

Firefighters battle blaze near Detroit

By Denise Ruttan

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SWEET HOME — It's quiet along the road that flanks Green Peter Reservoir, where campers set up tents on the shoulder of the road. There are no signs of smoke.

But at Lewis Creek County Park near Sweet Home, a town of more than 300 people has sprung up in 48 hours. Food caterers, septic suppliers and even contractors for portable showers supply a team of interagency firefighters and support staffers.

There is a war going on deep in the woods.

A large fire was reported in the Canal Creek area at 6 p.m. Aug. 26. It started at 45 acres in the Elk Creek drainage area, a remote region with extreme terrain and slope grades as steep as 80 percent to 90 percent. The fire grew to 200 acres by Aug. 28.

The Northwest Oregon Incident Management Team assumed management of the fire Aug. 29. By Aug. 31, the fire held at 283 acres.

At the start of the incident, more than 600 personnel were on the scene. As of Friday, there were 347 personnel. Crew members, who are on contracts with the U.S. Forest Service and other agencies, are from Oregon, Washington and Montana and are highly trained in wildland firefighting.

Officials can pinpoint the origin of the fire, but the cause of the fire still is under investigation, spokeswoman Kim Smolt said.

In the intense world of wildland firefighting, the Canal Creek fire is a small incident, Smolt said. In northern Los Angeles, a large fire has burned more than 140,000 acres this summer.

"In this neighborhood, there hasn't been a fire like this in quite some time, but it's been a naturally occurring process for centuries," Smolt said.

Smolt is a silviculturist with Hood River Ranger District, but when there is a fire, she is a public information officer.

Just east of Yellowbottom Campground, Forest Road 1131, closed to the public, begins a steep climb to the borders of the fire. Formerly an old logging road that's now out of use, the



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Daniel Preston, who is a task force leader in the incident response group called out for the 283-acre Canal Creek Fire and an engineering captain with the McKenzie River Ranger District, communicates via radio at his lookout point. The large fire is burning near Detroit.

Updates

To get regular updates on the progress of the team, check StaytonMail.com or <http://www.inciweb.org/incident/news/1863> for daily updates provided by the Incident Information System.

As of Friday, Sept. 4, the fire was at 283 acres, but had been approximately 70 percent contained. Firefighters made significant progress constructing direct lines across the north side of the fire. Helicopters will continue to attack hot spots in the near-vertical southeast corner of the fire.

Road and area closures remain in effect. However, as progress is made with the fire, and roads are determined safe for public travel, current closures will be modified and or rescinded by the Willamette National Forest.

team sent in brush trucks to open the road for fire traffic.

Only two engines are fighting the fire, but there are also heavy-haul helicopters that can lift 500-gallon to 1,000-gallon buckets of water, air tankers and hand crews.

"The number of engines is limited because the terrain is very rugged and we can do more with helicopters and hand crews at this point," Smolt said.

Though the area of the incident is near a popular recreation corridor, Smolt said the fire has been low-key.

"There haven't been giant plumes of smoke over town. Detroit was smoked in one or two days. They definitely knew a fire was happening," Smolt said. "But for a lot of people if they can't smell it or see it, it's not an issue, just a concept."

The Canal Creek area has a stand of second-growth cedar and Douglas fir, Smolt said. The nearest residences are about an hour away.

Smolt points out a weed wash station at the base of the logging road. Noxious weeds can be a challenge in wildland firefighting, she said. Out-of-state crews can bring in the plants, Smolt said.

"It's an important resource issue to keep tabs on," Smolt said.

The rocky road narrows and meanders until it reaches the team's designated drop points, where supplies are established and trucks are parked.

At drop point 45, the end of the road, bright orange Fold-A-Tanks hold water that is pumped into hoses. The team uses water from the Kinney arm of Detroit Lake.

At the drop point, crews load their gear and communicate with a leadership hierarchy that starts with a crew boss and extends to squad leaders and team captains, all the way to the incident commander at the top.

Chris Donaldson of Mill City is a crew boss trainee. His 20-person crew wears hard hats, long-sleeved protective gear, high-topped boots and packs with axes and modified shovels.

The crews are assigned to five divisions, points on an attack pattern shaped into a grid.

"Military and fire operations are pretty similar," Donaldson said. "It's a seasonal war on fire."

Crews in the field get daily meteorological updates. In the fragile environment of a large fire, wind direction or cooling temperatures can make a big difference, Smolt said, even when a fire is mostly contained.

Five crews in each division contain the fire by building fire lines and bringing hoses and equipment to the front lines of the fire. Crews hack dirt on extreme slopes to create a trail. Containing the fire is all about taking away its fuel — either through water or dirt.

Crews first took an indirect approach to the fire, but have been installing some direct lines.

After the fire is contained, another team of specialists will come in. The BAER team, or Burned Area Emergency Response, is responsible for rehabilitating and restoring the ecosystem.

With cooler weather, crews were making progress. By Friday, 70 percent was contained.

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