

## County unveils plan to help protect homes, towns

### FIRES

#### Success will depend on cooperation from area homeowners

#### WILDFIRE INEVITABLE

By Kathleen Ellyn

Wallowa County Chieftain

Joseph is at high risk of burning in the event of a catastrophic wildfire. That is just one of the things that approximately 40 residents of Wallowa County learned when they gathered to hear about the new Wallowa County Community Wildfire Protection Plan at a meeting Feb. 7 in Enterprise.

The plan was prepared to comply with local,

state and federal direction, and having such a plan may be required for a community or county to qualify for disaster aid.

Wallowa County is roughly 65 percent forested, and the likelihood of a forest fire is high. But what recent years have revealed is that forest fires no longer burn in the wilderness. They are superfires, faster than a speeding bullet and able to jump broad rivers in a single bound.

There are plenty of causes to consider, and dire circumstances to ponder, but the *See FIRES, Page A7*

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*Continued from Page A1*

presenters at the meeting were focused on helping Wallowa County residents prepare for the inevitable.

“It’s not if, it’s when,” said USFS Wallowa Unit Forester Matt Howard. “We live in a fire dependent ecosystem. We all have a choice: to be proactive or reactive.”

The wildfire protection commission, which includes Wallowa County Emergency Services Manager Paul Karvoski, Wallowa Resources Director Nils Christoffersen, Wallowa County Natural Resource Advisory

Mitigating risk in those areas will be discussed in future meetings.

One community is already addressing those risks. Lostine has become the first community in northeast Oregon to begin the process of becoming an official “Firewise” community.

“What these folks are doing for the Lostine, I hope will be a model,” said Howard. “They are working together to make their homes and properties more resilient to wild land fire. They will work through an evacuation plan. If a fire threatens their communities, they will have a plan, they won’t have to think it up as they go.”

A copy of the county’s plan will be posted online through Wallowa Resources; other informational meetings are planned including several meetings with Wallowa County Commissioners.

Commission Chairman Bruce Dunn, representatives from ODF and USFS and many others, worked for 18 months to produce the plan.

Wallowa County as a whole faces “high and extreme” risk for catastrophic fire, said Jenny Reinhart, a member of the commission. Other counties in that category include, in order of risk, Grant, Klamath, Wallowa, Umatilla and Baker.

The U.S. Forest Service, Oregon Department of Forestry and local fire departments are experienced and will act quickly when a wildfire starts, said Howard, but whether they’re dealing with an entire neighborhood going up in flames or fighting to create a fire break between forest and homes is a choice homeowners may make for them.

“Are you out looking at your home, pulling needles out of your gutter, moving your wood pile, pulling back your vegetation in June or are you wishing you’d done that in August as a fire comes down and threatens your property? As you are evacuating, are you hoping for the best when you come back? Did you do that up front? Did you work with your community?”

Besides Joseph, four communities ranked as having “extreme” wildfire risk in Wallowa County: Allen Canyon/ Bear Creek; Imnaha Corridor; Lostine Canyon; and Wallowa Lake-Ski Run. Others with “high” wildfire risk are Alder Slope; Davis Creek; and Divide/Prairie Creek.

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ODF can assist landowners in finding funding to reduce fuels and make their property fire resistant and defensible. ODF Stewardship Forester Tim Cudmore is the contact person for that information: Timothy. [J.Cudmore@oregon.gov](mailto:J.Cudmore@oregon.gov).

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**Matt Howard**

USFS Wallowa Unit forester



**Key players in the creation of a new fire plan for Wallowa County met to explain the process and need Feb. 7: Stewardship Forester Tim Cudmore, left, Wallowa Resources Director Nils Christoffersen, Wallowa Unit Forester Matt Howard, Gary Willis of Lostine and Ron Polk of Lostine.**

Kathleen Ellyn/Chieftain