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Wildfire
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Wildfire Season Preparation

It's been a relatively wet April and May in Harney County but there's more to the story.

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By Scott Barton

Spring has sprung in Harney County. Cold temperatures have given way to warm, long days, signs of renewal, and new life. Migratory birds have marked their annual return, wildflowers are in bloom, and the landscape is once again verdant. As temperatures continue to warm however, wildfire season looms just around the corner.

Wildfire Outlook for 2022

The Harney Basin has witnessed a relatively wet April and May, which logic suggests is good news for the upcoming wildfire season. Burns Interagency Fire Zone (BIFZ) Fire Planner, Casey O'Connor suggests there's a little more to the story though. "Despite the welcome relief from a fairly wet April and May, most of our area is still listed as being in an extreme to exceptional drought by the Drought Monitor. Weak snowpacks are a large factor in this."

He adds that, "although the last couple months of good precipitation have reduced some of our concerns in our forested portions, this moisture has also bolstered a healthier crop of grass in the sagebrush steppe portions of our zone. This is great relief for our ranching communities, however these episodic fluctuations in fine fuels (grass production) are closely correlated to significant fire potential."

While these early indicators are useful in gauging where the wildfire forecast stands at the current moment, it remains too soon to say how things will play out as we get into the warmer months of summer. "A lot can happen between now and July," O'Connor continues. "Summer storm patterns, the amount of lightning, and whether those storms come with precipitation or not are all big variables that we can't really predict."

Preparation is the Name of the Game



Training, preparations, and planning are largely left to the Burns Interagency Fire Zone (BIFZ) and Rangeland Fire Protection Associations (RFPAs) in Harney County. Among the agencies and players involved are local ranchers, the United States Forest Service Emigrant Creek District, Malheur National Wildlife Refuge, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and Bureau of Land Management among others.

Pictured: Crew member on the 2021 Black Butte Fire, source InciWeb

Under the Burns Interagency Fire Zone umbrella, these organizations work together year round. O'Connor says, "There are quite a few core fire training all fire personnel

have to go through annually including fire refresher, pack testing, and chainsaw refreshing to name a few.” “In addition, the younger workforce that is working towards career fire jobs, is undergoing some more advanced training, such as Initial Attack Incident Commander, Firing Operations, and other leadership training.”

“Seasonal crews have been coming back to work for the summer the last couple of weeks. Guard school kicked off Sunday, June 12 and ran through the week. It’s the introductory training that is required for all new fire fighters.”

While training before the season is a vital part of the process, the most valuable work is right on the horizon. O’Connor indicates that, “once our agency trucks are all staffed with the seasonal workforce, we’ll do some cross training between RFPA’s and the federal side. In my opinion, this type of training has the most value in preparation for the upcoming fire season.”

High Desert Partnership and the Harney County Wildfire Collaborative

The Harney County Wildfire Collaborative (HCWC), a collaborative of High Desert Partnership, is playing a major role in preparing and strategizing for the upcoming fire season and future fire seasons.

One very recent example is Oregon Senate Bill 762 which was passed in 2021 and allocated more than \$220 million to help Oregon communities better prepare for and respond to wildfires. It was largely due to the work of High Desert Partnership and the Harney County Wildfire Collaborative that more than \$5 million in funding was received for Harney County.

O’Connor participates with the HCWC. “We have several projects going that are either directly tied to the HCWC or associated. I have been directly tied to developing Potential Control Lines within the Stinkingwater Mountains region as well as the rest of our fire zone,” he says. Potential Control Lines are designated routes and points of access where fire crews can best respond to and attack wildfires. O’Connor indicates, “the purpose of these lines is to all be on the same page locally on a bad fire day. It also gives clarity to outside resources about important infrastructure to utilize.”

“My process has been to have the fire operations group mark maps across the areas they know to identify the best linear features across the landscape where we could make a stand on a big fire day. Typically, these are major road systems. The next step is to get large maps with these Potential Control Lines to the Rangeland Fire Protection Associates and have them vet the lines we have picked. They know their areas the best and typically have some valuable edits to incorporate in our final lines.”

The work currently being done is only the beginning though. O’Connor remains excited about what the future holds. “Going down the road, I’m optimistic that we’ll further strengthen these identified lines with vegetation and fuels work to make them more defensible. This is already occurring on portions of the Stinkingwaters in which funding was received from Senate Bill 762.”

“The Potential Control Line process is tied to a larger risk management model known as Potential Operational Delineations (PODS) that has been gaining momentum. Locally, Harney County is updating their Community Protection Plan. I believe these identified Potential Control Lines and the Potential Operational Delineations process will be utilized to identify areas of risk and focus mitigation efforts going forward.”

The Importance of Education

There’s no denying that mother nature is the most common cause of wildfires. While that might be the case, the consensus is that education plays a critical role in wildfire prevention and mitigation too. O’Connor agrees and can’t emphasize the importance of education enough. “Locally our fire workload is still dominated by natural starts. However, we have seen an increase in human starts. The education, prevention, and mitigation components to our fire program have been collateral duties for many of us until this last year. We are excited to have filled two positions to get more focus on these programs.

Derek Shoun was hired on the BLM side, as was Shyanne Slate on the Forest Service side. It's their responsibility to give more attention to the prevention and mitigation programs."

Final Thoughts

Every wildfire season is different, and unfortunately there's no predicting how this coming one will play out. While current conditions spell good news for forested portions of Malheur County, the opposite might be true in the sagebrush steppe.

Whatever the case may be, one thing remains certain: planning and preparation ahead of time are imperative to preventing the spread of fires when they do pop up.

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.

