

**Ochoco and Deschutes National Forests,
and Prineville District, Bureau of Land Management
Office of Communications**

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Wildland Fire Use Applied in the Three Sisters Wilderness, Deschutes National Forest

BEND, OR – A “holdover” start from the lightning storm that passed through Central Oregon last week, currently a 3/10-acre fire located on the southwest side of Broken Top and on the Deschutes National Forest, has been identified as another candidate for Wildland Fire Use (WFU) implementation in Central Oregon.

The fire is not expected to grow any larger than five acres in size due to its location in a rocky area of the Three Sisters Wilderness, where ground fuels are at a minimum. The fire is located approximately 400 ft off the Green Lakes Trail, one of the most popular trails on the Deschutes National Forest.

The Forest Service advises those using the Green Lakes Trail that the fire poses no immediate threat to people, but hikers should stay away from the fire area due to the potential danger of hazardous trees. When fire burns around trees, it can weaken the root system, causing them to fall over with little or no warning. And, because it is a WFU fire, hikers need not feel compelled to put the fire out.

“This fire is a good candidate for WFU. It started naturally from a lightning strike and being located in the wilderness, it provides the right opportunity to allow fire to play its natural role within a fire-adapted ecosystem. It is very small in size and poses no threat of major growth,” said Central Oregon Interagency Fire Management Officer Chris Hoff.

WFU Plans were recently signed off by Deschutes National Forest Supervisor John Allen and Ochoco National Forest Supervisor Jeff Walter. The plans provide local fire managers and Forest Supervisors with another option for managing fires that occur naturally from lightning strikes.

“We now have an alternative option that allows us to closely manage a WFU fire instead of taking immediate suppression action,” said Deputy Interagency Fire Management Officer Craig Letz. By choosing the WFU option, we allow fires to burn more naturally, as they did in the past.”

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Fire managers are being very selective about which fires are to be managed under the new WFU plans. Last week when a lightning storm passed through the area, the Central Oregon Interagency Dispatch Center responded to 126 new starts, dispatching initial attack firefighting resources to suppress all but a few of the fires. Out of the 126 new fires, only five were identified as appropriate for WFU Plan implementation. Those fires are located on the Ochoco National Forest in the Mill Creek, Bridge Creek and Black Canyon Wilderness areas. One of the five fires, located in the Mill Creek Wilderness, has since been contained (firefighters constructed a line around it). Late yesterday afternoon, fire officials identified a sixth fire, the fire mentioned above that is located in the Three Sisters Wilderness, as another suitable candidate for WFU.

The Central Oregon forested landscape needs periodic fires to keep it in a healthy and naturally functioning state. In the absence of fire, ground fuels such as down and dead logs, needle cast, etc, build up to an unnatural level. This is what federal land managers call “hazardous fuels” build up. These fuels are what subsequently feed the catastrophic fires that we are experiencing more commonly today.

Choosing to use the WFU alternative does not mean the Forest Service is initiating a “let burn” policy, allowing fires to burn unchecked.

The Ochoco National Forest is currently hosting a Fire Use Team that is managing the four WFU fires currently burning in the Mill Creek, Bridge Creek and Black Canyon Wildernesses. The Fire Use Team is made up of 35 highly trained fire management professionals who are working closely with field-going resources to monitor each of the fires on a daily basis, mapping fire growth and assessing the fires for projected future growth based on weather, topography and available fuels. Should any of the WFU fires require suppression action; the team can order firefighting resources to assist. With warmer temperatures and potential lightning predicted for early next week, the Ochoco National Forest is prepared to take any necessary action with the assistance of the Fire Use Team.

“WFU is another tool in our fire management toolbox and we believe it’s a move in the right direction for Central Oregon forests and rangelands,” added Hoff. “If we can lessen the amount of hazardous fuels and also gain resource benefits through the cost-efficient application of WFU, it makes good sense. It also helps firefighters down the road when the larger fires inevitably come through.”

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