

Megafires a growing concern for Climate Change Coalition



Staff photo by Kathy Aney

Pendleton Fire Chief Mike Ciraulo speaks Saturday about how fire seasons are getting longer and more intense at Blue Mountain Community College.

Jeff Blackwood receives climate champion award

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Jeff Blackwood sat back and listened, his brown eyes trained on the keynote speaker at the annual meeting (the first annual meeting) of the Eastern Oregon Climate Change Coalition.

Blackwood would soon be announced as the group's choice as 2018 Climate Champion, given to an Eastern Oregonian who raises local public awareness about climate change.

But Blackwood didn't know that yet.

In front of the Blue Mountain Community College meeting room, Pendleton Fire Chief Mike Ciraulo talked about mammoth wildfires resulting from years

of intense fire suppression coupled with climate change. Ciraulo, who came to Oregon from California, has fought fire for 35 years. The job is getting harder.

"I've seen change," he said.

California has always had plenty of fire on the landscape. Ciraulo spoke of the frustration of working to save neighborhoods nestled into brushy and forested areas. He remembered packing up fire equipment afterwards and knowing they would someday return.

"We knew we would be back in 20 years," he said. "They will rebuild and it'll burn again."

Fast-forward to today and the rise of the megafires — infernos that exceed 100,000 acres. Hotter temperatures mean busier fire seasons.

Firefighters from all around the nation,

See **CLIMATE/8A**

CLIMATE: Blackwood worked for U.S. Forest Service for 40 years

Continued from 1A

including Pendleton, often assist when other places burn. A group of Pendleton firefighters recently returned from the Thomas and Creek fires in California.

Ciraulo shook his head in disbelief at the thought of fighting a huge wildfire in December or January.

“The length of fire season is dramatically increasing,” he said. “Typically, (California’s) fire season would wrap up in October or November and then it was done.”

Megafires are fast-moving and hard to corral. In stand-offs between firefighters and flame, fire often wins, at least in the short term.

“The (Eagle Creek) fire spotted across the Columbia River,” Ciraulo said. “When a fire spots a half mile ahead of itself, nobody has enough firefighters to stop it. We catch it when the weather changes.”

Ciraulo, who started as chief in late 2015, recalled one of his first fires in Pendleton — a barn blaze on a cold December night. One of his captains mentioned needing a brush rig and Ciraulo looked at him quizzically. “A brush rig in December?” he thought. The fire chief looked around and realized a field of non-native grasses near the barn was dry tinder and ready to burn. Two hundred years ago, he said, native fire-resistant grass probably grew on that spot.

Another frustration in the age of megafires is time required of those managing fires. Serving on an incident management team takes increasing time and commitment.

“Used to be, you’d be out for a few weeks in the



Staff photo by Kathy Aney

Jeff Blackwood smiles after receiving the first-ever Climate Champion Award, awarded by EOC3.

summer when you make a commitment to a team,” said Ciraulo, who serves as incident commander for an interagency incident management team of Oregon and Washington team members. “Now you’re out 30, 40, 50, 60, 70 days.”

Blackwood nodded at Ciraulo’s words. Blackwood’s 40-year career with the U.S. Forest Service gives him plenty of perspective. Also, climate change is one of Blackwood’s passions of late.

He serves as an EOC3 board member and also facilitated two Eastern Oregon Forum panel discussions in 2015 about climate change impacts to water, fish, wildlife and public health.

After Ciraulo finished, participants discussed the group’s strategic plan and other topics. Then board member Don Wysocki walked up to the front of the room to present a plaque to the group’s first-ever Climate Champion. When Wysocki

announced Blackwood’s name, the former Umatilla Forest Supervisor popped to his feet in surprise and accepted his award.

“I’m absolutely blown away,” he said.

Wysocki said the choice of champion was unanimous.

“We wouldn’t be what we are now without this guy,” he said.

After the meeting, Blackwood shared some of his own thoughts about fire and climate change, recalling early days on the Malheur National Forest when a colleague took him on a forest tour.

“He took me to a 300-acre burn and said, ‘That’s the biggest fire we’ve ever had on this district,’” Blackwood said. “Now a 300-acre fire is just run-of-the-mill.”

He agreed with Ciraulo’s assessment and added a few more climate change worries such as less snow pack and earlier runoff that expose forests to more fire risk. These fires, he said, burn hot through some of our treasured landscapes. Consider this summer’s Eagle Creek Fire in the Columbia River Gorge.

“People’s favorite places are being dramatically altered,” he said.

It’s all a little staggering to think about, but Blackwood urged people not to get discouraged by the enormity of climate change.

“It’s normal for us to think ‘it’s bigger than me,’” he said. “But there are so many choices we make each day. Make those choices with the warming planet in mind.”

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