New Central Oregon wildland â€œPuzzle Fireâ€• Burns 2,000 Acres

by Cheryl McDermott

Almost 1,000 firefighters assigned to the newly-named â€œCascade Crest Complex Wildland Fireâ€• had their hands full Saturday as the new Puzzle Fire six miles east of Marion Forks and 12 miles north of the Lake George Fire sprang to life and quickly consumed almost 2,000 acres.

Three central Oregon fires, Lake George, Black Crater, and the Puzzle Fire are now known as the Cascade Crest Complex Wildland Fire. They are being managed by Pacific Northwest Incident Management Team 3 (PNW3) under a joint delegation from the Deschutes National Forest, the Willamette National Forest, and the Oregon Department of Forestry.

The newest fire, dubbed â€œThe Puzzle Fireâ€• because of its proximity to the Puzzle Creek Drainage, burned out of control with 0 percent containment as bucket drops of water and air tanker retardant were ineffective due to extreme fire behavior in continuous dry, heavy fuels. Authorities say the cause of the Puzzle Fire is under investigation.

Because of warm temperatures in the 80â€™s and northwesterly winds 6-12 mph forecast for Sunday, the Puzzle Fire is expected to continue rapidly spreading upslope and to the south and east. Fire managers are developing suppression strategies and tactics, and evaluating structural protection on the Puzzle Fire.

The 5,132-acre Lake George Fire located 13 miles west of Sisters is now estimated at 45 percent containment, with crews patrolling and mopping up the perimeters. Spot fires outside the established control lines are being located and extinguished.

Firefighters continue to carefully patrol the Black Crater Fire, now 100 percent contained, to monitor several lingering hot spots.

Several area and road closures are in effect. In addition to the closure of Highway 242, a forest closure is in place. The Pacific Crest Trail (PCT), from the 500 Road South to Highway 242, is within this area and is closed. In addition, hikers are discouraged from using the PCT south of 242 because exiting from the trail onto 242 is not possible. Meadow and Link Lakes remain closed allowing safe access to these water sources for suppression aircraft. The Willamette and Deschutes National Forests issued closure orders for the areas in and around the Mount Washington Wilderness. A portion of the Mt. Jefferson wilderness area is closed due to the Puzzle Fire until further notice. The closed area is bounded by the Woodpecker Trail #3343 to the north, by the Pacific Crest Trail on the east, by the Marion #3436 and Minto Pass #3437 trails to the south, and the wilderness boundary to the west. Marion and Pamelia Lakes are contained within the closure area.

Headline Photo Credit: Robin Wiley

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