

Goldmark discusses fire issues

By Dee Camp
The Chronicle

OMAK – Three of 10 new state Department of Natural Resources wildland firefighting engines and crews will be deployed in Okanogan County.

"This is one of the most fire-prone counties in the western states," Commissioner of Public Lands Peter Goldmark said during an interview last Thursday. "It was horrific last season. Our goal is to be better prepared and staffed."

Goldmark was in his native county for an evening wildfire roundtable hosted by U.S. Rep. Dan Newhouse, R-4th District. He accompanied Newhouse, U.S. Rep. Glenn "GT" Thompson, R-5th District Pennsylvania and others on an aerial tour of fire areas earlier

in the day.

The new engines come as part of a \$6.7 million appropriation from the Legislature in the state supplemental budget. Goldmark had asked for \$24 million.

"It is less than what we needed, given the enormity" of fire potential, he said. "The big fires exhausted our resources."

Part of the problem, he said, is legislators make funding decisions when fire season is over.

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"If they had to do it in late August, it would be different."

He said he also takes seriously his department's responsibility to the common school trust, the construction fund that benefits from DNR funds-generating activities such as timber sales.

"Hundreds of millions of dollars" in state timber has gone up in smoke, he said. "The Legislature is a trustee, too."

While the legislative



Goldmark

appropriation falls short of what he requested, Goldmark said he is grateful for money, which also will go to provide training for additional firefighters from tribes, the National Guard and elsewhere.

He also offered appreciation for Reps. Joel Kretz, R-Wauconda, and Tom Dent, R-Moses Lake, both of whom sponsored successful fire-related bills.

Kretz's bill deals with prescribed burning and air quality; Dent's allows ranchers to check on cattle in wildfire areas. Both were signed last week by Gov. Jay Inslee.

While it's still early spring, Goldmark said fire season has arrived, as witnessed by a blaze in the Aeneas Valley the same day he was in town.

That 11.8-acre fire was

reported along Highway 20 near milepost 277 east of Tonasket. It burned brush and timber. Three other, smaller fires were reported the day before in Stevens County and a fourth was reported March 31.

"We're working hard on preparedness," he said, adding that he's spoken with fire managers and crews.

He also stressed the importance of local knowledge of an area in an attack on fire, pointing to the new state Wildland Fire Committee and its work with local fire chiefs.

As part of his legislative funding request, he sought \$6 million to help local fire districts. Lawmakers appropriated \$1 million.

"It's a day late and a dollar short," he said.

Legislators also provided

some money for communications improvements.

The jury's still out on what sort of fire season this will be, but after two years of record-setting wildfires statewide – including more than 778,000 acres burned in Okanogan County – Goldmark said he's not optimistic the 2015-16 winter's snow and rains will make much of a dent in fire danger.

At some point, all that lush, green growth will dry up and become tinder-dry fuel, he said.

"There will be more fuel because of the (wet) winter," he said.

"We want to increase communication with local communities. We want to get people prepared," he said. "We don't know what the weather will bring."