

Fire protection options under debate for forest reserve

By KATIE FRANKOWICZ
The Astorian

CANNON BEACH — The arrow on a fire danger sign in Ecola Creek Forest Reserve rests dead center on a green wedge labeled “low.” But a debate is simmering about how best to protect the forested acres that shelter the city’s primary water source as the threat of catastrophic wildfires in Oregon seems to grow each year.

City emergency management staff and the rural fire protection district are pushing for improvements to roads in the reserve. Right now, they say, the roads are in need of repair and options are limited if they have to respond to a fire. However, in a draft update of the reserve’s management plan, the city’s Parks and Community Services Committee recommends minimal to no road enhancement. They, along with some city councilors, worry that improved access will only invite more people to the reserve and increase the risk of someone sparking an accidental fire.

They point to data collected from the Oregon Department of Forestry that shows fires on the coast have tended to be accidental and human-caused, often associated with logging-related activities like burning slash piles but also campfires and smoking.

They also examined data from the National Park Service for the agency’s Fort Clatsop unit that concluded the risk of wildfire on the North Coast was generally low given annual rainfall, cooler temperatures and humidity levels.

But Rick Hudson, the emergency manager for



The entrance to Ecola Creek Forest Reserve in Cannon Beach.

Hailey Hoffman/The Astorian

Cannon Beach, points to power lines that cut through the reserve — a potential fire hazard — and the fact that people already wander on roads and trails.

He respects the parks committee’s work and agrees that “people are responsible for being irresponsible.”

To him, that means plans and infrastructure like roads are even more necessary, especially as the climate shifts and the state continues to see fires like the ones that burned across Oregon last year.

“It’s impossible to keep human beings out of that environment,” he told The Astorian. “It’s already open.”

Damp places

Though the coast has burned before — the infamous Tillamook Burn fires of 1933, which destroyed more than 300,000 acres of timber in what is now the Tillamook State Forest, are the oft-cited examples — wildfire is not something many residents worry about

from year to year. North Coast forests are notoriously damp places and some spots on hiking trails will stay muddy almost year-round.

But last year, 1.1 million acres burned across Oregon, fueled by warm and dry conditions associated with climate change and unusually strong winds. In August and September, much of the West was burning.

On the North Coast, evidence of the massive fires raging elsewhere arrived in the form of thick smoke that blotted out the sun and caused temperatures to drop. Timber managers shut down recreational access to forestlands then watched and waited over the Labor Day weekend, wondering if the winds would drive fire toward the Coast Range.

Two fires that burned near Arch Cape in 2018 generated the same kinds of concerns Cannon Beach leaders face now. Those fires had a human root, sparked by timber slash fires, and were fanned by east winds. The fires — how fast they

moved, how fiercely they burned — unnerved many in emergency response roles.

And last year’s fires carry a warning for the North Coast. Farther south, in Lincoln County, the Echo Mountain fire affected some 2,500 acres, a tiny amount compared to what was burning elsewhere.

Still, it’s a fire that stands out, and one other coastal communities should consider as they think about wildfire risk and the steps they can take to mitigate that risk, said Aaron Groth, an Astoria-based regional fire specialist with Oregon State University’s forestry and natural resources extension fire program.

New to the job, he plans to begin reaching out to both small and large timber owners and managers to better understand some of the gaps that exist on the coast when it comes to fire protection.

“I think that (the Echo Mountain fire) is something that should be on people’s minds,” he said. “It’s something that had great impact

on Lincoln County.”

The Ecola Creek Forest Reserve is bounded on three sides by commercial timberland owned by GreenWood Resources. A network of roads maintained by the timber company provides access across this land to the reserve. GreenWood requires any recreational users on its timberland to register for a free pass to get beyond entrance gates. Access to the city lands is not monitored in this way.

The rest of the reserve faces U.S. Highway 101 and the city.

Mark Morgans, of GreenWood Resources, is in the early stages of discussing a possible memorandum of understanding between the timber company and the city. The agreement could formalize things the two entities already collaborate on, such as closing down public access to the forest during wildfire scares.

Morgans noted that Cannon Beach has already planned extensively for other natural disasters, such as earthquakes and tsunamis, and hopes they will plan for wildfires, too.

“As a neighbor, I do want to encourage them so that our forest doesn’t burn up if they haven’t developed a response to theirs,” he said.

‘Secret forest’

Fire danger and a wildfire strategy were not emphasized in the original management plan for the Ecola Creek Forest Reserve. Now, this potential danger has been included in the recent update, though city staff wish to go one step further and open up the possibility of future access improvements.

The purchase of the land, a process that spanned years

and involved complicated acquisitions and land swaps, did not have unanimous support in the community. A bond to help the city acquire the 800-acre state-owned tract that now forms the bulk of the reserve passed by a mere 12 votes in 2009.

The reserve has since become an important part of the community — it’s a “secret forest,” City Councilor Nancy McCarthy said. In it grow cedar trees estimated at 500 years and older, and the creek and streams provide key habitat for salmon. Importantly for residents, the reserve also helps shelter the city’s primary source of drinking water.

Given the public involvement and support in creating the reserve and the need to protect both the forest and municipal water supply while also giving people a place to wander, the city must maintain a tricky balance.

Hudson plans to conduct more meetings with parks committee members and other stakeholders and fire experts. The management plan and the question of road improvements were to come in front of the City Council again in March.

Ultimately, the City Council will decide on how protection of the reserve will be addressed.

But it will be hard to serve both sides, City Manager Bruce St. Denis cautioned city councilors in early February. In fact, he said, “I don’t see a way to resolve it by meeting in the middle.”

He said it comes down to different ideas of protection: Is it limited access to the public or is it the ability to bring emergency vehicles into the reserve?

Cannon Beach mulls food, beverage tax to help fund fire district

By KATIE FRANKOWICZ
The Astorian

CANNON BEACH — For years, the Cannon Beach Rural Fire Protection District has looked at ways to get tourists to pay their share for emergency services.

Now city leaders say they may go to voters in November with a tax on food and beverages as a way to target spending by tourists and direct that money back to the fire district. Increasingly, emergency calls from visitors make up the bulk of the fire district’s call load while residents continue to foot the bill.

Fire Chief Marc Reckmann floated the idea of a 2% food and beverage tax for the next three years, with most of the revenue going to pay for fire dis-

trict personnel. The district has only three paid employees. Another position, a staff member tasked with volunteer recruitment and retention who also serves as a firefighter herself, is funded through a grant set to run out in December.

The fire district relies on volunteer firefighters who, because of work or other issues, may not always be available when a call comes in. The district lacks daily staffing, as well as a dedicated fire marshal, someone who is able to review development plans and consistently provide fire inspections for hotels and other businesses that need this documentation for insurance purposes.

Funded primarily through property tax revenue, the fire district was not interested in pursu-

ing another bond measure that would only continue to draw money from locals, while the city says it is not able to take on the cost and logistics of running its own fire department.

But there is a disconnect between what people assume the fire district can provide and what it can consistently offer, Reckmann said.

“I believe it is the expectation of visitors that we have a surf and a rope team,” he told city councilors. “When they come and they hike the trails and they’re in the water, I don’t think anyone gives it a second thought: Do we have those services if they get in trouble? Or, who is going to come pull them out of the water?”

Meanwhile, the city, local businesses and res-

idents have their own expectations.

Going forward, if the fire district is not able to boost revenue streams and fund personnel, “the only other thing we can start doing is looking at services we provide,” said Garry Smith, the president of the fire district board.

“All that we’re really required legally to supply is structural firefighting,” he reminded the City Council at a recent work session. “We don’t have to do wildland firefighting. We don’t have to do (emergency medical care). We don’t have to do surf rescue.”

The fire district doesn’t want to give up providing these services, Reckmann said, but there could be difficult choices ahead.

Last year, the district responded to 466 calls for

service, an increase over prior years. Of those, 77% — 344 calls — came from nonresidents.

The fire district saw a dip in calls when Cannon Beach largely shut down to tourism in the spring and summer as coronavirus cases spiked across Oregon. Call levels shot up in September when visitors returned and remained high through the end of the year. Already this year, for January and February, the number of calls is higher than what the district saw in prior years.

When Reckmann recently reached out to businesses through the Cannon Beach Chamber of Commerce, he was told by some

not to put the question of a food and beverage tax on the ballot. But city leaders believe it is the best way to facilitate a fully public and transparent process.

City and fire district leaders have some work to do before anything goes forward, however. It isn’t clear how much money the tax would raise or exactly how revenue generated should be split between the district and the city.

Still, Mayor Sam Steidel believes visitors need to help pay their part. Besides, he said, many are already visiting from areas that have a sales tax. He expects a small tax like the one proposed would barely register.

County hires lobbying firm to help in Salem

By NICOLE BALES
The Astorian

Clatsop County has hired a lobbying firm to help protect and advance policy interests in Salem.

The county Board of Commissioners approved a \$45,000 contract with Pac/West Communications in October to provide legislative consulting services in 2021 and 2022.

The board endorsed a legislative agenda guide earlier this year to give Pac/West a reference for goals, strategies and priorities.

Among the goals, the county prioritized coro-

navirus-related expenses, the county jail and juvenile corrections, workforce development, affordable housing, homeless services, rural broadband initiatives, child care, public health and mental health.

Lobbyists from Pac/West have been attending county commission work sessions to discuss bills, answer questions and strategize.

“While the county’s membership with AOC (Association of Oregon Counties) allows the county to benefit from the reputable and effective work they do at the legislative level, it is with the understanding that this is being done

for all 36 counties within the state,” Assistant County Manager Monica Steele said in an email. “Pac/West fills in to assist with niche needs and specific issues that are unique to individual counties, for example with Clatsop County this might mean issues regarding gillnet fishing, since we are the only county within the state that has a fisheries program.”

“Additionally, while Clatsop County could not

ask for better elected legislators, especially with Sen. (Betsy) Johnson’s work on Ways and Means, Pac/West gives the county added capacity to review the thousands of bills and amendments introduced and to effectively prioritize and focus on the key issues. This work allows the county and legislators to focus on the most important and relevant legislation.

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