

Wildfires add to workload of Employment Department

By **PETER WONG**
OREGON CAPITAL BUREAU

Oregon’s widespread wildfires will add to the already heavy workloads of the state Employment Department.

But even as some employees cope with the after-effects of the fires and evacuations — and offices resume operations and are cleared of smoke — the acting director says the agency is taking on more tasks in addition to the workloads generated by the business shutdowns resulting from the coronavirus pandemic.

“On top of our existing economic troubles, the added disasters from the fires are incredibly painful for so many people,” David Gerstenfeld said on Wednesday, Sept. 16. “We are here as a resource and we will continue to be one through this difficult time.”

Gerstenfeld spoke about two specific actions during a weekly conference call with reporters.

“We are going through the claims, we have to identify people we know are from the areas most heavily impacted by the fires, so that we can prioritize the work on their claims,” he said.

Despite a record 566,100 claims for regular unemployment benefits filed statewide in the past six months — about eight times the 71,000 claims filed for a comparable period in 2019 — Gerstenfeld said on Sept. 16 only about 1,100 were pending, most of them filed in the past few days. Those claims are paid from a state trust fund into

which employers pay taxes. The agency is still working through adjudication of more complex claims that self-employed and gig workers have filed for under the CARES Act, which made these workers eligible for unemployment benefits for the first time. About 54,000 people are being paid federal benefits under Pandemic Unemployment Assistance, but others are still awaiting payments.

Gerstenfeld said starting this week, the agency’s computer mainframe system will be able to account for workers earning a maximum of \$300 per week before their unemployment benefits are reduced. That change came about in Senate Bill 1701, proposed at the suggestion of Labor Commissioner Val Hoyle and passed by the Oregon Legislature on Aug. 10.

Calculations are retroactive to Sept. 6, the first full week after Gov. Kate Brown signed the bill on Sept. 1.

Gerstenfeld said the original target for implementation was mid-December. He said people receiving benefits do not need to take further action.

He also said he anticipates supplemental benefit payments of \$300 per week for six weeks — from July 26 through Sept. 5 — will start at the end of September as previously announced. The federal money comes from FEMA under the Lost Wages Assistance program, which follows up supplemental payments of \$600 per week under the CARES Act, but that stopped at the end of July.

POLICE LOG

TUESDAY, SEPT. 15

8:02 a.m. — A vehicle theft was reported on West Hermiston Avenue.
8:50 a.m. — A bomb threat was reported on West Elm Avenue.
11:50 a.m. — A domestic disturbance was reported on East Newport Avenue.
1:16 p.m. — A burglary was reported on West Lathrop Avenue.
2:16 p.m. — A motor vehicle accident was reported on North First Street and Theater Lane.
3:10 p.m. — A motor vehicle accident was reported on Northwest 11th Street.
6:02 p.m. — A motor vehicle accident was reported on North First Street.
6:44 p.m. — An assault was reported on South Highway 395.
9:31 p.m. — A domestic disturbance was reported on East Sandstone Avenue.
9:45 p.m. — Unauthorized entry into a motor vehicle was reported on North First Street.

WEDNESDAY, SEPT. 16

12:10 a.m. — A drunken driver was reported on Northwest Willow Court.

THURSDAY, SEPT. 17

10:54 a.m. — A disturbance was reported on East Jennie Avenue.
9:17 p.m. — A disturbance was reported on North First Street involving three customers refusing to leave.

FRIDAY, SEPT. 18

1:06 a.m. — A disturbance was reported on North First Street.
6:07 a.m. — A drunken driver was reported on East Theater Lane.
9:38 a.m. — A domestic disturbance was reported on West Sunland Avenue.
7:46 p.m. — A motor vehicle accident was reported on East Main Street.
10:26 p.m. — A burglary was reported on West Hermiston Avenue.

SATURDAY, SEPT. 19

11:10 a.m. — A vehicle theft was reported on South Highway 395.
11:35 a.m. — A disturbance was reported on Southeast Third Street.
2:42 p.m. — A vehicle theft was reported on Northwest Third Street.
4:03 p.m. — A fight was reported on East Hurlburt Avenue.
4:42 p.m. — A motor vehicle accident was reported on Southwest 11th Street.
5:55 p.m. — An assault was reported on East Newport Avenue.
7:36 p.m. — A drunken driver was reported on Southwest 10th Street.
8:40 p.m. — Child abuse/neglect was reported on East Highland Avenue.
11:43 p.m. — Unauthorized entry into a motor vehicle was reported on Southeast Sixth Street.

SUNDAY, SEPT. 20

11:45 a.m. — Child abuse/neglect was reported on Southwest Seventh Street.
2:11 p.m. — A motor vehicle accident was reported on East Theater Lane.
5:12 p.m. — Child abuse/neglect was reported on South Highway 395.
10:54 p.m. — A motor vehicle accident was reported on North First Street.

MONDAY, SEPT. 21

8:14 a.m. — A burglary was reported on East Feedville Road. Someone reportedly broke into a building and stole a sculpture.
1:18 p.m. — A domestic disturbance was reported on East Harper Road.
1:18 p.m. — A caller reported a possible drunken driver was reported on South First Street cut them off, and then almost hit a pedestrian.
5:47 p.m. — An assault was reported on Northwest Sixth Street.
9:26 p.m. — A disturbance was reported on Northeast Sixth Street.
9:32 p.m. — A possible drunken driver was reported on Northwest 11th Street.



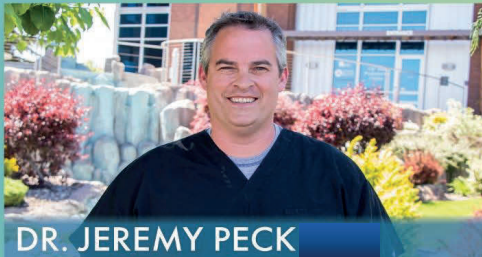
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