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Wind turbine sparks grass fire

Jade McDowell Aug 3, 2018

A malfunctioning wind turbine sparked a grass fire near Arlington that burned about 2,000 acres on Thursday.

Joe Claughton, North Gilliam Rural Fire Protection District chief, said no buildings were burned, but two railroad trestles caught on fire. The fire started about half a mile from milepost 3 on Highway 19 by Rattlesnake Road.

Claughton said he's seen about "half a dozen" wind turbine fires over the years, but this is the first one he saw that sparked a grass fire.

"They're usually electrical fires," he said. "Usually they go out after closing the door and letting them smother out."

A 2012 study by the Renewable Energy Foundation found that wind turbines in Europe were marketed with a 20-year life expectancy, but were actually wearing out in 12-15 years. The Global Wind Energy Council, an international trade association for the wind industry, found records of about 200 wind turbine-caused fires between 1995 and 2012 — an average of one per year for every 19,230 turbines worldwide.

Fire districts from Pilot Rock, Echo, Irrigon, Ione, Lexington, Condon, Boardman and Umatilla County Fire District 1 helped respond to the fire outside of Arlington Thursday, as well as the Gilliam County road department and Oregon Department of Transportation. Claughton said he was also grateful for the farmers who showed up to help disc fire lines and lend a hand in fighting the fires.

He said often fire departments from Sherman County and Wasco County to the west would help instead, but they were busy with multiple fires of their own, including the South Valley fire near Dufur.

“With all they have going on, I didn’t even ask that direction,” he said.

Agencies from Umatilla and Morrow counties also responded last week to a fire along Interstate 84 near Arlington that burned about 1,800 acres. That fire was suspected to be caused by a cigarette butt thrown from a vehicle.