



2021 Fire Season Marked by Few Wildfires

Lightning storms didn't generate many large fires in Harney County despite extreme drought conditions

By Lauren Brown
November 2021



While the 2021 wildfire season was predicted to start early thanks to drought conditions in Harney County, Jeff Rose, District Manager for the Bureau of Land Management in Burns, said those predictions didn't really pan out. While fire crews stopped several wildfires from spreading with initial attack, the 2021 fire season saw fewer fires than normal.

"The predictions didn't come true for us, but it wasn't very far off because they had some issues just to the southwest of us in Lakeview," Rose said. "They started early down there, and they were in the bull's eye this year."



Pictured: Bootleg Fire, photo credit AP.

Klamath and Lake counties both experienced extreme fire conditions as the lightning-caused Bootleg Fire, which was the largest in the nation at one point during the summer, started on July 6 about 15 miles northwest of Beatty and burned 413,717 acres. Lake County also had the Cougar Peak wildfire, which started on Sept. 6 and burned 91,810 acres.

Early season wildfires

Harney County was spared any megafires this year, but there were some notable fires over the course of the season. Kim Valentine, Burns Interagency Fire and Aviation Staff Officer, said that while new firefighters were being trained in their annual Guard School in June, they also had to respond to the Donovan Fire off the 47 Road north of Burns and the Upton Fire near Warms Springs Reservoir, which burned 10 acres and 1,200 acres respectively. Valentine said those fires were taken care of quickly and efficiently thanks to the seamless way agencies work together in Harney County. "The beauty of the interagency fire zone is that the color of the truck doesn't matter when we've got a large fire like Upton. The Upton Fire involved the Forest Service, BLM and even Fish and Wildlife," Valentine said. "When we've got a fire, they go."

Because Harney County experienced a fairly light season, local firefighters were sent to help in areas that were more heavily hit. Valentine traveled to help the Medford and Roseburg BLMs. "Our folks supported fires not only in the Pacific Northwest, but California and Colorado and New Mexico," she said.

Going into this fire season, the hot, dry weather certainly seemed to be setting Harney County up for a heavy wildfire season. The potential was certainly there. "We were fortunate enough that while we had lightning storms come through,

which produced an inordinate amount of lightning, there was enough moisture with them that we didn't get the starts that we normally would have," Valentine said.

Late season wildfire



Pictured: Big Meadow Fire near Riley, photo credit Seattle Times.

The Big Meadow Fire, off Silver Creek Road near Riley, was a noteworthy fire that occurred late in the season. It burned more than 2,600 acres, and an overhead team was called in for support. Rose said the local crews and the firefighters from the Silver Creek Rural Firefighter Protection Association were quick on the initial attack. "The crews worked really hard through the first three days, and by the time the [overhead] team got here, the fire stayed within the lines that the initial group held. But it still was fairly large, and the team was there to help us manage the food and the supplies," Rose said. The Big Meadow Fire started on BLM land and moved onto Forest

Service and private land. The Oregon Department of Forestry was also involved in this fire. "I think it was a good effort, and folks did well to keep it to the size they did," Rose said.

RFPAs on the ball

Burns Interagency Fire Zone Rural Fire Protection Association (RFPA) liaison Jacob Gear said that the number of wildfires that the local Rural Fire Protection Associations responded to was below average. However, there were two larger fires of note for the RFPAs: Big Meadow Fire and Black Butte Fire.

The Silver Creek Fire Protection Association was key in responding to the Big Meadow Fire. Rose said he is grateful for the RFPAs who drop everything to come help when they are needed. "The number of trucks on the Big Meadow fire from the RFPA was amazing," he said. "You can always tell the Riley folks because they have the red and white trucks so they're visible."



Pictured: Black Butte Fire, source Inciweb.

The Crane RFPA responded to the Black Butte Fire south of Unity. The lightning-caused Black Butte Fire started on Aug. 3 and ultimately burned 22,445 acres. The fire burned in the Malheur Forest, and the Crane RFPA helped with some contingency lines. The Black Butte Fire involved 110 miles of fire perimeter and at its peak, had 615 people working on it.

According to Crane RFPA members Cheryl and Louis Smith, it was a below average wildfire season for their volunteer crew. Cheryl Smith said they probably only responded to four or five fires this year, whereas last year, they responded to 27.

However, the Crane RFPA is ready to step up and help when needed. For example, while the Black Butte Fire was closer to Juntura than Crane, Cheryl Smith said the Crane RFPA's work on contingency lines kept the fire from moving into Harney County.

"Overall, it was really a pretty slow year. We didn't have too many fire responses out in the desert," Gear said. "A lot of that is attributed to lack of vegetation. We did get a few fires but most of them didn't go big because there wasn't fuel to carry them."

As far as training went, Gear said last spring, the RFPAs held a basic fire training class, which had 20 participants. Refresher classes in Lone Pine, Fields, Andrews and Crane trained about 50 people and about 200 people took advantage of virtual classes held online. Gear's goal for next year is to hold more in-person training classes and to recruit more RFPA members.

Cheryl Smith said the Crane RFPA trained 12 new members this year and the RFPA held its first fundraiser. For the last five years, the Crane RFPA has offered the Jim Leffler Scholarship, a \$500 scholarship to a graduating Crane Union High School senior. In September, in conjunction with Dan and Denise Kryger at the Crystal Crane Hot Springs, the RFPA held a hamburger barbecue, silent auction and swimming fundraiser with the proceeds going to its scholarship. "It was a very successful event and brought the community together," Cheryl Smith said. Scholarship recipients include one person who is a dispatcher for the Bureau of Land Management and others who have also received fire training through the Crane RFPA.

Both Louis and Cheryl Smith acknowledge the importance of keeping the RFPAs afloat by recruiting new members to help fight wildfire. "Those of us on the board of directors are all aging out," Cheryl Smith said. "Most of us shouldn't be on the fires, and we need the younger people to step up and get involved."



The RFPA motto is "Neighbors Helping Neighbors," and the Smiths, as members of the Crane RFPA board of directors, both embody that saying. "It's real hard to be out there haying and then all of sudden you either see a fire or you get dispatched to one," Louis said. "You're actually going to help put that fire out to save your livelihood and your neighbor's."

RFPA volunteers are always welcome. Those interested in joining their local RFPA but don't know who to contact can reach out to Gear at 541-589-4669.

The next big one looms

By most accounts, this was a below average wildfire season for Harney County, but that is no guarantee next season will be the same. Rose notes that if a few key variables had been different, Harney County could easily have had the fire season Klamath and Lake counties had. "I don't know if it's a roll of the dice or what it is, but it could have been us and next year, it could be us," he said.

Large catastrophic fires continue to pose a threat in southeast Oregon and the Harney County Wildfire and Forest Restoration Collaboratives have been working since 2014 and 2008 respectively to make sagebrush sea and Malheur Forest landscapes more resistant and resilient to wildfire.

Rose noted that an old firefighting adage is to prepare for the average worst day. “You don’t plan for the average summer day, you plan for the average hottest summer day,” he said. “Our systems are fire adapted, and fire is a natural part of it. We have the potential any day in the summertime to have a fire, and it can be a big fire if certain things line up.”

While he feels we may have gotten lucky this fire season with few large fires, the skill and efficiency of the local crews and agencies were key in their initial attack at stopping wildfires before they had a chance to grow. “There were definitely fires with potential that our folks got on top of,” he said. “Our folks are very good at what they do and with the help of our partners, I feel like we’re doing good. They need to be patted on the back for that effort because they work hard during the summer,” 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 and the Harney County Forest Restoration Collaborative.

