



**Pacific Northwest Region
Malheur National Forest**
431 Patterson Bridge Road
John Day, OR 97845
www.fs.usda.gov/malheur

News Release

Contact: Steve Beverlin, Malheur National Forest Supervisor (541) 690-6681

The Canyon Creek Complex: Initial Attack

JOHN DAY, Or--Wednesday, August 12, a lightning storm passed over the Malheur National Forest at 4:00 a.m. This was the third consecutive day of lightning activity that had occurred on the forest. The National Weather Service out of Pendleton had issued a Red Flag warning for "...thunderstorms producing abundant lightning" from 11:00 a.m. on Sunday, August 9 through 11 p.m. on Tuesday, August 11. The predicted lightning continued on through the morning of August 12.

The Malheur National Forest Fire Management Officer was prepared for the worst. He reported for duty at 5:30 a.m. in anticipation of new fire starts. As expected, reports of new starts came rolling in from the five staffed lookouts on the forest, lighting up the phones at the John Day Interagency Dispatch Center. By that afternoon, local firefighting resources had responded to 12 new starts on the forest, stretching from south of Seneca north and east to the Indian Rock area.

The Mason Springs (#270) and the Berry Creek Fires (#271) were two of the twelve new fire starts that received initial attack response.

"History has proven that the Forest Service is 98% successful with initial attack response in wildland fire suppression," said Malheur National Forest Supervisor Steve Beverlin. "Unfortunately, it's the 2% that escape initial attack efforts that impact lives, property and natural resources."

August 12 (Wednesday)

Initial response for the Berry Creek and Mason Springs Fires included both aerial and ground resources. One heavy air tanker, three single engine air tankers (SEATS), two helicopters with buckets, smokejumpers, rappellers, three engines, a twenty person hand crew, one dozer and two water tenders responded. Enough resources were on scene immediately to require a Type 4 Incident Commander (IC).

At 10:06 a.m., smokejumpers confirmed the Berry Creek Fire location was within the Strawberry Mountain Wilderness and requested special permission for use of chainsaws for fire suppression purposes. Chainsaws were approved by the forest supervisor at 10:18 a.m.; helicopter water bucket drops and aerial retardant use were approved at 10:26 a.m.

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for the greatest good

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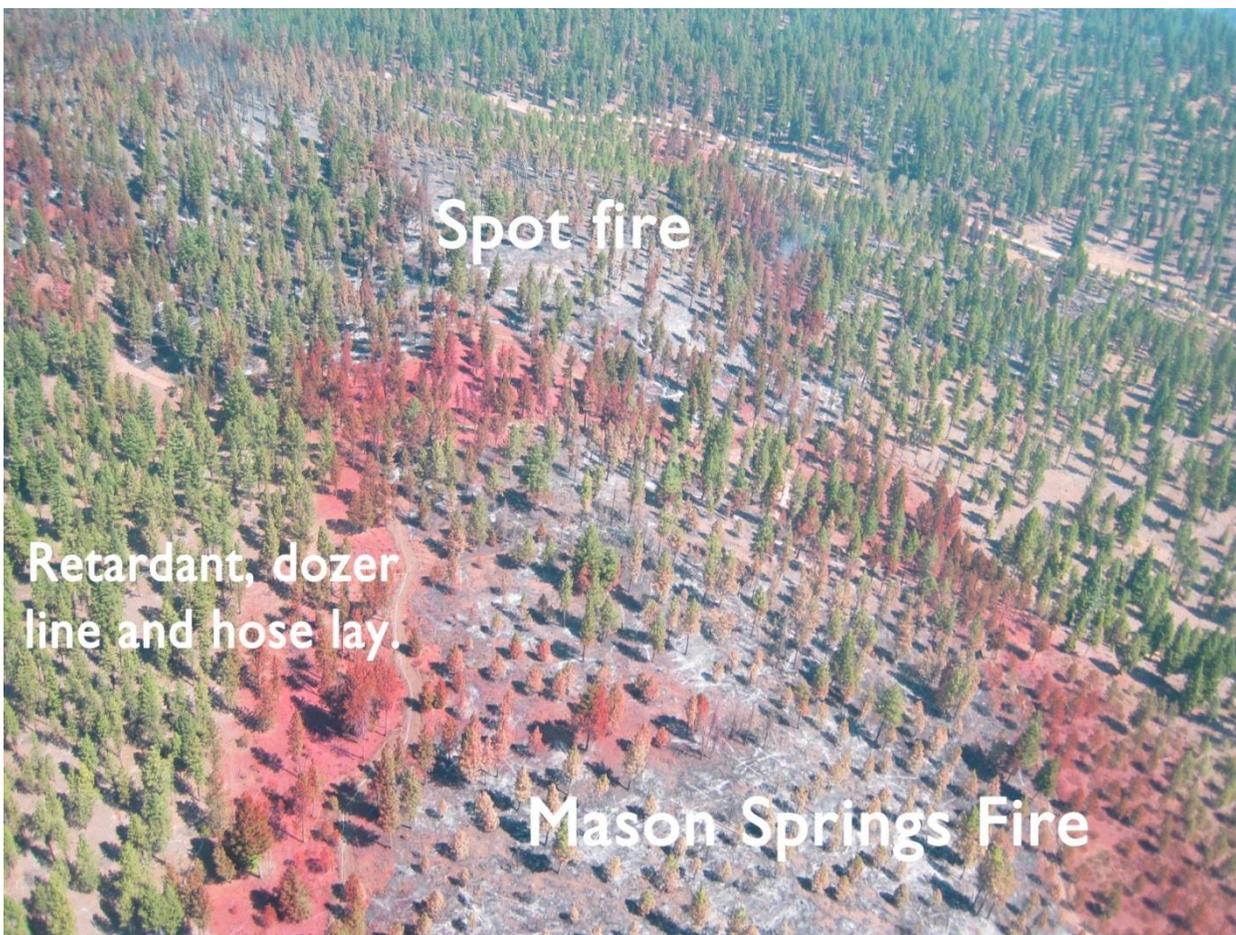
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By 11:00 a.m., one additional SEAT was dropping retardant on both fires. Two of the SEATs were on loan from Oregon Department of Forestry (ODF)-Prineville. At 11:12 a.m., the heavy air tanker was also supporting suppression efforts on the Berry Creek Fire with retardant drops. By 2:06 p.m., the Mason Springs Fire was lined with retardant and dozer line; a helicopter with bucket was working to cool down the interior of the fire. By 5:41 p.m., things were looking so good on the Mason Springs Fire that the helicopter was reassigned to the Berry Creek Fire.

At 9:10 p.m., a firefighter on the Berry Creek Fire required medical transport by ground ambulance for heat exhaustion. While busy with the medical response, a crowning hot spot flared up late in the evening. During this critical time, all resources on the fire were forced to pull off due to aggressive fire behavior exceeding the containment line.

Additional aircraft support was ordered for the following morning and the Type 4 Incident Commander requested a Type 3 Team to manage the escalating situation.



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August 13 (Thursday)

At 8:28 a.m. the following morning, the Berry Creek Fire was estimated to be 50 acres in size and was actively burning on the west flank. Once a Type 3 Team was ordered, ODF resources responded, including an Operations Chief, two structure protection engines, one dozer and a five-person hand squad. The Mason Springs Fire was approximately 10 acres in size.

By 10:30 a.m., air tankers and SEATs were providing aerial support to the Berry Creek Fire. Hand crews continued with line construction on Berry Creek and reinforced the fire lines on Mason Springs.

At 2:04 p.m., a spot fire was found 400' from the containment line on the Mason Springs Fire. By 2:40 p.m, a helicopter with water bucket was dropping on the Mason Springs Fire. By 3:04 p.m, two SEATs were dropping retardant. One dozer responded from John Day. The determination was made that the local Type 3 team that had assumed command of the Berry Creek Fire would also assume command of the Mason Springs Fire. Air resources continued to be shared between the two fires.

At 5:32 p.m., the Dry Soda Lookout reported winds with gusts up to 26 mph and fire activity was becoming extreme. AT 5:50 p.m, Dry soda Lookout reported winds 5-10 mph out of the SSW with 85 degree temperature and relative humidity 9%. The Berry Creek Fire was 60 acres in size and the Mason Springs Fire was generating multiple spots that had moved across the ridge. Weather reports had indicated, "...strong winds will create possible critical fire conditions."

Level 2 evacuations were recommended for Canyon Creek. The Grant County Sheriff was notified and deputies immediately responded, but the fire was already moving very rapidly toward Highway 395. By the end of the day, the Mason Springs Fire had escalated to 500 acres in size and had crossed Highway 395. A Type 2 Incident Management Team was ordered to manage both fires.

August 14 (Friday)

Firefighters continued to do everything they could to stop the fires. By 10:35 a.m. on August 14, SSW winds had increased significantly, up to approximately 30 mph. Both fires were very active and the main priority became structure protection. Heavy air tankers and multiple evacuations were ordered, an additional 20-person hand crew arrived, the ODF provided two division supervisors, and local fire departments rallied to provide structure protection. At this time, the Forest ordered a Type 1 Incident Management Team.

Matt Turner, Canyon City Fire Chief and Acting John Day Fire Chief, was paged to contact the Type 3 Incident Commander at the Mason Springs Fire to determine structure protection needs. By 12:02, the City of John Day dispatch office was notified and all county fire departments were paged to respond. The response included 12 engines and 32 volunteers.

Between noon and 1 p.m., Canyon City, John Day, Dayville, Mt Vernon, Prairie City, Monument and Long Creek fire departments were enroute to Canyon City. As resources arrived, responders were stationed starting at mile marker 7, and staggered north towards Canyon City.

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Around 12:45 p.m., Mt Vernon Fire Department arrived with two engines and the chief; they were sent to the south end of the fire for structure protection up Corral Gulch and J-L. Around 1:30 p.m., a spot fire at Eagle Peak prompted the chief to assign two engines and a 20-person hand crew, and also to request air support for a helicopter with water bucket.

“The mutual aid agreement with the ODF that allows local fire departments to utilize Forest Service resources was invaluable. Without support from the helicopter, I believe that all of Canyon City would have been lost. On two other historic occasions, the entire city was consumed by fire under similar circumstances,” said Matt Turner.

The fire was extremely active between noon and six p.m., and it was at that time that approximately 39 residences were destroyed.

“All of the firefighters that were on the fire that day feel terrible about the loss of homes and took that news very hard,” said Grayback Forestry Base Manager Dave Hannibal. “The seamless coordination between the different agencies all working as one was better than I have ever seen. The amount of radio traffic was fast-paced and professionally done. I was left very impressed by all our local resources’ quick actions.”

Around 11:00 p.m., local resources were released for the evening. Canyon City, John Day, Mt Vernon, Prairie City and Long Creek returned to duty the following morning on August 15 at 8:00 a.m. for stand by and patrol. At 8:00 p.m. that evening, the fire departments were released for local fire protection and response.

When it was discovered that a Type 1 Incident Management Team was traveling through Oregon to an assignment in Washington, quick action was taken by the Forest Service to divert them to the Canyon Creek Complex. Beth Lund’s Great Basin Team 1 assumed command of the Canyon Creek Complex at 6:00 a.m. on August 15.

“While it is true that we were low on available resources the day of the big run, if we’d had 1000 extra firefighters, we’d have only been more likely to have serious injuries, or worse. The fire would still have claimed what it did. Our hearts go out to all who lost their homes in this fire,” said Hannibal.

“We are truly saddened by this event and the loss that the community has endured. Many have come forward to help and provide assistance. We are grateful for the incredible efforts made by the firefighters, as well as contributions from the community and the amazing support offered by the Red Cross, and others who care,” added Beverlin.

“The Forest Service is committed to moving forward with rehabilitation efforts that will contribute to the healing of the forest, and hopefully, the people.”

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