

Crews Face Firefighting Challenges Amid Camp Relocation

by K_Guice

The Puzzle fire in the Willamette National Forest has expanded to more than 5,200 acres and there is 0 percent containment.

The Puzzle fire has been just that, puzzling for both firefighters and investigators. "They don't know how it started," said Jamie Paul, an information fire officer.

The blaze is burning six miles east of Marion Forks and two miles northeast of Marion Lake.

Photo by Matt Gomes Photo by John Pendergast It has been spreading to the west and north towards Bingam Basin. However, officials hope the weather will help crews put a stop to that.

"Over the weekend, the weather is supposed to get warmer, which could increase the potential for extreme fire behavior," Paul said.

"In that way, it could hurt firefighting efforts, but it could also slow the fires westward movement since the winds are coming from the north and northwest," she added.

Due to the Puzzle fire, most of the Mt. Jefferson Wilderness area and surrounding forest lands are closed until further notice.

The closed area is bounded by Hwy. 22 on the west, Whitewater Creek on the north, the Warm Springs reservation on the northeast, Forest Roads 1230 and 1234 on the east and Hwy. 20 and Hwy. 126 from Santiam Pass to Santiam Junction on the south.

Meanwhile, firefighters have also been working on the Lake George fire and monitoring what remains of the Black Crater fire.

The Black Crater fire, that consumed 9,400 acres, is 100 percent contained and officials say there are no reports of any smoke. "They are watching it from the air to make sure nothing is going on and it is no longer a threat," Paul said.

Lake George, 5,533 acres, is 70 percent contained. "There are two spike-camp crews (of 20 personnel)," said Paul. "That means they have been left to camp by themselves and we bring them in food."

Paul said there are also several engines, water tenders and bulldozers. "Everything is winding down on Lake George, so they're reassigning equipment to Puzzle as it is no longer needed on the fire," Paul said.

As firefighters continued to battle the multitude of blazes, the place they have come to call home was moved from Sisters Middle School to the Hoodoo Ski Bowl.

The move was a big project. The complex houses more than 1,000 rotating personnel that have been working since July 23 in the area handling a number of incidence including the Black Crater, Lake George and Puzzle fire.

The home base is run like a small, functioning city that covers several acres. "The camp is divided into departments," said Paul.

"For example we are in the information area. GIS (Geographic Information Systems) and mapping for the fire are in a whole other area and then there is the section set aside for the food unit," she added.

The food unit makes sure everyone is fed breakfast, lunch and dinner. "That includes getting food to crews who are on the line, even out on remote locations."

Sometimes, that means using trucks to deliver meals. Other times, helicopters are called for to make food drops.

"Then there is a whole unit for supplies," Paul said. "If you need a sleeping bag, a canteen, even a pen, paper clip or tape, they've got it."

There is also an area for the communications unit. They take care of the radio equipment and communication logistics to make sure everyone can talk to everyone else on the proper frequencies.

“Then we have a logistics division which manages the camp itself, from security to making sure there are vehicles to run things to where they are needed,” Paul said. “They also are responsible for the move.”

Among departments being relocated, the logistics division will also have to move a myriad of port-a-potties, portable shower trailers and hundreds of sleeping quarters, which are simply tents.

“There are tents all over the ground that are also separated into groups,” Paul said.

“Everybody is sleeping in a tent on the ground,” she added. “We are used to it. It is fun to us.”
Thankfully, Paul said they have had great weather.

Last but not least, is the nerve center of the entire operation. “There is a whole operations division where they deal with all of the tactical aspects of fighting the fire,” Paul said.

The camp, that covered the entire school ground, had to be moved in preparation of the beginning of the new school year.

The helibase will remain on the outer edges of town where nine helicopters are stationed. “That’s a whole other camp,” Paul laughed.

For additional closure information, contact the Willamette National Forest at 225-6300.