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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-coal-mine 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 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 ...

OPINION	A4
CLASSIFIEDS	B2
HARTS PASS	B4
COMMUNITY	B5
VALLEY LIFE	B6