

# Fire officials concerned as fires pick up, dry weather continues

By **BRYCE DOLE**  
STAFF WRITER

Some Eastern Oregon fire chiefs are concerned that the county's already dry conditions could lead to an increased risk of vegetation fires heading into a summer where drought is consuming much of Oregon.

"We've been worried about this for a while," Pendleton Fire Chief Jim Critchley said. "We've got flash fuels. So they're going to move fast, especially right now when everything's (growing) or is just starting to dry out."

Boardman Fire Chief Mike Hughes said that his team has been responding to roughly four vegetation fires each week in the Boardman and Irrigon areas.

"We've been running to vegetation fires every day," Hughes said. "Every single day we're on controlled burns that have gotten out of control because the winds came up."

Critchley and Hughes each said fires are occurring earlier this season than normal, attributing it to this year's lack of moisture.

"This is early in the season, so we're a little bit concerned that, already, we're catching these little grass fires so early," Hughes said. "Because you remember what happened last year in Oregon. The whole other part of the state tried to burn down."

Umatilla County Fire District Chief Scott Stanton said he has yet to notice an uptick in vegetation fires in his district, which covers areas around Hermiston and Stanfield, but added that he had not taken a look at the recent data. He said that with the predictions showing a drier, warmer summer, he's worried there could be an earlier start to fire season.

"It could be a busy year," he said. "And that's what they're forecasting at the state level — that this could



Ben Lonergan/Hermiston Herald

**Pendleton firefighters use a hose to mop up a hot spot at a brush fire near Southeast Nye Avenue on Wednesday, May 5, 2021.**

be another busy year."

## Conditions rival driest on record

The fires come as some areas of Umatilla County report conditions that rival the driest on record.

March was the second-driest on record in Hermiston. And in April, conditions hardly improved, the third-driest on record at Hermiston, according to the National Weather Service office in Pendleton.

Since October 2020, precipitation in both Umatilla and Morrow counties have been reported "well below normal," according to Marilyn Lohman, a hydrologist with the National Weather Service.

With much of the county already experiencing some level of drought, the Umatilla County Board of Commissioners last month unanimously declared a drought disaster and asked Gov. Kate Brown to follow suit. Morrow County did the same.

The declarations come as more than three-fourths of the state is already in some stage of drought. The National Weather Service Climate Prediction Center has said that drought will likely continue throughout the summer in Southern, Central and Eastern Oregon, as reported by Oregon Public Broadcasting on May 3.

## What residents can do

Fire officials pointed to

several different common causes for vegetation fires, including illegal fireworks, cigarette butts, downed power lines, controlled burn piles being kicked up by the wind and even vehicles and lawn mowers moving through dry grass.

They also noted several things that residents can do to prevent fires from sparking in their communities.

Critchley said it's important for homeowners and landowners to create a "defensible space" by "making sure that grasses or light fuels are mowed down within 30 feet of your residence." In addition, he advised that homeowners clear dry leaves out of roofs and gutters and move flammable materials like wood piles away from their homes.

Stanton said that for his district, residents should adhere to burning regulations and remain "extra cautious and careful, because it is extra dry."

If residents have questions about how to mitigate the risk of fires, Critchley advised they contact their local fire departments for advice. He also advised residents to check the department's Facebook page for updates and guidance.

"Fire is just part of our lives," Critchley said. "We just need to make sure that it doesn't injure anybody or damage property too much. That's what we're trying to stay in front of."

# Hermiston police lieutenant has surgery to remove brain tumors

By **BRYCE DOLE**  
STAFF WRITER

A lieutenant with the Hermiston Police Department underwent a procedure to remove two brain tumors identified by medical professionals just days before, according to Hermiston Police Chief Jason Edmiston.

Randy Stuebaker, the department's sole lieutenant, informed Edmiston about a week prior that he was beginning to have vision problems.

Stuebaker first went to an eye doctor before going to the emergency room on April 29. The following day, he went to a neurologist who



Stuebaker

discovered that Stuebaker had developed two brain tumors that would need an immediate procedure, Edmiston said.

"I know that every person in this department's concerned about his short-term health and long-term health as well," Edmiston said.

Between 60 and 80 friends and family gathered in a prayer circle at the Hermiston Police Department on Tuesday, May 4, before Stuebaker was transported to a clinic in the

Tri-Cities for his procedure, Edmiston said.

Officers in the department have heard from Stuebaker's wife, Shelley, that his procedure went well, but now he begins the long process of recovery.

Stuebaker has worked in law enforcement for 18 years. He comes from a family devoted to law enforcement.

His father served in law enforcement, his wife works with the Pendleton Police Department and his brother also works in the Hermiston Police Department.

Stuebaker moved to Hermiston when he joined the department in 2012.



Hermiston Herald, File

**Hayley Mele-Seibel watches the pool during swim lessons at the Hermiston Family Aquatic Center in 2018. The aquatic center is facing a shortage of lifeguards so far this season.**

# Hermiston aquatic center facing lifeguard shortage

By **JADE MCDOWELL**  
NEWS EDITOR

Parents are anxiously awaiting news on summer swim lesson signups at the Hermiston Family Aquatic Center, but center officials need to convince some more people to become lifeguards first.

Brandon Artz, recreation supervisor for Hermiston Parks and Recreation, said the aquatic center usually hires about 100 staff for the season, but is still in need of 50 more lifeguards.

"We're at a severe shortage," he said. "We've done some recruitment at the high schools, but like everyone else in town, we're hiring."

The shortage seems to be nationwide, he said.

Artz said usually the department puts out swim lesson signups in mid-May, and he has already had a steady stream of parents calling to ask about lessons. But they can't draw up a schedule yet until they know how many lifeguards

they will end up having, and if there aren't as many as usual, that will translate into fewer offerings at the pool. He said that includes hopes the department had to offer free swim lessons to students participating in summer camps with school districts this year.

The aquatic center's 50-meter lap pool is already filled and being used by the Hermiston High School swim team for practices, made possible by a limited number of volunteer lifeguards. The city plans to open rest of the center's pools and slides when school gets out, but again, availability depends on staffing, Artz said.

He said going through the Red Cross lifeguard certification process usually costs between \$200 to \$300 for someone to pursue on their own, but the aquatic center will provide that for free. Artz said often getting certified not only provides high school students with their first job, but allows them to work

at their university's indoor pool during the school year when they go off to college, and then come home to Hermiston to work at the HFAC during summers.

While students are often a good choice for lifeguards because they're available to work full time during summers, Artz said they also hire adults of all ages, including teachers looking for some extra money over the summer.

For the students, the managers work with them on professionalism and job skills that will translate into future employment. But Artz said they also have a good time together.

"A lot of other jobs, you don't get to have as much fun as us," he said.

There are two lifeguard trainings scheduled for the remainder of May. Those interested can fill out an interest form on the Hermiston Parks and Recreation Facebook page to be contacted, or stop by the Hermiston Community Center during business hours.

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