

Local firefighters return from Baker City blaze

By Dani Palmer
Seaside Signal

Thirteen Clatsop County firefighters arrived home likely ready for a shower and sleep late Sunday night. The 13 were part of a task force who responded to the Cornet fire south of Baker City early Thursday, Aug. 13. They returned after homes and businesses in that eastern Oregon area were considered out of danger.

It's "not that often" local crews respond to a fire elsewhere in the state, Cannon Beach Fire and Rescue Chief Mike Balzer said. It's been two years since Clatsop County was called upon — the last the Government Flats fire in The Dalles in 2013.

With heat and drought conditions leading to fire conditions throughout the state, "They've got a lot going on," Balzer said. "It was only a matter of time before they got out to request assistance from the coast."

Locally, Seaside sent three firefighters to help, the Knappa Fire District sent four firefighters, Warrenton and the Lewis and Clark Volunteer Department sent two and Cannon Beach and Gearhart each sent one firefighter. Lewis and Clark Fire Chief Jeff Golightly served as the task force's leader and all but the Gearhart Volunteer Fire Department sent a fire engine or water tender, as well.

"We like to help out," Warrenton Fire Chief Tim Demers said. "We don't like to see our brothers and sisters fight fires and us not do anything. We like being there, being involved."

Structure protection

Oregon's Office of the State Fire Marshal requested the Clatsop County Fire Task Force to assist in structure protection. The Emergency Conflagration Act, authorized by Governor Kate Brown, gives the marshal authorization to mobilize firefighters and equipment to



The Mason Spring Fire, as seen from about milepost 14.2 on Highway 395 late Thursday afternoon, Aug. 13. The fire, just east of Starr Ridge, was originally called Incident 270, and had been contained and controlled at 9.6 acres before it flared up on Thursday. Officials merged it with the Berry Creek Fire, burning about 7 miles south of John Day, with a new name, Canyon Creek Complex.

help local resources battle blazes that threaten lives or structures.

When that threat was reduced, Clatsop County's crew was sent home, Knappa Fire District Chief Paul Olheiser said.

His department fights as many wildfires as structure fires per year, but they "burn real different."

Wildfires are "real weather and fuel dependent," Olheiser said. The stronger the winds, the faster the fire spreads. And hot, dry conditions make a blaze even harder to contain.

Improved weather conditions over the weekend helped crews make progress on Oregon's largest wildfire, Balzer said. Expected to merge with the Windy Ridge fire, the Cornet-Windy Ridge blaze, sparked by a lightning strike, has burned more than 150 square miles and destroyed six homes, according to reports.

On Monday, firefighters continued to build containment lines around the fire's perimeter.

Special training

Task force members like those dispatched to eastern Oregon must com-

plete special training first. Training consists of about 130 hours worth of classroom and field work to get wildland certification, Olheiser said.

Knappa's 28 firefighters receive continued training annually at Camp Rilea. The wildfire program provides hands-on experience and the opportunity to work as a crew, he added.

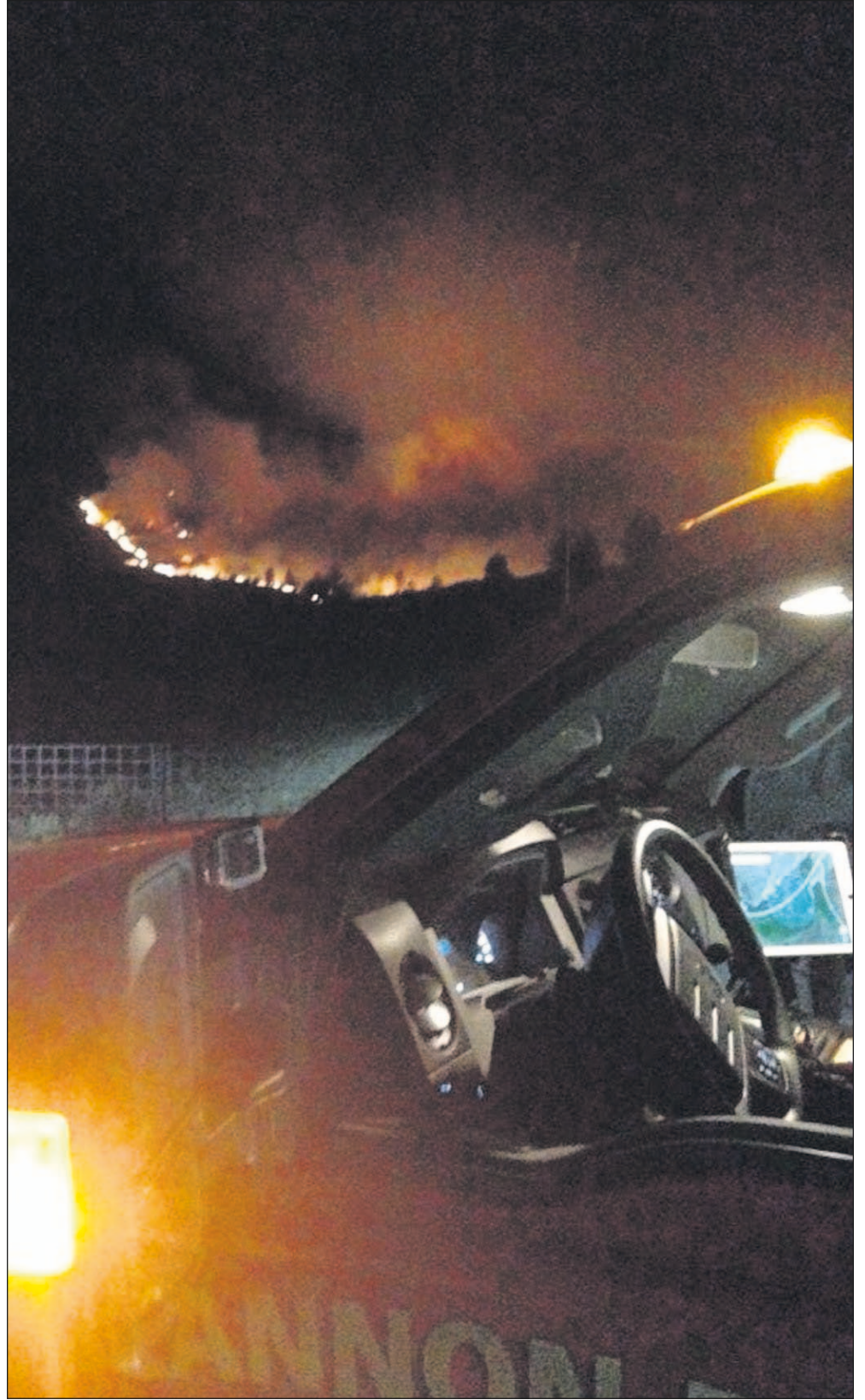
About a dozen of Cannon Beach's 24 volunteers are certified to battle the state's wildfires as well.

"It's a big commitment from the guys if they want to do it," Balzer said. But, he added, those who do are "excited about the chance to go out and help."

The entire county battled local wildfires near Arch Cape last year. And while a fire is never desired, the Warrenton Fire Department got the chance to "sharpen things up" when it assisted the Oregon Department of Forestry in the Fort Stevens blaze last month, Demers said.

That fire scorched 27 acres and took about three days to control.

According to the Oregon Department of



The Cornet wildfire, near Baker City, can be seen behind Cannon Beach's responding fire engine.

Forestry, more than 620 fires have burned on lands protected by the department and forest protective associations in Oregon this year. The majority, more than 420, are caused by humans, including the recent County Line 2 fire on the Warm Springs Indian Reservation.

As the dry weather continues, the Department of Forestry and the state fire marshal are asking for the public's help in pre-

venting fires by reducing fire-prone activities.

"There is a good chance we will get called out again," Balzer said.



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