

FIREFIIGHTERS COME HOME



Two teams of firefighters from Clatsop County helped fight the Eagle Creek Fire. INCIWEB VIA AP

Local task forces sent to fight Oregon wildfires

By Brenna Visser
Seaside Signal

Cannon Beach Fire Chief Matt Benedict has been called to fight many wildfires over his 20-year career, so getting the call from the state to go to Sisters and Eagle Creek for two weeks didn't feel much different.

But when he found himself at Multnomah Falls, memories of a fire that raged in 1991 were rekindled. He was a student in fire science at the time, and recalled protecting the historic lodge for two days straight with his classmates and mentor.

"I just remember thinking, 'Wow, this all over again,'" Benedict said.

The fire chief was among the more than 50 Clatsop County firefighters who were deployed with Oregon State Fire Marshal Incident Management to the Milli Fire in Sisters, the Chetco Bar Fire in Brookings and the Eagle Creek Fire in Multnomah County throughout late August and early September.

As of Tuesday, a team of 13 firefighters at the Milli Fire in Sisters, another team of 14 at the Chetco Fire near Brookings and two teams of 13 and 14 in Eagle Creek have all returned home. It was the first time in Clatsop County history two task forces were sent simultaneously to fight fires around the state, Knappa Fire Chief Paul Olheiser said.

The team deployed to Chetco Bar broke state history for the most days spent on a fire as a part of a conflagration order from the state.



Firefighters from the fourth Clatsop County task force pose in front of Multnomah Falls after fighting the Eagle Creek fire last week. SUBMITTED PHOTO

Olheiser, who is coordinating the county's volunteer effort, said firefighters from Seaside, Gearhart, Olney, Lewis and Clark, Cannon Beach, Warrenton and Knappa fire districts were dispatched to fires throughout the state. As of midweek, more than 20 wildfires are burning throughout Oregon.

Many of the firefighters served on multiple task forces — some even back to back, not even making it back into their own homes for more than a few hours.

This year it was unusual to deploy four task forces in one summer for out-of-town fires, Olheiser said. Before this summer, the next most active summer was in 2015 with two

task forces, and just occasional deployments every few years before then.

"Without dedication from the community, we could never do these things. It's a hard hit to a small business if you lose two or three employees for weeks," Olheiser said.

Olheiser said the number of firefighters sent and from which fire department is based on availability of personnel and resources.

"When the state gives a resource order, you go down the list of what the state is asking for and see who has it," he said. "Starting with Milli Fire, I was getting daily updates from departments of who was available and what was available."

Late night call

Lt. Josh Como, with the Gearhart Volunteer Fire Department, had just gotten back from a family vacation when he got the late-night call to fight the Chetco Bar Fire. He's been with the department 11 years, he said, but being called out to a fire out of town and of this size was a first.

"I got the call at 11:14 p.m., and by 3 a.m. we were on the road to Brookings," Como said. "I think it first set in what we were doing when the sun started coming up over I-5, a couple of hours in. If you weren't ready — it was too late. You have to try picturing yourself there."

Days were long — often starting at 5 a.m. and ending at midnight —

and the number of tasks to complete plentiful. But between moments of exhaustion, Como said, were feelings of excitement.

Como was in charge of a truck designed for fighting brush fires. He and the other volunteers were in charge of trimming back foliage close to houses that could catch on fire and turning on sprinkler systems as preventative measures. The team would also help protect livestock and watch for spot fires.

Together the task force triaged almost 50 homes.

"Being in a fire is a finely-tuned machine," Como said. "If you look at the big picture, it seems like it will never get done. But when you break it down into parts, it's like a lawnmower: there's a blade that cuts the grass and shaft that connects to the engine — each thing plays its own little part in making it work."

"Maybe we were just a team of 13 people out of 1,800, but if we weren't there to protect those homes then that job wouldn't have gotten done."

Put people at ease

Often people envision dramatic battles between firefighter and flame. But, sometimes, the job of a firefighter is not only to put out the fire, but just to put people at ease, Benedict said.

"We were cutting weeds around one family's house who were on Level 1 evacuation, which just means be prepared if you need to go, and they were visibly scared," Benedict said. "So we showed the kids around the truck, showed them what we do with the sprinklers. It gives us an opportunity to talk to people to bring them down from that fear and help them know what they can do in the future to be safe."

How South County food bank serves a growing need

Church has impact for food bank

By Brenna Visser
Seaside Signal

For the past four years, the South Clatsop County Food Bank had always counted on the North Coast Family Fellowship as a steady source for donations.

But at the beginning of this year, regional manager Karla Gann started to see more and more blue bags filled to the brim with food donations. Instead of receiving 500 to 800 pounds of food from the church like she expected, she started getting monthly donations of 800 to 1,400 pounds.

It's called blue bag Sunday. The first Sunday of the month, the congregation of the North Coast Family Fellowship piles fruits, vegetables, canned goods and more into blue bags that read "With Love" on the side, and leave them in the church for the food bank to pick up Monday. This church alone makes up one-tenth of all donations to the food bank.

It's a type of donation Gann rarely sees from a private entity, and she said the impacts are huge.



COLIN MURPHEY/EO MEDIA GROUP

South Clatsop County Food Bank regional manager Karla Gann stands next to stacks of donations recently made by a local church. Gann said the amount of donated goods has increased dramatically since the beginning of the year.

"We can go from distributing 65 pounds of food to a family at one time to 125 pounds. Before we were able to give out about on average three days worth of food to a recipient," Gann said. "Because of this increase, now I can give out closer to five days worth of food at a time. This helps get people through."

In Clatsop County, that means helping the 390 to 470 families who come in each month needing food to get by

before payday.

"It keeps the money flowing. We are saving \$700 to \$1,000 a month to keep the lights and to build a reserve instead of spending it on building up our food supply," she said. "Everyone here is a volunteer. So it's significant."

'With Love'

When John Neagle joined the North Coast Family Fellowship last October, the pastor liked how the ministry had

connected with the community through donations to the food bank. So starting in January, he challenged his congregation to do more.

Tyler Evans, a volunteer with the church, said the office started greeting people at the door with blue bags inscribed with the words "With Love."

"It's easier to donate when you have a reminder," Evans said.

Neagle said he made expanding the relationship with the food bank, which the church has had since 2012, a priority because it is an easy, yet impactful, way to connect with the community.

"When people offer, sometimes it's just a few items, and other times they bring two bags packed to the gills that takes two hands to carry," Neagle said. "Sharing helps the person you are sharing with, but it's also helpful for those who are giving the food. We're not just trying to give you a can of food; we're trying to share God's love through that can of food."

Children's ministries director Annie Utterback said helping to feed the community is an important way as Christians to be a helping hand for all.

"This is a way for us to reach out without people having to walk through our door," she said.

The fellowship plans to keep expanding its contribution to the food bank, as well as local shelters and other social services, Neagle said.

"It's about blessing people where they are at, and showing them love through food," worship arts and student ministries director Sam Hughes said.

Meeting a need

An estimated 25 percent of county residents qualify for emergency food assistance, Clatsop County Regional Food Bank Director Marlin Martin said, a figure that has remained steady for the past five years. More than 6,850 people used emergency food resources last year.

"We have continued for the past 11 years to see increases in the number of emergency food boxes being distributed and the number of people visiting food banks, even though the population hasn't grown significantly," Martin said. "Those people living in poverty have fallen into deeper crevasses of poverty. We count each household as individual

visits, and we see the same households coming more often."

Clatsop County isn't alone. The Oregon Center for Public Policy reported last year that one in six families statewide lack consistent access to adequate food. Oregon has also seen the largest increase in food insecurity, spiking 18.4 percent since the Great Recession. "We don't have enough living wage jobs for people to meet their food needs," Martin said.

To meet this steadily increasing need, Martin said the regional food bank is working on securing more funds to implement a mobile soup kitchen later this fall — much like the mobile produce bank that has provided fresh vegetables and fruits for the past three years.

It's not a problem Gann sees going away anytime soon. But if she can keep handing out five days worth of food instead of three, she sees it as one more way to help people just make it through.

"I have a passion for food, and a passion for people," she said. "We want to provide as much variety and choice as we can for people who visit us, and donations like this keeps us from falling into just rice and beans."

State seeks input on Nehalem River plan

EO Media Group

The Oregon Parks and Recreation Department is taking feedback until mid-October on a proposal to add a 17-mile section of the Nehalem River to the state scenic waterways program. A scenic waterway designation helps protect the scenic, natural and recreation value of a section of river by subjecting some activities within one-quarter

mile of the bank to a review.

The designation would include several miles of the river in southern Clatsop County between Henry Rierison Spruce Run Park and the Beaver Eddy Campground. The designation would continue downriver to Cougar Valley State Park east of Nehalem. Public feedback will be used in a recommendation for or against the designation. State Scenic Waterway des-

ignations help minimize or prevent destructive streamside logging, dams, devastating mining, and other inappropriate development, while enhancing fish and wildlife habitats. Comments can also be emailed to oprd.publiccomment@oregon.gov or mailed to: OPRD Scenic Waterway Study, 725 Summer St NE Suite C, Salem, OR 97301. The comment period closes Oct. 13.

MEETINGS

Tuesday, Sept. 19
Seaside Planning Commission, work session, 6 p.m., City Hall, 989 Broadway.
Seaside School District Board of Directors, 6 p.m., 1801 S. Franklin, Seaside.

Thursday, Sept. 21
Seaside Tree Board, 4 p.m., City Hall, 989 Broadway.
Transportation Advisory Committee, 6 p.m., City Hall, 989 Broadway.

Tuesday, Sept. 26
Seaside Airport Advisory Committee, 6 p.m., City Hall, 989 Broadway.

Wednesday, Sept. 20
Seaside Tourism Advisory Com-

Monday, Sept. 25
Seaside City Council, 7 p.m.,

Tuesday, Oct. 3
Community and Senior Center Commission, 10:30 a.m., 1225 Avenue A., Seaside.

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