



# Potential for large fires looms this summer

Harney County Wildfire Collaborative has been prepping for the upcoming fire season

By Lauren Brown  
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It is once again fire season in the Harney Basin. Wet, cooler weather has allowed for a longer greening up period locally, but with the onset of summer, we can expect hot, dry weather and storms with lightning that can touch off wildfires.

Tim Boyce, a Fire Management Specialist with the Malheur National Forest Emigrant Creek Ranger District, said the month of May was drier than normal and while the area has seen some rain in June, the rest of the summer looks to be dry and hot. "For the months of July, August and September predictions from the Northwest Interagency Coordination Center indicate above normal temperatures, below normal precipitation and drought," he said.

"We have a pretty good grass crop from last year on the south end of the zone," said Kim Valentine, Fire Staff Officer for the Burns Interagency Fire Zone. "We've got fuels available for fire, so it's just going to depend on whether we get rain with all the lightning storms and then how fast it all starts to dry out."

Jeff Rose, District Manager for the Burns Bureau of Land Management, said that the potential for large fires increases starting in July. "I know folks are looking around and they see lots of grass, but to me, it looks average to slightly above average in terms of fuel load," he said. "We've had a little below average precipitation, which makes things look pretty dry and they are. The potential is there for fire any time right now. From here on out, as days progress, the probability of a large fire gets higher and higher until it snows again."

Valentine noted that the BIFZ has been getting engines ready and crews trained up. They have already responded to a few small lightning-caused fires, which served to make certain that everything is in place for when the bigger fires hit.

In addition to training personnel and tuning up equipment, agencies have also been coming up with plans on how to deal with the Covid-19 pandemic. From performing daily screenings to wearing face masks to coming up with county-wide plans for dealing with sick firefighters, agencies are employing a variety of controls to keep personnel as safe as possible. Valentine said



that BIFZ training has incorporated social distancing. “Folks will be spaced out accordingly and appropriately,” she said.

The Bureau of Land Management has been planning not only at the crew level but also on a larger scale, according to Rose. In fact, the BIFZ, the Forest Service, Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife and others have all been working with the Harney County Health Department, Harney District Hospital and the county emergency management to develop a plan on how to deal with the possibility of sick firefighters. The plan would be in place in the event an incident management team comes in from outside of the community and brings Covid-19 with it. Rose said they want to make sure they do not overwhelm local resources if firefighters get sick.

Currently, firefighters are monitoring themselves for sickness. “We do a self-screen every morning for all the firefighters, and there’s a list of questions they need to answer,” Rose said. In the future, temperature checks may be part of that routine. “If they exhibit symptoms or have high probability of being exposed, they would have a high priority to be tested here locally,” Rose said. Because firefighters are considered first responders, they are prioritized for testing. Other controls that will be utilized will include face masks and face coverings, Rose noted.



Jacob Gear, the Rangeland Fire Protection Association (RFPA) Liaison for the Burns Interagency Fire Zone, said that when the pandemic hit in March, the RFPAs moved their training online because they couldn’t have in-person classes. Harney County has six RFPAs with 176 trained members. Many of the RFPAs have annual refresher classes to knock off the dust and make sure everyone is current on their training. Gear set up a website with refresher training videos that RFPA members could watch to get their minds back into fire season and be reminded of the dangers and hazards. “I put that together for Harney County,” Gear said. “But we

shared it throughout the state, and we’ve had 90 people take refreshers on it so far.” It has been popular enough that Gear said they will likely carry those online refreshers into the future and make it available to RFPA members annually.

The RFPAs in Harney County protect 1.3 million acres of private land with 445 member properties. In 2019, they responded to 25 fires. Between the six RFPAs, they have 42 T4 engines, 33 T5 and T6 engines, 18 water tenders and 25 bulldozers. According to Burns District BLM Manager Rose, the RFPAs have become a vital factor in how the BLM tackles wildfires. “They’re proving to be a really valuable resource to us,” Rose said. “With resources potentially being scarce because of some of the issues with the virus, the RFPAs become a much more important kind of initial attack force for us out in the field.”

Valentine agreed and said Gear has done a great job of working with the RFPAs through the winter. “They’re part of the team,” she said. “We’re going to rely on them like we always have, and we’re going to continue with that relationship because that is a huge asset for us.”

Each fire season is a little different and takes its own form based on what the weather conditions provide. It’s always a bit of a guessing game until the season actually arrives. However, the Harney County Wildfire Collaborative has worked throughout the year to ensure all the different fire agencies and entities are prepared

to handle whatever Mother Nature has in store. “Every year we have a lot to think about,” Rose said. “We have a little bit extra this year, but our mission is still the same. It’s to protect the public and protect the resources that we have, and we’ll continue to do that in the best manner that we can based on whatever conditions get thrown at us,” he said.

*This article is provided by High Desert Partnership; a Harney County nonprofit convening and supporting six collaboratives including the Harney County Wildlife Collaborative.*

