

Costs of fighting Ashland blaze continue to mount

September 1, 2010

Ashland emergency crews spent about \$17,000 in overtime and extra resources to battle the blaze on Oak Knoll Drive that destroyed 11 houses and caused more than \$3 million in property damage Aug. 24.

The cost estimate doesn't include contributions by 15 other agencies that responded with manpower and equipment under a mutual aid agreement in Jackson and Josephine counties.

Altogether, 135 firefighters and public safety personnel worked at the fire, considered to be the most destructive the town has seen in at least 100 years.

Fire Chief John Karns of Ashland Fire & Rescue said his off-duty crews were called in and firefighters worked overtime to douse the blaze and conduct mop-up operations through the night and into the next day.

He said he is still compiling an estimate, but thinks his department spent about \$15,000 above and beyond the normal cost of operations.

Ashland Police Chief Terry Holderness estimated it cost his department \$1,500 to \$2,000 for overtime and to bring extra officers on duty during the fire.

When the fire started, seven firefighters were on hand in Ashland for that shift. The department has three shifts for a total of 25 firefighters. Two of the shifts have seven and one has nine firefighters. Karns said his department is looking to hire an additional two firefighters.

After the fire erupted, all personnel were called in. Because some were out of town, Karns said about 20 helped battle the blaze, many staying at the scene for two nights to check for hot spots.

Five administrators were on hand to coordinate the response.

In addition to two Oregon Department of Forestry helicopters, Ashland hired a third from Timberland Helicopters at a cost of \$2,250.

A contract investigator who works with the Oregon Department of Forestry, Chuck Miller, has been hired at a cost of \$1,000. That amount is being shared with Jackson County Fire District No. 5 because the human-caused blaze started just outside the city limits.

Karns said his department wanted investigative help because of the severity of the blaze and because it started as a wildland fire.

"We wanted a strong investigation team," Karns said.

Investigators have interviewed the suspect, 40-year-old John David Thiry , to determine how the fire started.

"The alleged perpetrator is relatively cooperative," Karns said. "I got the impression that he was set back by what happened."

Thiry is being held in the Jackson County Jail on \$500,000 bail on 14 counts of reckless burning and 10 counts of reckless endangering.