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## Transient camps cause safety issues for area

Fire Danger



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ELKO — Between the railroad tracks and Idaho street, and behind Toki Ona, out of sight from the road, are two blackened clearings, about 300 yards apart.

Glass bottles and unburned trash lay strewn across the ground. Tents dot the landscape. Some are tarps over sagebrush, held up with a little bit of rope. Some look like they've come out of an outdoors catalog.

A man, probably in his 30s, ducks out of his tent. He doesn't look homeless; with a well-trimmed Vandyke beard and a clean shirt, he looks like he could own his own house. He calls hello to the visitors to the transient camp behind the railroad tracks.

A young man, camping near the railroad tracks, started one of these fires when he threw his cigarette out of his tent. The brown, dried grasses and the sagebrush went up in bitter smelling smoke.

"The public doesn't know what's going on," Josh Carson, the deputy fire marshal, said, motioning to the hidden tents.

The precipitation for the year, despite yesterday's rainfall, has been very low and conditions are very dry, he said.

"All it takes is one simple, little miscalculation or mistake," Carson said. "And, it'll be helped by the wind."

Transients light cooking and warming fires, which can easily get out of control.

The problem of homelessness in Elko has come to a head in the past two years, he said, as the number of transients has increased. This year, especially, has seen an increase.

"People are coming out here with high hopes," he said. "They're trying to get a job with the mines."

Housing for these hopeful souls is almost non-existent, especially before they have paying jobs, he said.

The increase in transients, both permanent and temporary, brings a series of challenges and potential risks for the city as a whole.

“(They’re) a concern for us and for the police,” Carson said.

### **Dangerous places**

The transient camps are a risk because of the fires that are started in the camps or next to the tents, in addition to the incidentals like cigarettes and heating appliances and other open flames.

The fires lack permits as well as the proper pits and cleared areas to assure that a fire doesn’t make its surroundings — often, the backside of businesses on Idaho street — go up in flames.

Some of the transients who live down by the river are camped in incredibly hard to access areas for the fire engines and trucks, said Elko Fire Chief Matt Griego.

“Along the river is limited access for us,” he said. “Getting the trucks back there is difficult” and time-consuming.

### **Problems sans solutions**

It’s only April, early in the season. Lesli Ellis, the public affairs specialist for the Bureau of Land Management, said it’s not even fire season yet.

But, it’s dry, as evidenced both by the fire on Tuesday, 50 miles north of Elko, and another fire Wednesday morning, near NYTC road.

The warming and cooking fires, while normally tolerated, are now too much of a danger, Griego said.

The homeless, however, have nowhere else to go other than to make other transient camps on the outskirts of town.

“The homeless will just be homeless somewhere else” if the police department arrests or forces them out, Police Chief Don Zumwalt said.

“It’s a public safety and fire and sanitary issue,” he said.

A public issue it may be, but it is also an issue of homelessness not being a crime.

“We can’t trample on their constitutional rights,” Zumwalt said.

The issue is a societal problem, he said.

“For now, Chief Griego is putting out the fires,” he said.

### **A matter of luck**

Last December, Mark Olson, 57, died after his tent had caught fire. Elko police said they believed Olson was in the tent when it caught fire, and he died from his injuries a few yards away.

Olson's death may be an omen of what could happen.

"We've been lucky on a lot of them," Carson said.

Responding to a brush fire at one of the transient camps, Griego found two homeless men who had been sleeping in their tents, unaware a fire may overtake them at any moment.

"They could be sleeping and not even know it's coming," Griego said.

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