put the manager in charge of the woman. The employee became upset, Hillmick claimed, and Bowser told her to “deal with it and move on.”

Beyond Bowser’s words and attitude, Hillmick told Peters the union membership was concerned “all of these things happened and nothing was ever done about it and here we are again.”

Hillmick pleaded with corrections officials to start a formal investigation to protect the prison’s employees.

State Sen. Brian Boquist, R-Dallas, responded first to the email group, encouraging veterans to file discrimination complaints with the

federal Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. They also could file with the state Bureau of Labor and Industries, but Boquist stated the labor commissioner “is likely to bury the complaint to protect the establishment.”

Smith said his office receives a multitude of similar emails, but Hillmick’s report caught the attention of his legislative director, Nicole Crane.

“These types of issues you have to take seriously,” Smith stressed.

Crane conferred with Boquist’s staff and confirmed Heidi Steward, assistant director of state corrections, let lawmakers know on April 15 that human resources appointed an investigator to look into the accusations. According to Smith’s office, the corrections department expected the work to conclude by the end of June but has yet to provide any update.

Roger Ware is the AFSCME staff representative for Eastern Oregon Correctional Institution, Pendleton, and Two Rivers. Ware said he couldn’t talk about the active investigation. Other union officials did not return calls for comment.



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