

# Methow Valley News

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## Twisp River Road fire destroys home, shed

District 6, DNR, USFS crews all respond

BY MARCY STAMPER

Strong afternoon winds spread a fire, reported to have started in a shed, to a field and trees along the Twisp River before destroying the adjacent house the following morning. The fire, almost 5 miles up Twisp River Road, was first reported at about 4:30 p.m. on Tuesday, April 7.

It was a long haul for firefighters from Okanogan County Fire District No. 6, many of whom grabbed just three hours of rest after cleaning the engines at 1 a.m., only to be called back at about 4 a.m. on April 8 when the fire spread to the house, Okanogan County Fire Dis-

trict No. 6 Chief Cody Acord said.

Fifteen to 20 volunteers from all four stations, from Carlton to Mazama, plus all five district employees and at least a dozen engines, responded to the blaze, said Acord, who arrived first at the scene Tuesday afternoon.

Further complicating their work on the warm, windy afternoon was restricted access to the property, which is reached by a private bridge over the Twisp River. Acord assessed the bridge as soon as he arrived and determined that the metal stringers could support a fire truck. But centering the 40,000-pound truck over the stringers on the narrow bridge after making the sharp turn off the road was difficult, and a wheel punched through the wooden

See FIRE, A2



Photo by Marcy Stamper

Firefighters used an inflatable bag, blocks of wood – and a lot of patience – to extricate the 40,000-pound fire engine that punched through the bridge deck.



Photo by Don Nelson

Jonathan Baker prepared a shipment of completed masks at eqpd's TwispWorks facility.

## Well eqpd to help

Twisp manufacturer switches from bags to protective masks

BY ANN MCCREARY

Weeks before his business, eqpd, was shut down under the statewide "Stay Home, Stay Healthy" order, Jonathan Baker was laying the groundwork to convert his small manufacturing operation from producing sturdy tote bags to making protective face masks.

As the coronavirus was spreading around the world and the first cases were reported in Washington state, Baker was following news in the fabric industry, where manufacturers were being overwhelmed by orders for material to make protective masks that are in critically short supply.

"I saw the trend in the manufacturing

world. That was my canary-in-the-coalmine moment. I thought, 'Whoa! We're all going to need this. Every one of us is going to need one of these,'" Baker said this week.

"That was about six weeks ago — in this day and age, that was forever ago," Baker said. "My wife said, 'You might want to look into making masks.'" Then the first cases of COVID-19 — the disease caused by the coronavirus — were reported in Washington, and hospitals around the country began pleading for donations of PPE (Personal Protective Equipment).

"I saw the whole world start making their own masks and I said, 'We need to help.' I was able to find and secure materials. I maxed out my credit card to get it all. I thought, 'I'll worry about it later,'" Baker said.

"As an experienced product designer with a team of talented sewers, I knew

See EQPD, A3

## North Cascades snow clearing resumes

The Washington State Department of Transportation (WSDOT) reported that it resumed clearing snow from the North Cascades Highway on Monday (April 13).

However, Twisp Mayor Soo Ing-Moody said at the town council's Tuesday (April 14 meeting) that WSDOT has indicated that the highway won't be open to regular traffic, but will be available as an emergency route as fire season approaches.

"An alternative access in this area is critical in case of a natural disaster, such as a wildfire," said Lauren Loebach,

communications manager for WSDOT's North Central Region. "The fluidity of this emergency means we cannot predict what the circumstances will be in the four to five weeks it will take us to complete the reopening."

WSDOT began its annual work to clear the highway from both the east and west sides on March 23. But on March 26, after Gov. Inslee issued his "Stay Home, Stay Healthy" orders, Secretary of Transportation Roger Millar suspended most highway maintenance around the state including work to reopen the highway.

## County's COVID-19 cases total 14

Most have recovered; testing continues

BY MARCY STAMPER

Okanogan County has reported five new cases of COVID-19 since April 6, bringing the total to 14. Ten of the individuals have fully recovered, but one remains hospitalized, Okanogan County Community Health Director Lauri Jones said on Tuesday (April 14).

When the number of cases in the county doubled within just four days, county health officials were very concerned, but haven't seen that rapid increase again, Jones said.

Five of the cases in the county are in people over the age of 60 and four in people between 40 and 59, according to the Washington Department of Health (DOH). There are also several individuals under 19, some of whom were basically asymptomatic and, with just "a bit of a cough for a day," Jones said.

Five of the confirmed cases are in the Methow Valley, seven on the Colville Reservation, one in the South

County (from Malott to Pateros), and one in the North County (from Riverside to Oroville).

Health workers have tested 345 people in the county and are still awaiting results on 36 tests. Although testing is becoming more widely available, Okanogan County Public Health still advises people that the virus is most likely circulating throughout the county and that not all cases will be reflected in tests. About 5% of the tests in Okanogan County have come back positive.

Okanogan County is fortunate that there haven't been any COVID outbreaks in long-term care facilities or nursing homes, enabling health officials to secure those facilities to protect residents and staff, Jones said.

COVID-19 data lead health professionals to believe that spread of the disease in eastern Washington is two to three weeks behind western Washington, which experienced the first cases in the country. Okanogan County has been working in conjunction with the rest of Eastern Washington to determine when it will be safe to start relaxing the stay-at-home order and to

reopen commerce and other activities.

There were 10,538 confirmed cases of COVID-19 and 516 deaths in Washington as of April 12. Statewide, the age group most with the most confirmed cases (35%) is 40 to 59, but the majority of deaths have been in people over 80, according to DOH.

Although 52% of cases have been in females, males account for 57% of deaths. The majority of cases have been in non-Hispanic whites (56%), followed by Hispanics (24%), according to DOH.

### Local resources

Three Rivers Hospital in Brewster and Mid-Valley Hospital in Omak have isolation rooms and are caring for anyone in the county who needs hospitalization for COVID-19 but doesn't require the more intensive care that would necessitate transfer to Central Washington Hospital in Wenatchee. Because North Valley Hospital in Tonasket is connected with a long-term care facility, they aren't treating patients with COVID-19. Central

See COVID, A3

## Unemployment claims skyrocket in county

Firms, workers wait for system to catch up

BY MARCY STAMPER

Since the beginning of March, 1,711 people in Okanogan County have filed claims for unemployment. While new claims statewide started to fall last week, Okanogan County saw its biggest increase so far — 1,041% — compared to last year.

"I think what's raising eyebrows now is that it's much greater than during the recent great recession [from 2007 through 2009]," said Don Meseck, a Regional Labor Economist for the state Employment Security Department (ESD).

Last week, Okanogan County had the unenviable status of making the list of the five counties in Washington with the biggest spikes in initial claims. And while other counties on the list saw a relatively small increase from the previous week (between 1% and 8%), Okanogan County's claims skyrocketed by 26%, according to the ESD.

Still, statewide unemployment claims are up 2,627% from last year, seven times higher than during the great recession, according to the ESD. Job losses are hitting all industries, from management and wholesale sales, to the arts and recreation.

Initial claims count the number of people who've applied for unemployment, not the number who've been approved for benefits, Meseck said.

Things were actually looking relatively good in Okanogan County before the coronavirus shutdown walloped the economy. In February, the unemployment rate was 8.9% which, while higher than the state and national levels, was the lowest rate in the county since 1990, Meseck said. Most industries had been adding jobs, although the leisure and hospitality sector was having a downturn, he said.

### Waiting for benefits

Unemployment filings are likely to rise more this month, since the ESD has asked people who qualify under new federal rules (like sole proprietors, the self-employed, and contractors) to wait until mid- or late April to apply, when the system is expected to be updated.

Massage therapist Arijana Moon is waiting for that update to kick in. She mailed her unemployment application a few weeks ago. "Now, it's a waiting game to see if they call me back," she said.

Massage therapists aren't on the list of businesses closed by Gov. Jay Inslee, since some people receive massage as part of medical treatment. "But it's hands-on, for sure. Everyone's been

cancelling," Moon said.

Moon is getting by — watching her expenses and appreciating the meals from the school district for her daughter. Still, if the government stimulus check doesn't arrive in time, Moon is afraid her savings will start running out. "There's no harm in trying for unemployment — I'm not making any money. Everyone's quarantined and not wanting to come in," she said.

Moon doesn't want to be in debt when she starts working again, which makes her reluctant to pursue a business loan.

After the last recession, it took two years before business bounced back, and this time it's even scarier, Moon said. It's not only that people may not have money for a massage — Moon is also worried that people may have phobias about physical contact after being schooled in the importance of social distancing.

After 23 years as a massage therapist, Moon doesn't want to think about another career. "It's a really weird place to be in. I love my job, and love what I do," she said.

### Cancelled trips

Guides who lead ski and trekking trips in the mountains don't fit neatly within the parameters of the unemploy-

See JOBS, A2

### ADDRESS LABEL

| THURS.       | FRI.                        | SAT.            | SUN.                     | MON.                | TUES.        |
|--------------|-----------------------------|-----------------|--------------------------|---------------------|--------------|
| April 16     | April 17                    | April 18        | April 19                 | April 20            | April 21     |
| 62°          | 67°                         | 64°             | 68°                      | 73°                 | 74°          |
| 32°          | 42°                         | 41°             | 40°                      | 46°                 | 40°          |
| Mostly sunny | A li'l sun<br>A li'l clouds | Morning showers | Indecisive: clouds & sun | You are my sunshine | Partly sunny |

WEATHER DATA BASED ON ACCUWEATHER.COM FORECAST FOR TWISP

### INSIDE ...

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| HARTS PASS  | B4 |
| COMMUNITY   | B5 |
| VALLEY LIFE | B6 |

# JOBS

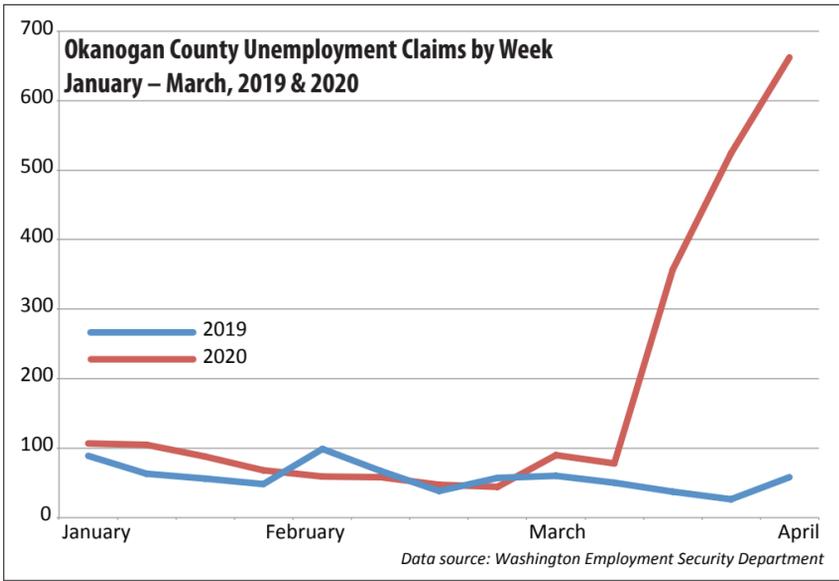
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ment system. Most guides work for several companies, are paid by the day, and work seasonally, said Josh Cole, co-owner of North Cascades Mountain Guides (NCMG) and a guide himself.

Although this is typically a quiet time of year for NCMG, the company cancelled six trips to Europe and have closed at least through June 1. Those trips constitute a significant portion of the company's yearly revenue, Cole said.

While the cancelled trips mean a loss of income, at least NCMG hadn't prepaid for expenses such as lodging. But the company is still paying its office manager. NCMG's insurance broker is negotiating a reduced premium since they're not leading trips. "But, luckily, as our income has ground to a halt, our expenses have also reduced," Cole said.

Cole's own unemployment application — for as a self-employed business owner — was denied. "I'm hopeful that, as the



Unemployment claims in Okanogan County increased by 1,041% compared to last March.

legislation makes its way into the system, that will change," he said. Because Cole's wife is a teacher, his family has some income and health insurance.

Cole has also applied for a loan through the Small Business Association, and is researching

other options like the Paycheck Protection Program. "I'm going through all the hoops," he said.

The company's bookkeeper, accountant and a professional association for mountain guides have been a big help in navigating the legislation, Cole

said. "That's been the thing that has reduced the stress the most — having professional people wade through the materials," he said.

### Clients on hold

Devin Barnhart, owner of

Trimline & Co. Salon, is still waiting for unemployment benefits to work out. She's been cutting hair for 23 years and has never been unemployed. "Thirteen days is the longest I've ever had off from work — 10 years ago, when I had my daughter," Barnhart said.

Her husband has a construction business and is also self-employed, so they've applied for loans and are awaiting a decision. Barnhart has a mortgage on the salon building, which she purchased last year for stability.

At least Barnhart is confident that she'll have clients when she's allowed to cut hair again. She cringes when she gets photos from clients of their husbands cutting their hair. "People want to be first on the list — they keep rescheduling," she said.

### Standby status?

Susan Finn worked just one day in March at her new job at a local inn before everything shut down. Then everything was put on hold until the stay-at-home order is lifted, she said.

Finn was fortunate that she'd already been collecting unem-

ployment when she got the new job, so her claim continued without interruption. But she's waiting to find out if she's been approved for standby status, since her employer has certified that her work will resume when the inn reopens fully. Standby status would mean she doesn't have to look for a job while collecting benefits.

Meanwhile, Finn continues to look for work — not an easy task with so few employers looking to fill jobs. Finn has also filled the requirement by doing online training through WorkSource Okanogan, although many of those classes are full.

It's been impossible to find out the status of her standby claim. "You literally cannot get through on a line — you call and it says they're too busy, before it hangs up," Finn said.

"With unemployment, I'll be OK financially. I'm careful not to be maxed out," Finn said.

Still, she thinks about the uncertainty in the tourism industry. "Who knows what's going to happen with our summer? Are people going to go on vacation? Are they going to have money for motels?" Finn said.

# FIRE

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bridge deck. The truck was stranded there for about four hours.

Although they could use the truck to pump water, firefighters had to hike across the bridge carrying ladders, saws and other equipment to reach the fire.

### Other hot spots

Firefighters had the fire in the shed knocked down within a couple of hours. Half of the shed was still standing, but considerable work remained to dismantle the remnants to look for hot spots, Acord said. Meanwhile, firefighters had to split up to deal with spot fires burning in cottonwoods and vegetation along the river.

A major challenge for the fire crews was that both the shed and house had sawdust insulation. "That makes it extra-difficult to get a fire out. Sawdust can hide fire sometimes — it's a really tough thing with fire," Acord said.

Two wildland fire crews from the Washington Department of Natural Resources (DNR) and one from the U.S. Forest Service

responded around 5:30 p.m. to combat the spot fires that ignited grass, trees and vegetation along the river. Some firefighters had to wade into the river to reach an island where woody debris on fire, DNR Fire Prevention Forester Guy Gifford said.

When District 6 firefighters left around midnight, they knew they'd be back to check on the house and surrounding area, Acord said. A DNR engine stayed at the scene overnight to keep an eye on the house and to monitor spot fires, but wildland firefighters aren't certified to fight a structure fire, he said.

The early-morning call reported that the remaining half of the shed was "completely involved" and the fire was starting to spread to the house, Acord said. "When I got there, the winds were just howling again," he said.

The wind pushed the fire throughout the old house and into the second story. Firefighters spent about three hours trying to get through the windows, but there was no safe access, Acord said.

The wildland fires stayed put overnight and, with electric power back on in the morning,

firefighters were able to set up irrigation to wet down the area, Acord said.

Upwind of the structure fire, there was another fire in trees at the base of a hillside, where an individual had a permit to burn piles, Acord said. But when that person left the piles to help fight the structure fire, the piles got whipped up by the wind and also got out of control, he said.

### Truck rescue

On Tuesday night, once the shed fire had been knocked down and wildland firefighters were on hand to address the burning trees along the river, District 6 crews turned their attention to the truck stuck on the bridge.

Fire trucks carry inflatable air bags for lifting things, and had one strong enough to support the engine. So, while firefighters gradually inflated the bag, others stacked blocks of wood to shore up the truck frame. When the truck was finally elevated enough to free the wheel, firefighters slid long planks of wood under the wheel above the gaping hole in the bridge. It was almost dark by the time they carefully repositioned the engine over the stringers and were able to back it

up, Acord said.

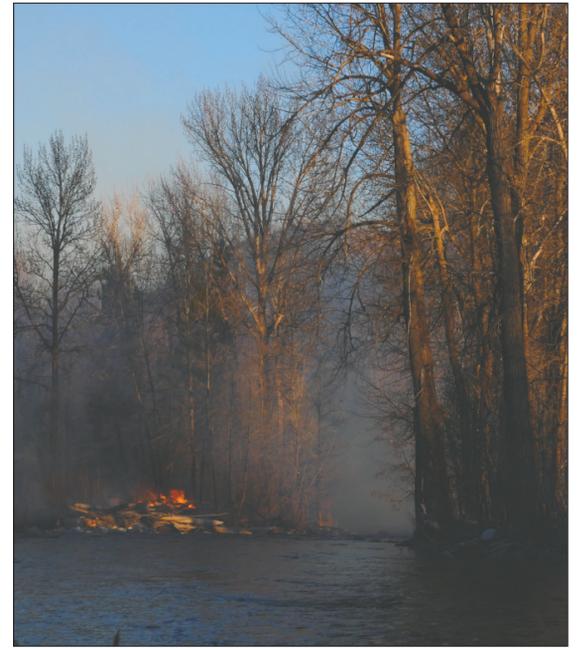
The property owner, who wasn't there at the time of the blaze, told Acord afterwards that an engineer had rated the bridge for a 60,000-pound load, Acord said.

EMTs from Aero Methow Rescue Service treated a family member of the property owners for burns and transported him to Three Rivers Hospital, according to Director of Services Cindy Button. The injuries were not life-threatening, she said.

District 6 has suspended its weekly trainings during the governors' coronavirus stay-at-home order, but if the restrictions continue much longer, the district may hold video trainings, Acord said. When fighting a structure fire, firefighters have their own masks and breathe their own air, and they kept their distance during breaks, he said.

The fire was still in patrol status on Friday (April 10) as DNR crews monitored smoke and watched for new ignitions, Gifford said.

The fire is under investigation by DNR. DNR is handling the incident as two fires, called the Poorman Creek Fire (1.5 acres), and the Poorman Creek Fire No. 2 (0.3 acres).



Photos by Marcy Stamper

Above: A fire that started in a shed spread to a nearby field and trees along the Twisp River on a warm, windy afternoon.

Below, left: Firefighters from Okanogan County District 6 and state and federal agencies worked through the night to suppress the blaze.

Below, right: Fire crews were called back the next morning after the fire spread to the house, which had sawdust insulation. They worked for hours, but weren't able to save it.



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