

No one can predict in advance what a fire season will be like, Eugene-Springfield Interim Fire Chief Chris Heppel told City Club members and guests at the April 15 program. Last year's devastating Holiday Farm fire was a product of a once in a hundred-year weather pattern of unusually high easterly winds at a time of extended drought. But while that pattern may not recur this year, the program came just as the County had banned backyard burning in April, itself a very unusual event, coupled with a continuation, and perhaps worsening, of the drought Oregon continues to experience.



Chief Heppel was joined by Patence Winningham, the Lane County Emergency Manager, Dan Hurley, the Lane County Public Works Director, who serve as recovery manager for the Holiday Farm fire, and Kevin Holman and Ken Vogeney, respectively the Emergency Managers for the City of Eugene and the City of Springfield in reviewing both lessons learned and what they knew about the upcoming fire season.

While Chief Heppel agreed it was unlikely that the Holiday Farm area would burn again soon, he noted that on the perimeter there remain several areas that are still smoldering from last year and cautioned those could reignite. His main concern, he said, was the Oak Ridge area, where limited access and steep terrain make it more challenging to get resources to any fire that occurs. Responding to a question, he said that western Lane County benefits from higher humidity in the Coast range because of proximity to the ocean but reminded all that the Sweet Creek fire occurred there last year, and that the Whittaker fire had occurred over 10 years ago. The County is considered to be in the low to moderate risk range, but that does not mean that the danger of fire is small.

Last year's event has led to recognition of some important point for this year and the future. Many fires are what Chief Heppel called "escape fires," where backyard burning or some other legitimate activate escapes from its bounds into wildlands and forests. There are particularly worrisome at the interface between urban land and forests and fields. The County's FireWise program, which helps residents fund improvements to their property to make homes more defensible, is an important asset. The program for 2021 will open on May 3, and residents may request information by sending an email to FirewiseProgram@LaneCountyOR.gov

More training on how to use the Incident Command System, a national program to provide common procedures and practices in any emergency, is important to get prepared for any event, whether it is fire, which happens every year, or more unusual events like earthquakes or other natural disasters. As Mr. Vogeney explained, that system makes it possible for local, state, and national officials to communicate much more effectively so that resources can be deployed quickly. Although all the fire departments in the area are closely linked –dispatched from the same command center and tied closely with strong mutual aid agreements, communications in an emergency is key and a uniform system which makes it easy for all levels to understand each other is vital.

Unfortunately, it appears there remains some tension between funding, particularly at the federal level, for suppression of fires and management efforts at fire prevention. While a State policy committee

recommended changes in the balance of funding between those two activities, it takes a long time for legislation to move, and an even longer time for a change in focus to be effective.

Mr. Hurley pointed out that one thing that the region had not been prepared for was the extent of animal rescue involved in the Holiday Farm event. Rescue workers handled 576 livestock and over 100 domestic animals. Personnel had not been trained on animal rescue and resource management was not well organized. Debris management also proved to be a challenge. While the Lane County landfill had an area set aside for debris management, much of the debris recovered was hazardous waste and needed to be placed in the lined area of the landfill that is used for domestic waste. That has led to some restrictions on haulers disposal to preserve land fill capacity.

Communications in an emergency is always a challenge all the speakers noted. Mr. Vogeney described the multiple tools that exist for governments to get information out. The County is covered by the Integrated Public Alert and Warning System, which can send messages to every cell tower in the county, or to only selected ones. Emergency managers can select media outlets for messages (which generate those annoying beeps on your radio whenever a test is conducted). Each city has social media pages which can be used to disseminate information. Mr. Holman said that Community Emergency Response Team members, who are volunteers trained to support emergency services, can reach out to their neighbors. All this communication is coordinated by Joint Information Systems organized under the ICS model to assure that a common and uniform message is passed along. Mr. Hurley urged people to be careful to rely on information from official sources, noting that misinformation spread by other groups can be very dangerous.