



# Harney County Experiences Few Significant Fires In 2020

Locals travel to help fight catastrophic fires elsewhere in the west

By Lauren Brown  
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While the West has had an unprecedented and catastrophic fire season this year, Harney County had a relatively quiet one.

Jacob Gear, a fire management specialist with the Burns Interagency Fire Zone (BIFZ) in Burns and a member of the Harney County Wildfire Collaborative, noted that BIFZ responded to about 60 wildfires. On about a quarter of those, the BIFZ worked with Rural Fire Protection Associations (RFPAs). Gear noted that a strong initial attack is crucial to getting wildfires under control. "The RFPA advantage is having resources spread throughout Harney County," he said.

## Notable local fires

Kim Valentine, a fire staff officer with the Burns Interagency Fire Zone (BIFZ), said that Harney County was fortunate to have its more significant fires such as the Neals Hill, Mud Creek and Buck Butte fires earlier in the season before the catastrophic fires hit on the west side of the state, so the BIFZ was able to utilize other resources to help keep those fires under control. "Our initial attack folks here in the zone along with the help of the RFPAs is what helped us be successful with not having significant large fires this year," Valentine said.

The lightning-caused Neals Hill and the Mud Creek fires started on Aug. 5 in the Steens Mountain area near Princeton, and an incident interagency management team was called in to assist on those fires, which were fueled by grass, sagebrush and juniper. A crew of about 50 folks helped the local 20-person crew manage and fight the Neals Hill Fire, which ultimately burned about 3,400 acres and the Mud Creek fire, which burned more than 200 acres.

Another fire that was not notable in size, but important in the historic nature of the structure that burned, was the Allison Guard Station fire, near Delintment Lake. The bunk warehouse caught fire and burned on Aug. 14. Valentine said the cause of the fire has yet to be determined and fortunately the crew was evacuated safely. Allison Guard Station was one of several Forest Service lookouts, campgrounds, and buildings constructed during the 1930s by the Civilian Conservation Corps. "It's significant not only for us, but it's significant for the community because it's historic, and a lot of folks have a lot of memories around there," Valentine said. She hopes that it will be replaced at some point in the future.

In the Malheur National Forest, the lightning-caused Buck Butte Fire, near Drewsey, burned about 100 acres after it started in late July. "We were able to get a dozer line around it fairly quickly," said Joshua Giles, District Ranger for the Emigrant Creek Ranger District. "We got lucky that nowhere else was really burning at the time, so we had all our resources on hand."

However, the fire season was not without complication. COVID-19 threw a bit of wrench into the system as agencies had to figure out how to keep firefighters and other personnel socially distant during the pandemic. "As a zone, we spread people out and separated them into what we call pods," Giles said. The Forest Service got modular trailers so that employees could have their own workspaces. This helped separate people so that if one engine or hand crew had to quarantine, other groups were not infected. At the height of some of the bigger fires, the BIFZ also rented out the fairgrounds to allow for increased separation.

## Assisting other fires

The relatively light fire season in Harney County allowed the Bureau of Land Management, the Forest Service and U.S. Fish and Wildlife to send personnel to fires around the west.

In September, Valentine traveled to Southern Oregon to help with the Slater Fire that started in California and crossed into Oregon. "I was a duty officer there and worked with the agency administrators to help with the decision-making process for the fires," she said.



Gear and his team helped fight the California August Complex fires, which have burned more than one million acres. The lightning-caused complex fire ignited mid-August and is still burning in tall grass, shrubs and timber. The complex has more than 700 personnel still fighting it with an estimated containment date of Dec. 15.

Valentine said that watching the fires spread throughout Western Oregon was shocking. "I've been doing this for 30 years in the Pacific Northwest and to sit and see something of this scope and scale was just incredible," she said. As the fire events exploded throughout Western Oregon around Labor Day weekend,

she said her first thoughts were how the fire personnel on the east side could help. "That's what we've been working on: supporting them anyway we can," she said.

*Pictured above: Active fire near Forest Glen, CA September 27, 2020, part of the August Complex Fires.*

The coordination between agencies responding to wildfires in the Harney Basin owes much of its success to the Harney County Wildfire Collaborative, a collaborative of High Desert Partnership, which is a diverse group that includes local residents, ranchers and farmers, members of the Burns Paiute Tribe, business owners, nonprofit partners, government agencies, tourists, conservationists, scientists, policy makers and others who share a love and concern for Harney County.

The Harney County Wildfire Collaborative meets throughout the year. For more information about the wildfire collaborative and the High Desert Partnership, visit [highdesertpartnership.org/collaboratives/harney-county-wildfire-collaborative](https://highdesertpartnership.org/collaboratives/harney-county-wildfire-collaborative).

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

