

Mariah Rawlins- Emergency Response Unit Manager at Oregon Office of State Fire Marshal

1. There are quite a number of initiatives and programs that are aimed at wildfire mitigation and also suppression. The Oregon state fire marshal really is just one piece of the puzzle that is fire in the state of Oregon. One of the ways we are looking to add capacity is thinking about (wookie?) fire prevention and education and home hardening which is really that concept of making sure that homes have defensible space and are not going to be impacted or as impacted by fire so after the 2018 fire season which was also a rough season the governor put together the council on wildfire response.
2. There's definitely a lot of different options as far as the hardening of homes. We use that term to discuss the broader concept of defensible space. There is definitely actions individuals can take as far as making sure their roofs and gutters are clear of debris bc generally when a wildfire ignites a structure it is doing that through debris that is on the house or by embers getting into the home so making sure that you have any vents or openings under your home screened off, that can help. But 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. Detroit is a fire wise community so I don't know that any actions could have changed the outcomes for the homes themselves.
3. (used)
4. All hands on deck at the state fire marshal's office. It really started the night of september 7 we had our staff working at our agency operations center and started trying to find resources to move around the state. It really was everyone that was able to do work; we had roles for them. Working in the agency operations center to move resources, responding to incidents themselves because a lot of our staff are trained in that, delivering equipment, everyone was working. A lot of us including myself had to evacuate our own homes. It was definitely a wild time. I think everyone in this part of the state had a tense time. For me personally I was glad to have something that I could feel like I was making a difference so I think that it was a stressful time for sure for everyone and for all of our staff as well. I do think for people who want the mental stimulation I think it was healthy for them to have an outlet to put that nervous energy and then be able to actually have something you can do like pack up a trailer to go somewhere or something I think that was helpful for some of us.
5. That's a big question that our office is actively engaged in trying to answer with our partners. Building codes is a separate entity and we've been having a lot of conversations with them about rebuilding and what's the appropriate code to be following. (used the rest)
6. Clean up work is really mostly being organized by other agencies. Our role is really in code enforcement and rebuilding so we aren't directly involved in the clean up efforts necessarily but as far as access and water supply that's where our office is part of the conversation. I was in Detroit this morning and the Oregon Department of Transportation was there and the amount of work that they've done and organized is amazing how much they've been able to do.

Fire Recovery: Where are they now and what's to come

This past September, Oregon experienced record breaking, devastating wildfires all across the state. The fires have had long lasting effects on many communities across the state. Many families are still left without homes and the once green forests have become black and colorless. Some families received no evacuation warning and were only alerted by seeing the fires right outside their house. They had to leave with nothing and carry logs and debris out of the road on their way to safety as their house burned completely in minutes. Recovery efforts are being led by several different groups.

After the fire season in 2018, Governor Kate Brown put together a council for Wildfire Response. The council published recommendations and solutions to mitigate the effects of wildfires in the future. These recommendations were intended for immediate and long term change and improvement for the future.

“I really think that the week of labor day in particular is going to have long term impacts for all of the different pieces of mitigation before the fire, and response and suppression at the time, and obviously now the big question is rebuilding and recovery. What exactly all of those impacts and changes are, really remain to be seen. Even though we are 90 days out, 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 really is.” Mariah Rawlins, Emergency Response Unit Manager at Oregon Office of State Fire Marshal said.

The week of the fires was a stressful time for families all across Oregon. The Fire Marshal's office was “all hands on deck” for several days giving jobs to everyone that was able to work.

“[Some 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, delivering equipment, everyone was working. A lot of us including myself had to evacuate our own homes... For me personally I was glad to have something that I could feel like I was making a difference.” Rawlins said.

One thing the fire marshal office is focused on is the hardening of homes. Home hardening means making sure houses have defensible space and are less impacted by the fires. Two of the biggest things that can cause a house to be ignited by the fire is through debris on the house and embers getting into the house. It is recommended to keep your roof and gutters clean and in the event of a fire, make sure openings and vents in and under the home are closed off.

“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.

Repopulating the areas affected by the fires has also been a big question in the recovery process. 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 [the 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 that was an anomaly...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.

In November, the senior ASB group at South organized a trip to Gates through the GATES Community Wildfire Volunteer Mission. Several South students participated in helping rebuild the Santiam Canyon.