

May 19 Administrative Session

It's that time of year to start thinking about fire and Josephine County Commissioners got a look at what might be ahead during their May 19 Administrative Workshop. The following week they met briefly to finalize RV sites at Whitehorse Park, approved an order allowing Roads and Bridges to loan the Sheriff's Department \$300,000 to keep patrol running, did some routine consent calendar business and got in a complaint about Sen. Art Robinson.

Oregon Department of Forestry SW District Forester Tyler McCarty told Commissioners his department hopes to repeat the successful 2021 fire season even though drought conditions persist. Success was confining fires to 10 acres or less with a 97.8 extinguishing rate. McCarty said he's also filling vacant positions in his department and hiring 50 seasonal employees in preparation for fire season. Two additional cameras in strategic places will also help catch fires even before witnesses call them in, he reported. And at the ready are 26 fire engines with 6 backups in case of breakdowns, two bulldozers and air attack equipment. Commission Chair Herman Baertschiger brought up the importance of private sector resources as well.

Long term weather forecasting predicts above normal temperatures for July and August and the recent rains, while helpful, have done little to relieve the severe drought here in the Southwest District, McCarty said. The good news is the ponds and reservoirs used for dipping during fires seem to be holding up.

Baertschiger said he believes the average homeowner in a wildfire environment today isn't taking their situation as seriously as people did 40 or 50 years ago. People used to do things on their own to keep their property cleared and more likely had cows or sheep to keep grasses down. Now there are more houses and landscaping and "there's no way citizens can afford to pay for all the fuel reductions."

Baertschiger said he will be holding a Fire Symposium June 14 to try to make people living in rural areas realize they need to take fire as seriously as people in other areas take tornados and hurricanes. "Fire is part of our environment and we need to be proactive," he said.

During the session Commissioners also decided the county needs to expand the job of grant writer since most of the county's budget consists of grants. The job description was updated to include grant management as well. Someone needs to make sure spending stays within the terms of the grants, said Finance Director Sandy Novak.

Commissioner Dan DeYoung said grants are fences the county has to stay within. Baertschiger called grants the way government controls you.

Novak also brought up the possibility of the Roads and Bridges Department loaning the Sheriff's Department money out of its reserve fund. Public Works Director Rob Brandes gave his approval and said the loan won't affect any projects he has planned. Novak said this is a one-time fix that has to be paid back, with the same interest it would have gotten sitting in the Roads reserve, in three years.

Baertschiger said this doesn't mean the county can just find money in the budget to keep the Sheriff going forever. DeYoung agreed, saying the Sheriff's budget needs to a permanent fix, which is hard to do out of a county tax stuck at 58 cents per thousand dollars of assessed value.

The Oregon State Legislature has considered setting a \$2 county minimum tax but hasn't because "if they did people would take it to the ballot and shoot it down," said Baertschiger.

Legal Counsel Update May 24

County Attorney Wally Hicks drafted the order for the interfund loan from Roads and Bridges to be transferred to the General Fund to keep the Sheriff's Department from having to reduce patrols. The loan will be up to \$300,000 at .75 percent interest and must be paid back in three years. Interdepartmental loans are allowed by state statute but must be paid back in three years. The loan will have to be taken into consideration when calculating a possible levy, said Hicks.

Weekly Business Session May 25

Commissioners approved the interfund loan and the final paperwork on expanding RV sites at Whitehorse Park. They also approved two new appointments for the Animal Shelter Board with the approval of the Consent Calendar. There were no public comments but Commissioner Darin Fowler brought up low voter turnout during Matters from Commissioners.

"Only 30 percent of registered voters in Josephine County bothered to vote. I guess putting the ballot on your coffee table is not as effective as it was thought," he said. "I don't know what to do about that. People make their own choice."

Fowler said people need to be more proactive about voting and pester their friends to vote during conversations. He said he was disappointed the Code Ordinance was repealed and said it's "the only thing Senator Art Robinson has done in two years."

Baertschiger had no comment on that and closed the meeting. DeYoung was absent.

Administrative Workshop May 26

This five minute meeting had Commissioners approve some minor changes in the Rural Land Development Code and appointed Mark Jones to the Housing and Community Development Council. Jones recently ran unsuccessfully for Commissioner.

The Bill and Herman Show May 24

After talking about Boatnik and the Korean War Veteran float Herman would be driving in the parade, Bill and Herman moved on to fire issues. Herman denied climate change has anything to do with current drought and high fire danger conditions. His favorite line is "Forests grow up and then they disappear." Herman didn't explain how trees thousands of years old still survive in Sierra Nevada forests, Yosemite National Park, Stanislaus National Forest and other locations in America.

Bill asked Herman to tell about his background in fire fighting to give credibility to his comments. Herman said he worked on his first fire in 1977 and since then has held a number of fire management positions. He said he's worked as a fire science instructor, a consultant for a power company regarding trees and power lines and worked for the Stihl Company where he traveled to other countries teaching how to operate a chainsaw safely. He said he also helped with chainsaw accident investigations. He says he only does "local stuff" now because as a County Commissioner, he can't travel extensively anymore.

Bill, always looking for the political angle, asked Herman if Oregon Governor Kate Brown's latest "doom and gloom" about fire will come to pass. Last week the Governor put out a message saying, "all signs point to a difficult 2022 fire season that will challenge our firefighting teams and the capacity of our response systems" and asked Oregonians to do their part to prepare for wildfires. She said the good news is Oregon has one of the best wildfire response systems in the country. "We continue to lead the nation in this space, improving even further as investments from SB 762 have already allowed us to add both seasonal firefighter capacity to our ranks and additional aviation assets."

Herman – Well, you know, I always start at the very beginning of this conversation is that forests grow up and then they disappear. And they disappear by fire, or insects or logging. That's another way they disappear. And it's been like that a thousand years ago and it's the same way today. So the problem that people have is that time period of growing up and disappearing can be hundreds of years so it's outside of the average age of a person so it's kind of hard for them to grasp that. But all forests grow up and disappear and they're still doing that and as long as you have forests you're gonna have fires. Now, the climate change argument, they start blaming all these large fires on it, and I don't know if that's the right thing to do because if we study the history of fire, uh, what about the fires of 1910? They were huge fires in Idaho, Washington and Montana. And then how about, I'm just throwing out a few examples, um, the Tillamook fires, actually a series of fires in the 1940s and 50s and that was in an area we consider a wet forest, so when you have forest conditions where the fuel moistures are low, especially the dead fuel moistures, if ignited they will sustain ignition. Well, then you have a fire. And we meet those conditions every year on our forests but with the absence of ignition you have no fire. So you can have the worst conditions in the world but if you have no ignition you have no fire.

Bill – Now what we're looking at right now, it's been a wet cool spring and it looks like after even hitting a peak tomorrow of 90 we're sliding back down to the 80s and the 70s and even the 60s here next week. So we're going to remain cooler than normal and I guess really, what's going to make the difference is whether we have a summer of lightning. Isn't that essentially what drives most of this? A little bit later on?

Herman – Well, Mother Nature has two ways of catching the forest on fire, lightning and volcanoes. Those are two ways. And you just don't know what lightning's gonna bring. Is it gonna be a dry lightning storm which is kind of worst case scenario? Or is it gonna come with moisture, well then it's not near as bad. And then of course the other way is human activities and human activities doesn't necessarily mean that it has to be intentional. It can be by accident. And

so the more humans you put in the fire environment the more chances you have ignitions during those times that the forest can be ignited and sustained ignition.

Bill – So there's a case to be made then, that when we talk about climate change driving forest fire activity, it really might be more accurate to say, perhaps, more people in the forest and a population growth and more people using the forests over time would be more opportunity than for the human touch-offs. Would that be fair or not?

Herman – Yes, you have two factors there. You have to have fuels that are at the point of such low moisture that when ignited they stay lit so you have to have that. You have to have the dry fuels, especially the dead fuels, you have dead fuels and live fuels, and then you have to have ignition. So, without those two components...and then a fire's driven across the landscape, either by topography or fuels, or weather and wind being the major factor in weather and so wind-driven fires That's what happened at Hermit's Peak fire down in the Santa Fe National Forest in New Mexico...

Bill – Is that the one that's been in the news recently? The one we've been hearing about just huge, like 300 acres?

Herman – Yeah. 300 and some thousand acres and I'll read the summary. Now you gotta remember the government controls the narrative....(Herman reading) "So the Hermit's Peak fire began April 6, the result of a prescribed burn on the Pecos, Las Vegas Ranger District of the Santa Fe National Forest. Although forecast weather conditions were within perimeters for prescribed fire, unexpected erratic winds in late afternoon caused multiple spot fires outside the project boundary." And so anytime you go outside the "project boundary" then it's classified as a wildfire cause it's no longer controlled because it didn't stay within the boundaries.

Bill – Well...so Ok, so that was actually a human caused fire? What we're witnessing right now? Essentially.

Herman – Yes it was. And from my experience, unfortunately they probably had too much fire on the ground and weather conditions changed and winds are the worst things. Winds are, you know, because they change so fast. But that burned up 700 and some houses already. So it's a pretty bad deal. And this is not the first time prescribed fires have gotten out of control. The Los Alamos fire, there's been all kinds of prescribed fires that have gotten out of control. The forest service chief now has stopped all prescribed burning on US Forest Service land.

Bill – Could you repeat that, your phone was cutting out there Herman. Could you reposition so we could hear your voice better? Try that again. What did the Forest Service do about prescribed burns?

Herman – The forest service chief stopped all prescribed burns on national forest lands because of this. And so I don't know how we're gonna get all this project work done when we can't burn.

Bill – Now let me ask ya, I was going to ask about this because I know that Jackson County Commission had their smoke ordinance there a couple of years ago that they ended up passing that said that...now I'm just spit-balling off the top of my head here...that if you have a lightning

strike in the middle of the summer you don't look at this as the chance to let it burn for land management purposes during fire season, when fire season has been declared, that you will go and put it out and I appreciate that. I guess my question is though, are we gonna have to be having that conversation which, in the liberal world it means someone's going to lecture you, but I just literally want to have a conversation with you Herman...Are we gonna need more mechanical removal of brush rather than depending on prescribed burns, given how little harvesting has been going on with so many of these lands over a very long period of time? I'm just wondering if the buildup is too great to hope for prescribed burning to take care of the problem.

Herman – Well the problem is, it becomes a financial problem at \$6 a gallon for diesel it gets a little expensive doing mechanical thinning. And who's gonna pay for that and you know \$200 million was thrown into the mix by the state but \$200 million doesn't go very far when it comes to, uh, we've got a lotta acres need to be treated and one of the reasons that we're so far behind is after the 1910 fires public opinion came out and said "hey we can't allow these fires so the Forest Service to out by ten policy. In other words if there's a fire we're gonna put it out by 10 the next day. And so because of the 100 years of putting out fires we've kinda got behind. Remember when I said forests grow up and then disappear? You gotta always start with that. Alright? So now the tonnage per acre on our forests wherever you go is so much more than it was 200 years ago cause 200 years ago nobody was putting out fires. They were going across the landscape

Bill - Yeah. Lightning would strike, and boom, nature would take its course. So, now politically letting it burn then ended up not being a good thing, but then we also had the death of the timber industry. Or shall I say the shooting in the head of the timber industry too, which, to a certain extent, did a lot of the work that perhaps burning the forest used to by Mother Nature. Would that be a fair assessment of where we've found ourselves then?

Herman – Yep. Go back to my original statement. Forests grow up and then disappear. And so when you do these clear cuts you're mocking a fire and you're also creating large areas within the forest that are not fire prone for a certain period of time because, we call em man-made breaks like you have natural breaks like lakes, rivers, stuff like that. Then you have man-made fire breaks such as freeways or clear cuts and stuff like that. But you know this perception that all these big fires are something new is...I just shake my head and you know I've studied fire history and I've been up at Oregon State University. They got a big room there where you can set up under a microscope and you can count tree rings and you can see where you've had fires and you can see where we've had 20 and 50 year droughts. I don't think 50 year droughts are really climate change, it's more of a weather change. So you have weather change. Climate change comes over long periods of time. Weather change comes over short periods of time. But there's all kinds of examples of long periods of drought that we've seen two three hundred years ago. So, and if you go back Bill and you study fire history in the late 1800s we had all these huge fires in Northern Minnesota, Michigan, Maine and then we had urban fires like we had an urban fire a couple of years ago over in Medford. That's an urban fire. I think it's 1871 Chicago almost burned down. If you remember that.

Bill – Yes indeed. Mrs. O’Leary’s cow. The whole thing.

Herman – She was actually exonerated in the 90s. Her barn did catch fire and start that fire. It was a wind-driven fire, it was very windy. Of course Chicago is known for that. And the whole town of Chicago was made of wooden buildings, wooden sidewalks, and whether a wood is manufactured wood or a wood is growing in the ground it’s, uh, wood is wood. When the fuel moisture is low enough it can what? It can...

Bill – It can be lit and the wind can blow it. Same sort of thing. So I guess then what you’re saying is this feeling or this general feeling here in Southern Oregon that “Oh the wildfires have been getting worse, have been getting more of them.” It doesn’t really match the record. But I guess the issue being is I wonder because most of the humans here in Southern Oregon came out of a time with a more managed forest. You know they remember the 1980s, 1970s, 1960s. I mean, even if you didn’t like the look of clear cuts everywhere, they were the beneficiary of removing forests in a way that didn’t smoke up the skies. I guess. Would that be something of what affects us politically when it comes to try to come up with a fire fighting policy? A wildfire policy?

Herman – Well, the timber industry helped because, like I said, it helped forests to disappear. And then they come back. They’re planted and they come back. Forests always come back and you know I’ve visited forests in South America. I was down there on some forest lands. I’ve been in Australia and in Germany. Spent a lotta time in Germany in the Black Forest with some foresters and you know, it doesn’t change. When the fuel moistures get to a point and you have ignition you have a fire and we’re gonna continue to see that and it may be more intense. It depends. And then the other thing Bill, if we are in a drought then in the summer months the fire danger is a longer period of time then when we’re out of drought and that definition of drought it kinda always makes my head scratch. What is the real definition of drought? So like this year they’re predicting it’s gonna be a wetter summer but still getting into August, September we’re still gonna have conditions that we could have big fires. One of the biggest fires in Southern Oregon started on August 31 1987 with a dry lightning event and I was busy on those fires all the way until, I want to say, Thanksgiving. So things change. You can guarantee that fire’s dynamic, weather’s dynamic, it’s ever changing and to blame it all on climate change I don’t think is realistic.

Bill – Have the politicians though reacted appropriately in your view given you say “hey, forests are gonna grow and then they are going to disappear one way or the other and I guess it’s a political choice though on how we make forests disappear. Laughs. Before they reappear.

Herman – Well it just happens. My observations in the 90s I was logging over on Gearhart Mountain in eastern Oregon for a couple years, ya know and we were all over that place and I would say all the time all those project grounds from Weyerhaeuser...I’d say one of these days this whole mountain’s gonna catch fire. It’s gonna happen. You could see it. It was getting set up.

Bill – And it did last year. Didn’t it go last summer? If I recall correctly?

Herman – Yeah last summer Gearhart Mountain completely burned to the ground and it was not a surprise to me all that Winter's Rim and all that country...I just used to shake my head and say one of these days. One of these days. And sure enough it's gone. It's gonna start all over again. It'll start that cycle of growing back up.

Bill – Is there any political will...I know that John West, of course, is going to be one of the two to be Josephine County commissioner candidates for that open position in the fall and he was talking about wanting to get back in the woods. Is there any realistic possibility of that going on? On the public lands. At least the federal public lands. How do you see it?

Herman – Well, there's two factors there. You have the environmental community that's adamantly against it and they have senators like Wyden and Merkley that want to continue to create more wilderness, more wilderness, more reserve you can't manage and then you have our big landowners in the state, you know, they don't want those logs on the market....

Bill _ Ahhhh...I bet people haven't even thought about that because you get US Forest Service wood out there, all of a sudden private timber land's not worth so much, right?

Herman – Yeah the rates go down. And the demand for timber from the Pacific Northwest is not what it was in the 50s, 60s, 70s and 80s because in those years we were supplying a lot of timber throughout the world because Europe was destroyed so a lot went there, Australia was using some and Japan, we destroyed a lot of Japan so there was a big demand for timber. That has changed significantly: one, those cities have been rebuilt and different building materials and two, fiber, timber, is worldwide now. I mean they're producing wood in Australia out of gum trees, South American is producing a lot of fiber, Central America, Africa, so now you've got fiber coming from all parts of the world where it use to a lot of it came from the United States. And if Russia ever gets tooled up and going they actually hold the largest timber reserves. So that's what's going on. So the big land owners don't, you know, they don't want a lot of competition for their logs.

Bill – You know I haven't even considered that. I'm glad we had a little talk about the politics of not just timber but also of wildfire here. And the politics still not lining up though to properly managing a forest. Can we agree on that much before we take off here Herman?

Herman – Yeah but the large timber companies, they will entertain some of that management on Forest Service lands because their lands are adjoining and they're getting a little tired of Forest Service land catching on fire, or BLM land catching on fire and moving across the landscape and taking out their trees so they're getting tired of that too so you'll see em entertain a little bit. It's kinda like a double-edge sword for em but fire, Bill, is gonna be in our lives, it's gonna be in the lives of our kids, it's gonna be in the lives of our grandkids just like it has since the beginning of time.

Bill – In other words relax a little bit about it. You're not going to be able to control everything about this even if you wish you could.

Herman – Yeah and you get the politicians who get up and “Oh we got \$200 million, yeah, like this is the silver bullet and that \$200 million is just a speck on the landscape. Is it a positive speck? Absolutely. Will it help? Absolutely. Is it going to solve the problem? Absolutely not.

Bill – OK. If you have trees around you and they dry out and they ignite they’re gonna burn. OK. Got it.

Herman – Add a little wind to that and the forest can come marching through the community because always remember Bill, houses are just another fuel body.

Bill – That’s a sad point to note Herman.

