

## **Wildfire Recovery: What Is Happening?**

This past September, Oregon experienced record-breaking and devastating wildfires across the state. The effects have been lasting, with many communities affected months after the fires have been extinguished. Families are still left without homes, living in RVs or other temporary buildings on their burned property, in hotels, at the houses of friends or with family. Green forests have become blackened, as a constant reminder.

During the wildfires, flames rushed into the canyon rapidly due to high winds. Some families received no evacuation warnings, only being alerted by seeing the fires right outside their house or when neighbors knocked frantically on their doors. They left with no belongings. Some had to move or run over logs and debris in the road on their way to safety, as their house burned. This has led to serious discussion over emergency warning systems and preparedness.

Mariah Rawlins, Emergency Response Unit Manager at Oregon Office of State Fire Marshal, told the Clypian that she believes the events of Labor Day week will have “long term impacts” on multiple facets of emergency wildfire work. She said that the events will likely impact mitigation before, as well as, response and suppression during fire events in the future. Rawlins is unsure what exactly these changes will be.

“Even [months later], there is so much work to be done. I really think we are going to be seeing some change in Oregon for years based on what happened that week. I think a lot of things worked really well, but I also think it opened everyone's eyes to what the potential [of wildfires] really is,” Rawlins said.

Rawlins said that she recalls the stress of that week vividly, for her office and for families across Oregon. The Fire Marshal's office was “all hands on deck” for several days giving jobs to everyone that was able to work.

“[People were] working in the agency operations center to move resources, responding to incidents themselves because a lot of our staff are trained in that, [or] delivering equipment. Everyone was working,” Rawlins recalled.

She also added that as all this was going on, much of the staff were forced to evacuate their own homes, including herself. Rawlins told the Clypian that she was glad to have something impactful to do during that week.

Looking forward, Rawlins thinks that the “big question is rebuilding and recovery.”

“The potential impacts of fires are going to be on everyone's mind as rebuilding occurs and in the long term, that will probably have positive impacts,” Rawlins said of recovery efforts.

Recovery efforts are being led by several different groups, both private and governmental. Although the Office of the Fire Marshal has been assisting, balancing recovery work and future preparation work, they are just “one piece of the puzzle.”

The Office of the Fire Marshal is not in charge of organizing clean-up, beyond working to ensure access and water supply. Their role is mostly in “code-enforcement and rebuilding.”

One thing the Rawlins said is important is the “hardening” of homes. Home hardening means making sure houses have defensible space, a buffer between any greenery and one's home. The presence of defensible space can mean the difference between a fire burning and sparing a building.

Rawlins said that houses are most likely to be ignited by debris on the house and embers getting into the house. Thus, the need for defensible space, as well as, yard, gutter and roof maintenance during fire seasons.

The Office of the Fire Marshal is encouraging people to “harden” both new and old homes. As homes are rebuilt, the need for defensible space around the building should be on the forefront of the minds of builders. Modifications should be made to other homes, which withstood the wildfires but do not have adequate defensible space. Even so, this is not a fool-proof strategy.

“When you really look at some of the impacts from the fires this season and if you drive up into that area, I don't know that there is anything that could have been done to mitigate the impacts of those fires on those structures. That fire was moving so quickly and so hot,” Rawlins said of the 2020 fires.

In the rebuilding of homes, the Office of the Fire Marshal has been working with other entities. Rawlins said that their office has been having a lot of conversations about rebuilding and which building code is appropriate with other agencies.

Repopulating the areas affected by the fires has also been a big question in the recovery process. There has been some discussion over if the areas should be rebuilt in the same fashion. While the increasing effects of climate change include the increased risk of wildfires, Rawlins and many others are hopeful that this year's event is not a new normal for Oregon.

“I think that much of what happened that week [of the fires] was really driven by that wind event, and I don't think that's a new normal. I believe that was a historical wind event and I am cautiously optimistic that it was an anomaly,” Rawlins said.