PRESENTING SPONSOR
WASHINGTON STATE DEPARTMENT OF
NATURAL RESOURCES


REGIONAL NEWS FOR THE GORGE | May 20, 2026 | 3rd Annual Edition | $2.00

# FIRE IN THE GORGE 2026

■ **By Trisha Walker**
*Columbia Gorge News*

THE GORGE — Coming off the devastating 2025 wildfire season, this year's Fire in the Gorge feels particularly relevant.

Record-low snowpack and an anticipated hotter-than-normal summer could mean a busier-than-usual wildfire season across the Pacific Northwest this year — and while we hope that isn't the case, the reality is that wildfires start earlier and end later with each passing year. After decades of mismanagement, many forests are chock full of flammable fuel, missing Indigenous stewardship and the historic presence of healthy, regenerative fire.

When we started this publication, it was to promote public safety. It has undergone an evolution of sorts with each passing year. Our goal with this year's publication is to give you the information you need before wildfire strikes, but we've also put an emphasis on looking back to last summer — how residents and firefighters mobilized a heroic response to the Rowena Fire, what the Burdoin Fire did to Lyle-area vineyards, what fire agencies learned and how that knowledge is shaping preparations for this year.

Additionally, we've included resources that we hope you utilize: Need to sign up for emergency alerts? Websites and phone numbers are listed on page 3. Wondering what evacuation levels mean? You'll find that on page 4. And what do you need to bring with you once evacuated? That list is on page 11.

You'll also find a variety of information from community partners to help you get your property and neighborhoods ready to withstand a forest fire, or to help should fire hit.

Wildfire season is only getting harder, but with a little preparation, we can potentially alleviate the worst of it.

## Revisiting Rowena

Above, Brian Harris, standing on the foundation of Don and Monte Dickinson's home, poses for a portrait on April 9. Harris helped protect several homes from the Rowena Fire last summer, but despite his best efforts, the Dickinson's burned. At right, the Rowena Fire, as seen from Rowena Crest Viewpoint around 2 p.m. on June 11, 2025.
Nathan Wilson and Gary Elkinton photos

### How two residents helped save five homes, and what factors complicated the initial response to last summer's destructive blaze

■ **By Nathan Wilson**
*Columbia Gorge News*

ROWENA — Late morning on June 11, 2025, Brian Harris and Renee Sirois pulled up to Roger Stansbury's house at the end of Rowena Ferry Road, about nine miles east of The Dalles. Harris assists local residents with odd jobs — landscaping, interior painting, chopping firewood — and Sirois tags along sometimes. That day, a friend wanted to borrow the rototiller Harris left at Stansbury's.

"If I'm driving by a property and it looks like they could use a hand, not like I'm trying to evaluate them or judge them, but I like to help people," Harris said. "I'm okay with whatever they think it's worth."

While there, Stansbury asked if Harris could clear the overgrowth around his house, worried that, one day, a fire might race down the hill toward his back door. A few hours later, one did.

The Rowena Fire ignited just after 1:20 p.m. and torched roughly 3,700 acres, taking 61 homes and 91 outbuildings in the process. An additional 57 dwellings were impacted due to damaged wells and septic systems. Between Mid-Columbia Fire and Rescue (MCFR), Oregon's Department of Forestry, United States Forest Service crews, the Oregon State Fire Marshal and task forces from adjacent counties, personnel on the fire peaked at over 700.

Harris and Sirois helped save five homes but, inevitably, they watched those of friends, neighbors and customers go up in flames on that horrific Wednesday afternoon.

The two were living together in a single wide trailer at Rowena Crest Manor then, and the same friend who borrowed Harris' rototiller called to warn about the fire. Immediately, Harris and Sirois jumped in a truck and drove to Stansbury's, the first structure threatened. Heading west, flames were already shooting through Highway 30's white guardrails.

MCFR Fire Chief David Jensen was at home hosting a birthday party for one of his kids when he got the call. Considering the dispatcher's tenor, and that he could see smoke coming down the Gorge from his front porch, Jensen knew it was a significant incident. Driving down Interstate 84, and in conversation with another MCFR fire chief who was looping around from Mosier, they observed at least seven separate blazes across a five-mile area, which Jensen said was "inconsistent" with typical spotting behavior.

"In a standard wildland urban interface response, you have a certain set of difficulties, of challenges you need to overcome, but this one almost had

See **ROWENA**, page A8

## Fire agencies prepare

■ **By Nathan Wilson and Neita Cecil**
*Columbia Gorge News*

THE GORGE — Looking down the barrel of longer, all but guaranteed severe wildfire season, boots are being broken in, Pulaskis sharpened and trainings repeated until they become habit across the region, including at the Washington Department of Natural Resources' (DNR) Dallesport Work Center.

Up until October or so, that's home base for the Klickitat Handcrew, a 23-member team specialized in the physical, grueling work of digging 18-inch-wide trenches down to mineral soil for the purpose of containing wildland fires. Most are no stranger to carrying a 40-plus-pound pack up steep terrain and working 12 hours a day for 14 straight, apart from the few new faces, though all are relatively young.

"For three open spots, we interviewed upwards of 30 people," said Superintendent Patrick Richardson. "It's somewhat cutthroat."

Alongside his foreman, fire management officer and squad bosses, Richardson has been leading the Klickitat Handrew

See **AGENCIES**, page A5

## The resiliency of Oregon's white oak

■ **By Emma Renly**
*For Columbia Gorge News*

THE GORGE — The Oregon white oak is an unusual species — with deep cavities, long winding trunks, and a life span of hundreds of years, it has carved out a unique spot in the Columbia River Gorge's ecosystem.

Its presence in the Gorge is unusual, too. The species generally lives west of the Cascade Mountain Range from Northern California to Southern British Columbia, but in the Gorge, its habitat stretches to the east.

It's an outlier that Lindsay Cornelius, manager for the East Cascades Oak Partnership and natural area manager for Columbia Land Trust, can explain.

"This is the only place on the planet where a river the size of the Columbia River bisects an active volcanic mountain range," Cornelius said. This causes, she added, rapid environmental transitions between the western and eastern Gorge.

The Columbia River corridor funnels western marine air, creating a Mediterranean-like climate — more moderate and moist compared to the surrounding interior plateau. Oregon white oaks are able to grow here, but are not found much further than The Dalles in Oregon and Klickitat County in Washington.

There are also fewer oaks

See **OAK**, page A9

New leaf growth on an Oregon white oak. Its bark shows burn marks from the Burdoin Fire.
Emma Renly photo

## A song of wine and fire

■ **By Sean Avery**
*Columbia Gorge News*

LYLE — "In the Columbia Gorge, everybody is familiar with fire," said James Mantone, co-founder of Syncline Winery and volunteer firefighter with the Lyle Fire Department. "It's not if, it's when."

For generations, winemakers have reaped the benefits of the region's geographic advantages, situated at a climatic inflection point between cool, wet conditions to the west and arid, sun-drenched land to the east. Here, grapes with a range of needs — from fog-loving Pinot Noirs to warm-minded Cabernets — flourish in harmony.

Over the last few decades, though, Northwesterners have come to reckon with a far less fruitful phenomenon. A consequence of warming temperatures clashing with human negligence, the frequency and severity of Gorge wildfires have intensified in the 21st century, sparking the inevitable question for wineries and homeowners alike year after year: whose turn is it next?

### Syncline Winery

In July 2025, the Burdoin Fire blazed through nearly 11,000 acres of land in Klickitat

See **WINERIES**, page A6



0 88267 02331 4

# The climate conditions behind our wildfire season

## This winter saw high temperatures and poor precipitation. Mass evaporation further dried out fuels. Only a very strong El Niño could help avoid repeat next year.

■ By Nathan Wilson
*Columbia Gorge News*

THE GORGE — While last week's showers brought a temporary reprieve, Oregon and Washington still face historically low snowpack and impending drought as a longer wildfire season begins; however, there might be some hope at the end of this climate-change-driven tunnel.

As of press deadline, Washington is under a statewide drought emergency while 12 counties, stretching from southwest to northeast Oregon, have made similar declarations. Apart from two, the amount of water stored in snowpack, otherwise called snow water equivalent (SWE), is less than 50% of the historical average for all major basins across both states, according to May 15 numbers from the Natural Resources Conservation Service.

In fact, just east of The Dalles, the John Day Basin has completely melted out, and Mount Hood's SWE is currently the lowest it's been since data collection began in 1980. The National Interagency Coordination Center predicts significant wildland fire potential east of the Cascades by June, with the entirety of Oregon and Washington under elevated risk come August.

"In Oregon, we were tied for the [second]-warmest winter on record going back to 1895," said State Climatologist Larry O'Neill. "We were something like six degrees Fahrenheit above normal, and that was relative to the 20th-century average. Whatever precipitation we got fell as rain rather than snow, for the most part."

As previously reported by *Columbia Gorge News*, two atmospheric river systems hit the Gorge in mid-December. Although streams swelled and some areas saw flooding, Mt. Hood Meadows didn't get a boost because temperatures never dropped, forcing the resort to open just before Christmas — another record.

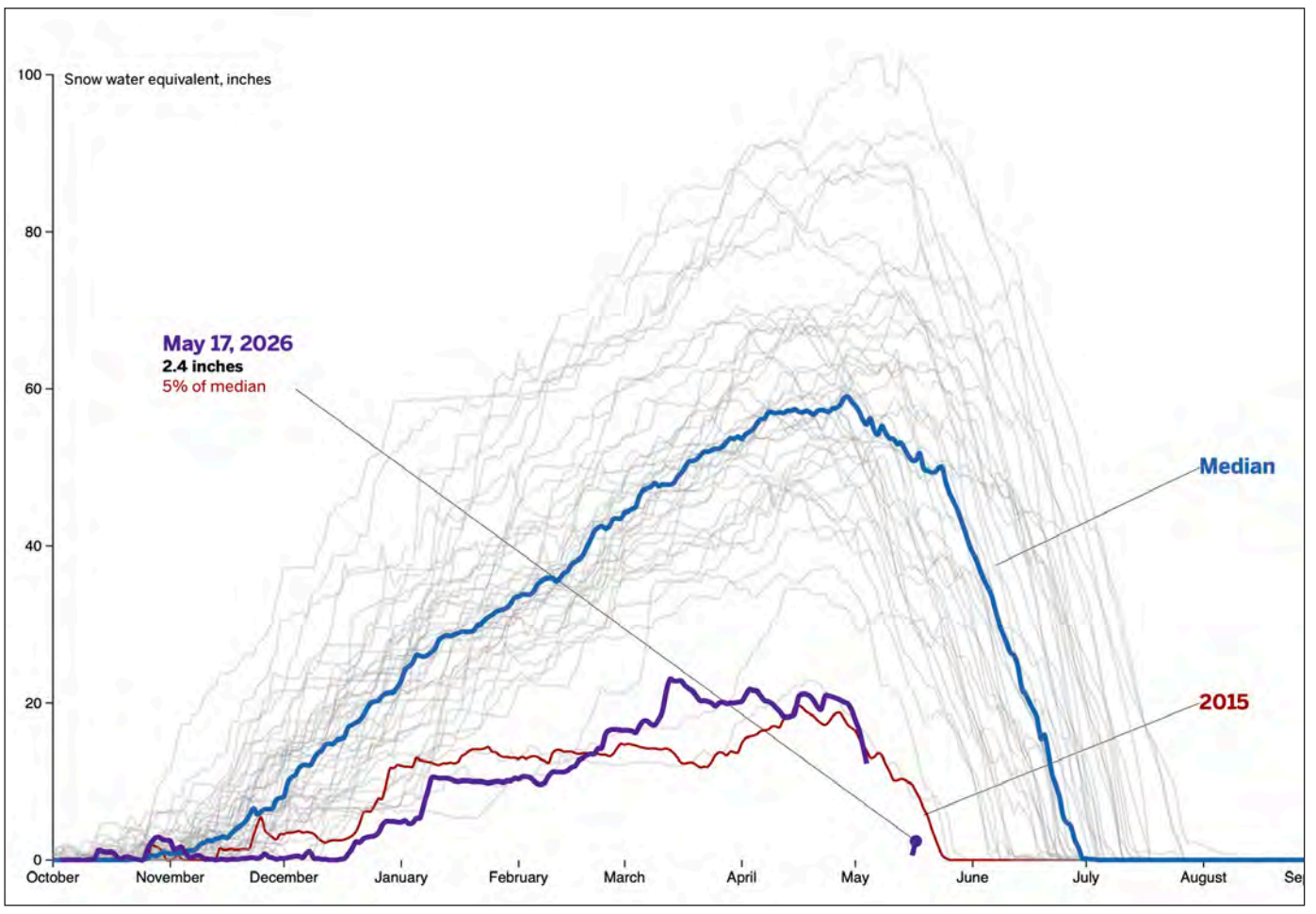
According to O'Neill, last April to March was also the sixth-driest 12-month period that Oregon has experienced, again since 1895. Washington saw better winter precipitation, particularly in the North Cascades and Puget Sound area, but a regionwide warm, dry spring followed, causing the already-meager snowpack to diminish faster than normal.

"That means the landscape will get to its typical summer dryness about one to two months earlier, barring any miracle storm," O'Neill said on May 6. "It basically will just extend fire season by that much."

Locally, *Columbia Gorge News* staff received the first report of a quickly extinguished wildfire on April 10. The Pine Mountain Fire, sparked by a prescribed burned 2,569 acres southeast of Bend that has since been extinguished, was declared a wildfire on May 7, marking Oregon's first major incident this season.

With natural reservoirs depleted, poor springtime recharge and continued high temperatures, the Pacific Northwest has already experienced what O'Neill calls a "mass evaporation event." Warmer atmospheres can hold more water vapor — they demand it — sucking whatever moisture is left from the soil, crops, trees and water bodies.

Snowpack usually keeps water in the environment for longer and reflects sunlight back toward the atmosphere, moderating temperatures at higher elevations, and its absence paves the way for more evaporation. Looming over this positive feedback loop is climate change.




**A graph showing the snow water equivalent, or the amount of liquid water stored in snowpack, at a Mount Hood test site from the present year (in purple) all the way back to 1980. The site was almost completely dry as of May 12, melting out several days earlier than in 2015, which used to be the worst year on record.**
**Graphic courtesy of The Oregonian**

"This has been part of a trend that we've seen over the last 30 or 40 years: declining snowpack in much of the U.S. West," said O'Neill. "There might be some natural variability associated with that, like ocean temperatures, but a big part of it is driven by general warming."

Although recent cooler temperatures and rain staved off further drying, warmer, drier and sunnier conditions will return this week for most of the state and will likely continue for the rest of May. As a result, O'Neill is confident that evaporative demand will return to being well above normal.

Beyond wildfire risk, where fuel moisture plays an important role, he noted that agriculture and hydropower generation will probably suffer because of reduced stream flows. In summer 2015, when Oregon and Washington had similarly lackluster snowpack, electricity via dams fell roughly 32% compared to the previous five-summer average.

Looking into this winter, however, O'Neill is cautiously optimistic about a rebound.

According to the National Weather Service's Climate Prediction Center, it's 98% likely that an El Niño pattern will emerge in August, September or October. Characterized by warmer ocean waters in the central and eastern tropical Pacific, which then influence jet streams nationwide, moderate or strong El Niño events typically bring warm, dry winters to the Pacific Northwest.

But for Oregon specifically, a very strong El Niño could mean the inverse. Three have occurred since the early 1980s, O'Neill said, and two of those winters saw higher-than-average precipitation, snowpack and even some flooding. Currently, there's a 37% chance that a very strong El Niño will form in October, November or December.

Community members meander through information booths at the "Before Wildfire Strikes: Improving Wildfire Preparedness in Hood River County" event on April 29. Trisha Walker photo

Panelists above, from left to right, are Kate Conley, conservation easement manager at Columbia Land Trust; Andy Dwyer, fire risk reduction specialist with the Oregon State Fire Marshal; Katie Skakel, Hood River County emergency and resilience program manager; and Lauren Kramer, Oregon State University associate professor.

At right, Kate Conley, Columbia Land Trust, presents at the April 29 wildfire prevention event.

Trisha Walker photos


# Before wildfire strikes

## Improving preparedness to keep communities safe

■ By Trisha Walker
*Columbia Gorge News*

HOOD RIVER — Are you ready for wildfire season?

"Before Wildfire Strikes: Improving Wildfire Preparedness in Hood River County," a free presentation at Columbia Center for the Arts on April 29, brought together hosts Hood River All-Lands Partnership, the Oregon State Fire Marshal, Oregon State University Extension and other local partners to share information and resources on wildfire — starting at 10,000 feet and ending with the makeup of wildfire smoke.

"That Hood River County faces extreme wildfire risk is an understatement," said Hood River Forest Collaborative's Andrew Spaeth, also a founding member of the Hood River Alliance Partnership, who served as the evening's emcee. "We are in the 100th percentile for wildfire risk among all counties in the United States, and, among counties in the Western United States, we face some of the highest risk of wildfire transmission from the surrounding forest lands to homes."

### Created environment

"As much as fire is part of the landscape today, historical records suggest that we actually had a lot more fire in the past," Spaeth said. "We've created a really homogenous and overly abundant, dense forest condition, and it's easy to see how fires can rapidly spread and grow in that new forested environment that we've created."

Over the last three decades, 80-90% of all fires in Hood River County were human-caused, such as from vehicles, debris piles and burns, and abandoned campfires.

"One of the reasons fire is particularly challenging is because we built homes and communities and places that historically had a lot of fire," he said, adding insurance companies have conducted extensive research on how buildings ignite and emphasizing the importance of establishing defensible space, particularly within five feet of homes. "If it's clear of if it's clear of debris, if it's clear of receptive fuels, you can significantly reduce the potential for structure loss and structure ignition in a wildfire event."

### County preparations

Katie Skakel, Hood River County emergency and resilience program manager, reiterated that most fires are human-caused before going over the responsibilities of her department. (Her predecessor, Charles Young, now works for the Oregon Department of Emergency Management's North Cascades region, which includes Hood River, Wasco and Sherman counties.)

"We coordinate with all of our state and federal partners to create a safe and resilient community," she said. "It is also prepping all of our firefighters, our teams, to be ready in the event of an emergency."

Skakel is also concerned about how the Gorge "locks up" in an emergency event, namely that traffic comes to a stop in town, on bridges, and on the interstate. "We need to address transportation issues," she said.

That said, a lot is happening around prevention and mitigation. The county is looking to start a Community Emergency Response Team (CERT) to train volunteers on how to respond before, during and after an emergency. And under Young's tenure, the county received a five-year wildfire mitigation grant and is looking to hire a wildfire mitigation coordinator who would work in the City of Hood River, Cascade Locks and other county communities.

Bottom line: remain vigilant, and report any sparks, be it on the highway or railroad tracks.

"We need to be hearing about it," she said.

Preparing, adapting, and coexisting with wildfire

Andy Dwyer, fire risk reduction specialist with Oregon State Fire Marshal (OSFM), focused on "structural ignition" and how "continuous fuels" — like grass, shrubs and trees, but also including debris in gutters — can lead a fire directly to the side of a residence.

"OSFM does have the option to do an official defensible space assessment — go through a checklist and do a deep dive around your home," he said. Those interested should visit oregondefensiblespace.org to schedule an appointment with Wade Gibson, deputy state fire marshall for Hood River.

The risk to wildfire-threatened structures has increased significantly over the past two decades — more than 1,000%. (No, that's not a typo.) Embers can travel far — Dwyer cited a basketball-sized ember landing in Dallesport during the Rowena Fire.

"I've actually seen this happen — a flash fire, a grass fire, moved through a structure. The structure didn't ignite," he said. "But what happened was a shed smoldered … that was near the house, within 15 feet, and then that radiant heat fractured the windows on the vehicle near the house, and then the vehicle upholstery ignited, and the vehicle was near the eaves of the home and brought fire into the home."

### Hood River Bluffs

Kate Conley, area manager for Columbia Land Trust, said the trust's role in fire prevention centers around ecosystems. "We try to do things like prescribe fire when possible, to get rid of some of those built-up fuels and change the vegetation composition back toward the species that really thrive, even in situations where there's frequent fire," she said.

Of course, that doesn't work in an urban setting — and there are houses right up to the edge of the bluff, on steep, forested land. Instead, the group focuses on removing those potential fuels by hand, such as blackberry bushes.

Using native plants also helps, and volunteer planting events the past two Aprils have bolstered those numbers. But that doesn't mean the fight is over.

"I would say that the biggest concern out here is going to be the long-term maintenance. Things will keep growing back," Conley said. "The reason we're planting those native shrubs is so that it doesn't all come back in blackberry, but this is ongoing work for all of us."

### Smoke preparedness

The catastrophic Labor Day fires — in which more than 4,000 homes were destroyed and 11 lives lost — saw toxic air conditions in the Gorge as smoke traveled from Southern Oregon.

Oregon State University Associate Professor Lauren Kraemer, family and community health, took the poor air quality to heart. "I felt like we needed to do better, and that our continued droughts and heat and fire are only going to create worsening smoke situations for the future," she said.

Smoke is a mixture of whatever is on fire, and it becomes more toxic as it travels. She estimates that 60%-70% of Gorge residents are in the "smoke sensitive and vulnerable populations," including those with pre-existing conditions, pregnant people, infants and children under 21, houseless individuals, and those who work outside.

In response, Kraemer began tracking air quality. At present, more than 50 new monitors have been installed at schools, orchard sites, and other locations to provide real-time data, paid for with grants.

"When I began this work, smoke and fire were kind of separated," she said. "These things happen together, and we need to be working together."

For more information — including air quality readings — visit smokereadygorge.org.

•••

Hood River County OSU Extension has a downloadable PDF guide, titled "Before Wildfire Strikes," that includes more information on defensible space, home hardening, creating an emergency plan, and preparing for wildfire smoke; visit extension.oregonstate.edu and search "Before wildfire strikes Hood River."

# BLM, Wildland Fire Service announce fire restrictions

■ Bureau of Land Management

Fire restrictions went into effect May 14 on all Bureau of Land Management (BLM) administered lands throughout Oregon and Washington.

The BLM and U.S. Wildland Fire Service leaders encourage all visitors to be aware of active restrictions and closures as warmer, drier weather sets in around the Pacific Northwest.

These fire restrictions help reduce the risk of human-caused fires. The use of fireworks, exploding targets or metallic targets, steel component ammunition (core or jacket), tracer or incendiary devices, and sky lanterns.

"We are increasingly concerned that 2026 could rival the most extreme years on record for heat and dryness in the Pacific Northwest," said Jeff Fedrizzi, U.S. Wildland Fire Service, assistant chief of operations, for the Pacific Northwest. "Every visitor must understand that even one small spark can lead to a costly and destructive fire in these high-impact conditions."

People who violate the prohibition may be fined up to $100,000 and/or imprisoned for up to 12 months. In addition, those found responsible for starting wildland fires on federal lands can be billed for the cost of fire suppression.

For more information on seasonal fire restrictions and fire closures, see www.blm.gov/orwafire.

# SIGNING UP FOR EMERGENCY ALERTS

Signing up for emergency alerts is a strong first step to take in being prepared for emergencies.
Visit these websites in Oregon and Washington to sign up.
You can tailor what kind of alerts you
get, and how you get them — such as by email, text or phone call to your landline or cellphone.

**IN WASHINGTON:**
For Klickitat County:
www.smart911.com/smart911/ref/login.action?pa=klickitatco

For Skamania County:
signup.hyper-reach.com/hyper _reach/sign_up_ page_2/?id=45528

**IN OREGON:**
For Wasco County:
member.ever- bridge.net/453003085612392/login
Individuals who need assistance can register by calling the Wasco County communications manager at 541-506-2760.

For Hood River County:
hoodriversheriff.com/events/emergency-alerts

# New research reveals increased wildfire risk for more than 400 communities in Northwest

■ **By Steve Lundeberg**
*Oregon State University*

THE NORTHWEST — A new wildfire risk assessment tool that takes social vulnerability into account indicates more than 400 communities in the Pacific Northwest are at greater risk than previously thought.

However, researchers at Oregon State University (OSU) and The Nature Conservancy say their assessment tool could inform fair distribution of risk-reduction resources.

Andy McEvoy of the OSU College of Forestry led the creation of the tool, which integrates social vulnerability factors like as structure density and environmental hazard, and was presented in Environmental Research Letters.

Among the communities whose risk level increased are the Oregon towns of Cave Junction, La Pine and Glendale, and the Washington towns of Selah, White Salmon and Ellensburg.

The researchers found that Northwest communities with both high wildfire hazard and high social vulnerability tended to be small — having fewer than 5,000 buildings — and were mainly in the drier portions of the region. Examples of communities in need of higher prioritization by funding allocators include Warm Springs and Goldendale.

"Warm Springs and Goldendale have slightly lower wildfire exposure than some nearby, better-resourced communities like Bend and Leavenworth, but they experience greater social vulnerability and therefore are likely to experience greater impacts if a fire occurred," said co-author Chris Dunn, also of the College of Forestry. "By blending a mix of factors, our assessment method is a path toward more equitable investments in community wildfire risk reduction."

Social vulnerability refers to community characteristics that partially influence the capacity to withstand and recover from events such as wildfires, floods and earthquakes. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention uses data categorized under four themes — socioeconomic status, household characteristics, racial and ethnic minority status, and housing type and transportation in its social vulnerability index.

"This tool balances the important element of social vulnerability with wildfire exposure, highlighting communities that are experiencing a relatively high degree of both," Dunn said. "In a paper published in 2024 by OSU researchers, we observed that a lack of investment in mitigation and fire suppression resources led to more fire impacts in socially vulnerable communities — even when their other risk factors were comparatively low. The new tool is a huge step forward for allocating risk mitigation funds in a more equitable and effective way."

The authors explain that the level of wildfire impact on a community depends on a variety of factors including its firefighting capacity, the surrounding landscape and the characteristics of its "home ignition zones" — i.e., how much flammable material is in close proximity to buildings.

Pre-fire mitigation, smoke management plans, wildfire response and postfire recovery are a function of a community's access to resources and its level of participation in wildfire management networks, the researchers say.

"Despite official and unofficial demands that social vulnerability be better accounted for in wildfire mitigation decision making, there have been few decision-support tools to help with that," McEvoy said. "The current tools don't really factor in a community's demographic and socioeconomic data."

The researchers applied their novel tool, which integrates a social vulnerability index with a quantitative wildfire risk assessment, to 1,005 communities in the Northwest. Almost half of them, 459, were shown to be at greater risk than the quantitative assessment alone indicated. Based on the new tool, 26 would be elevated to the "priority" status for receiving funding for risk mitigation measures such as education, planning and fuels reduction.

Those 26 include Odell, The Dalles and Warm Springs in Oregon, and Roosevelt in Washington..

"Communities experiencing less social vulnerability often have the capacity and resources needed to apply for and make use of publicly funded mitigation," McEvoy said. "The many communities across the Northwest that are experiencing high social vulnerability have less capacity and fewer resources — but that doesn't mean they aren't facing the same risk, or even greater."

For 541 communities in the study, risk level went down when social vulnerability was included in the equation. The largest decreases in risk were seen in communities with the highest per-capita income.

Seventy-four communities were considered priority communities with or without taking social vulnerability into account; all are in regions categorized as high hazard.

"Oregon and Washington communities increasingly see the direct impacts of extreme wildfire on people and the forests that support them, and these datasets reveal which communities experience the greatest wildfire risk and are under-resourced for fire preparedness and recovery," said co-author Kerry Metlen of The Nature Conservancy. "Using these data will facilitate more effective local partnerships to restore resilient landscapes, help communities adapt and develop smoke management plans that will allow forests and people of the Pacific Northwest to thrive."

The U.S. Forest Service funded the study.

## Check your burn piles

The Oregon Department of Forestry (ODF) encourages anyone who may have completed a debris or slash burn in the past few months to monitor and patrol the burn site.

Embers can smolder beneath the surface, even in winter, after a burn and reignite in dry conditions, and wind gusts could reignite residual embers and start a fire. If you feel heat at your burn site, drown the site with water, stir, and repeat until it's cold to the touch.

For more fire prevention information and tips, visit www.oregon.gov/odf/fire/Pages/fire-prevention.aspx or keeporegongreen.org.

•••

This news release was provided by the Oregon Department of Forestry.

# Six ways vehicles can cause wildfires

UNDER HOT, DRY CONditions, all types of motorized vehicles can ignite a wildfire. Prevent yours from turning into a costly wildfire by following these safety tips:

- **No dragging metal** — Metal tow changes and car parts dragging on the roadway throw sparks.
- **Maintain exhaust system** — Worn catalytic converters and other exhaust parts can cast hot carbon particles into dry roadside vegetation.
- **Check tire pressure** — Maintain proper tire pressure. Driving on exposed wheel rims will throw sparks.
- **Capture sparks** — Off road vehicles (OHVs) and dirt bikes must be equipped with clean spark arrests. Always operate motorized vehicles on established roads and trails.
- **Avoid dry grass** — Hot exhaust parts can ignite fires on contact. Never park, drive, or idle over tall, dry grass or brush. Pull over on gravel or paved surfaces.
- **Maintain brake pads** — Brakes worn too thin may cause metal-to-metal contact, which can generate sparks.

Be prepared by carrying a fire extinguisher in your vehicle and learning how to use it.

*— Source: smokeybear.com*

# EVACUATION LEVELS AND THEIR MEANING

When wildfires occur, officials provide varying evacuation instructions to affected areas, depending on the severity of risk. The three levels are: Be Ready; Be Set; and Go Now!

The following is a description of what each level means, as provided by wildfire.oregon.gov.

**(Green on a map) LEVEL 1 - BE READY** to evacuate.

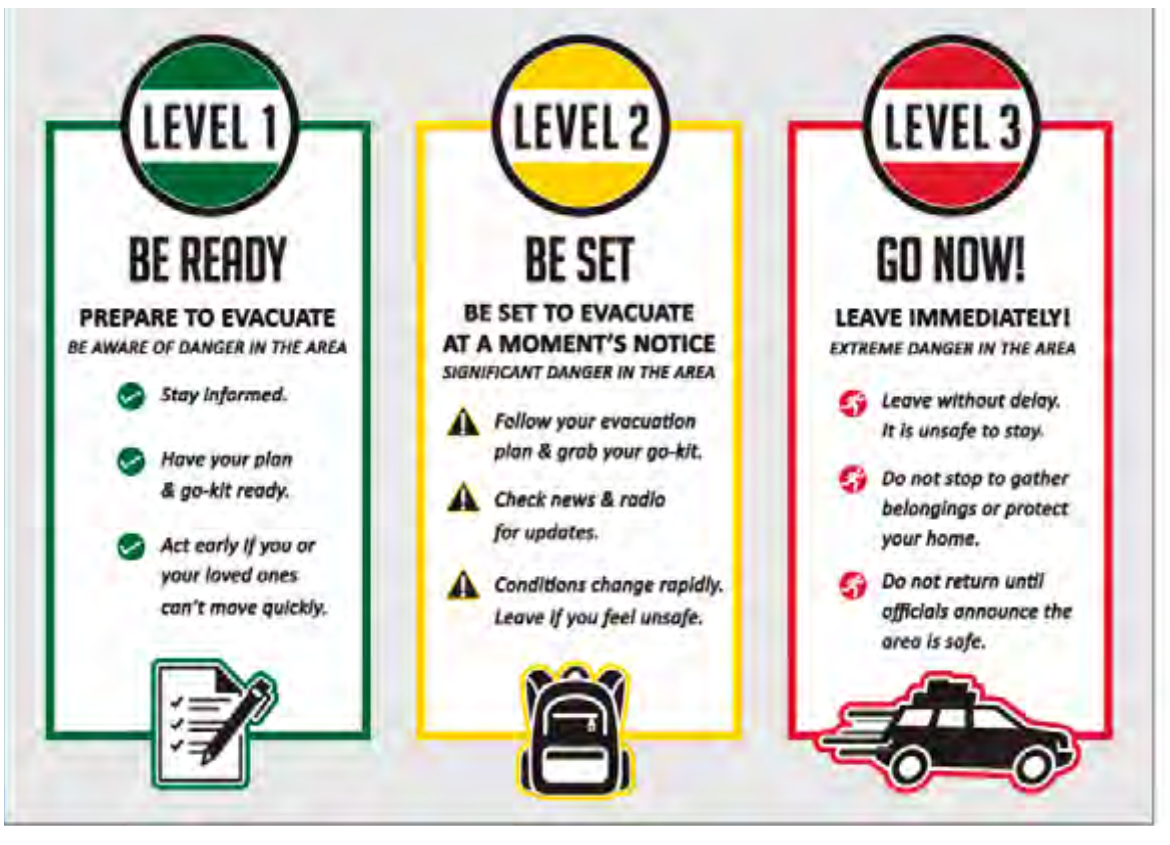
Be aware of danger in the area. Stay informed: Sign up for emergency alerts with your county. Check the county emergency management website and follow local emergency services on social media for updates (county, sheriff's office, fire agencies). Tune in to local news for more information. This is the time to pack and prepare to leave. Have your emergency plan and go-kit ready. Plan possible evacuation routes and transportation needs. Check with loved ones and emergency contacts. If you can do so safely, check with your neighbors, share information and ask for help if needed. Consider leaving early if you or your loved ones can't move quickly and need more time to evacuate, including older adults, families with children, people with disabilities and those with limited access to transportation. Consider moving pets and livestock early.

**(Yellow on a map) Level 2 - BE SET** to evacuate.

There is significant danger in the area. Be prepared to leave at a moment's notice. Time to act — there may not be enough time to pack your belongings and doing so is at your own risk. Leave if you or your loved ones can't move quickly and need extra time to evacuate. Inform loved ones of your evacuation plans. Be prepared to relocate to a shelter or with family or friends outside of the affected area. Stay informed and be alert. Continue to check the county emergency management website, local emergency services on social media, and local news for updates. Conditions can change rapidly. Leave if you feel unsafe. You don't need to wait for another evacuation notice.

**(Red on a map) Level 3 - GO NOW!**

Leave immediately! There is extreme danger in the area. It is unsafe to stay and threatens the safety of you, your loved ones and emergency responders. Do not stop to gather belongings or make efforts to protect your home. Emergency responders may not be available to provide help if you choose to stay. Do not return to the area until officials announce the area is safe.




Graphic from wildfire.oregon.gov

**As the saying goes, knowledge is power. In an emergency, it can be lifesaving.**

The key areas to learn before an emergency are:

**Know your risks.** What's most likely to happen here? Tornadoes? No. Tsunamis? No. Wildfires and winter snowstorms? Yes. Know when and where to go. Beforehand, decide on several possible destinations in various directions, and share them with your family and friends. When you choose one, share that.

**Know what to bring.** Build a go bag ahead of time so you're not scrambling (see page 8). Make sure everyone in the house knows where it's stored and who is responsible for it in an emergency.

**Know where to get good information.** Sign up for alerts from your local emergency management agencies and the National Weather Service, which will provide updates on threat conditions, shelter locations, and other important safety information.

**Download the FEMA App** where you can receive real-time weather alerts, locate emergency shelters in your area, prepare for common hazards, and more.

**Keep your car full of gas,** especially if you know evacuation is likely. Keep your tank half full at all times.

**If you don't have a car,** plan with family and friends how you will leave.

**Once you evacuate,** close and lock your doors. Leave a note saying where you're going. Unplug small appliances.

# AGENCIES

## Training in full swing

Continued from page A1

through what's called the "Critical 80," a series of progressive trainings designed to teach field-based skills — everything from taking weather to felling hazard trees, safely working around bulldozers — and ensure peak physical readiness over two weeks before the season begins in earnest. It's a trial by fire, so to speak.

Every morning starts with a similar pattern. One person from each squad helps clean the showers, bunk room and kitchens while the rest perform morning checks, seeing that trucks are fueled up, chainsaws warm, water jugs filled and all other necessary equipment is accounted for at 8 a.m.

Next comes an overview of goals for the day during crew briefing, which also includes a short safety presentation. On May 8, the topic was chipping debris during post-fire cleanup, and then everyone gathered behind the center, formerly Dallesport Elementary, for an hour-long physical training session under the sun, winds shooting down the Gorge.

Beyond the mental fortitude needed to remain rational in life-threatening situations, Richardson stressed that wildland firefighting demands strength, endurance and flexibility — "occupational athletes" — so the Critical 80 places a heavy emphasis on conditioning. The group did weighted sandbag rows, pull-ups, battle ropes and other exercises, rotating stations every three with almost no rest inbetween. Capped by a group core session, everyone then changed into their "greens" and "yellows" (standard flame-resistant clothing) for an afternoon of simulated training sessions.

"I want you verbalizing as you're doing it. Say it out loud," Richardson told the group. "We're learning the play and running half speed. You're learning it to the point where you don't have to think about what you're doing, because we train to develop that muscle memory.

"If you're distracted with the stuff you possess every day because we don't train with it, you can't focus on the fire itself," he continued. "That's why we walk through. That's why we do it until we can't get it wrong."

•••

*Story continues below*

Led by Squad Boss Natalie Schroder, the Klickitat Handcrew works on their bread and butter — digging fireline — during the afternoon training session on May 8. They had to rotate through five stations designed to simulate critical skills and scenarios on the job. Completing 99 feet in 20 minutes was the goal at this one, and each tool serves a slightly different purpose, like cutting through roots, scraping and grubbing. Visible are Scout Dale, Alex Barzee and Sean Albro, in that order. Nathan Wilson photo

At another station, Sean Albro pretends to have injured his foot, and the squad worked through how to manage an incident where someone needs medical attention. Carrying Albro are Natalie Schroder and Ryan Towell on the left, assisted by Alex Barzee and Scout Dale on the right. Nathan Wilson photos

Should they ever be trapped by wildfire, Sean Albro, Ryan Towell and Natalie Schroder practice how to deploy an emergency shelter, shedding everything apart from their water and radios. To prevent oxygen from escaping and noxious gas from entering, it's critical that firefighters have a tight seal between their shelter and the ground. Nathan Wilson photo

The squad deploys from their crew truck before digging fireline. Scout Dale grabs the tools while Ryan Towell and Alex Barzee shuttle packs out to Sean Albro and Natalie Schroder. At other stations, the squad went over positions for mobile attack with a brush truck and, when working in a heavily wooded landscape that restricts movement, progressive hose lays. Nathan Wilson photos

Austin Russell, helicopter manager with Washington Department of Natural Resources Helitack, talks with the Klickitat Handcrew and engine personnel for aviation training at the Columbia Gorge Regional Airport in Dallesport on May 14. Helen H. Richardson photo / special to Columbia Gorge News

Members of the Klickitat Handcrew watch as a helicopter drops water during a training exercise on private land east of John Day Dam along the Columbia River on May 14. They were learning how to communicate with aviation crews and coordinate precise water drops, simulating wildfire response. Helen H. Richardson photo / special to the Columbia Gorge News

Richardson's crew covers Klickitat County, first and foremost. DNR's Southeast region, which encompasses Leavenworth, Pullman and Yakima, is their secondary responsibility, with the entire state coming third. Despite an abundance of handcrew applications, DNR's Klickitat Fire Unit is down three engines this year, from seven to four.

"There were plenty of firefighter applications for the engines as well; however, there were not enough qualified applicants for the engine leader position to staff the engines," said Klickitat Fire Manager Anthony Dobson. Without an engine lead, DNR can't fill the other four seats.

To help flush out capacity gaps and improve cross-river collaboration, Richardson aims to have a mutual aid agreement signed with the Oregon Department of Forestry (ODF) office in The Dalles, where similar preparation is underway, come July.

ODF started hiring firefighting staff earlier than usual, said Unit Forester Chase Duncan, and they're also hoping to bring on the two aircraft that get stationed at Dallesport airport and are crucial to firefighting efforts earlier than normal.

Over at Mid-Columbia Fire & Rescue (MCFR), four fresh wildland firefighters continued fuel reduction projects, including tree thinning, limbing and brush removal, throughout Wasco County last month and will remain on staff for the season.

All MCFR firefighters take an annual refresher training on wildland firefighting, command staff complete classes on incident management and MCFR recently hosted an advanced fire weather training for regional agencies.

Division Chief of Operations Josh Beckner emphasized the importance of regional coordination, alongside establishing operational systems before a wildfire occurs.

"Logistics is everything behind the scenes that ensures firefighters can safely and effectively do their job when an emergency happens," Beckner said.

They plan for water and fuel supplies, sign agreements for meals and portable restrooms, and map access points in wildland areas. They identify areas with heightened risk and ensure communication systems can handle large scale events.

"The 2025 Rowena Fire highlighted how critical communications and infrastructure are, and we continue working on improvements in that area," he said. Beth Kennedy, public affairs officer for the U.S. Forest Service's Columbia River Gorge National Scenic Area, emphasized how that's a shared effort.

Like DNR, ODF and MCFR, Forest Service firefighters spend time getting physically ready for the season, running, hiking trails with gear and doing calisthenics, she said. In the run-up to fire season, local, state and federal fire agencies meet weekly to coordinate.

Key areas are changes to staffing, communications plans and dispatch procedures, Duncan with ODF said. Also, to prepare staff as much as possible, they'll send local personnel to other areas for further experience, as workload allows. In return, other states come to Oregon when its fire seasons is in full swing, Duncan said.

Wes Long, chief of West Klickitat Regional Fire Authority, said the Gorge was lucky to have fire agencies on both sides of the Columbia River that work well together. That's not necessarily the case elsewhere, he said.

And weather is another key factor that fire officials keep an eye on. "I think everybody's nervous about the upcoming season," Long said. It could be a wet May or a wet June, but the weather predictions aren't saying that, he said.

He communicates with the meteorologists at the National Weather Service out of Pendleton. "We put a lot of weight on what they tell us because that's the best way we can plan, short of having a crystal ball.

"It's gonna be a busy season," Long said.

COR Cellars off Old Highway 8 lost about a quarter of an acre of vineyard due to the Burdoin Fire.
Nathan Wilson photo

A couple watches watch the Burdoin Fire as it threatens the town of Lyle, as seen from the Rowena Crest Overlook near the Tom McCall Preserve across the Columbia River on July 19, 2025.
Helen H. Richardson photo / special to Columbia Gorge News

A helicopter makes a water drop on the Burdoin Fire west of the Klickitat River on July 19, 2025, as seen from the Rowena Crest Overlook.
Helen H. Richardson photo / special to Columbia Gorge News

# WINERIES
## Damaged by fire, and smoke

*Continued from page A1*

County, damaging or destroying over 100 structures in the process. Lyle's Syncline Winery, co-founded by Mantone and his wife Poppie in 1999, was one of several affected properties.

The couple initially relocated to the Gorge for the same reasons anyone might — a leisurely lifestyle, immediate access to nature, and a dynamic climate — recognizing a rich potential for horticulture. "At the time, there was hardly any wine going on," Mantone said. "With all the fruit that's grown in the area, we felt confident to start a brand here."

Once they got a handle on the climate, the Mantones started planting vineyards, launching Syncline's 27-year existence as one of Lyle's pioneering wineries.

Sitting on the Gorge's eastern end, past the Cascade rain shadow, Lyle has always offered sunnier skies than its western counterparts. But the area has grown dramatically warmer and drier since they arrived, Mantone explained. Such trends have familiarized the small unincorporated community with constant summertime fire risk, requiring heightened alert and preparation from property owners.

Last year, figuring a fire scare for Syncline and nearby structures was inevitable, the vigneron decided to join the Klickitat County Fire Protection District 4, or the Lyle Fire District (LFD), which consists entirely of trained neighbors helping neighbors. "It felt like something I wanted to do for years," Mantone said. "And I'd gotten the business to a point where I could."

On July 18, 2025, the day Burdoin broke loose, Mantone received a call from a buddy in Hood River who noticed smoke rising over the White Salmon/Bingen area. On what was already a sweltering day, with winds blowing at 35 knots, he developed a bad feeling and notified staff to start preparing for the worst. "Everybody knew it was gonna explode as soon as it started," Mantone said. "It was just like the Rowena Fire a couple of months earlier. It's gonna move, it's gonna race. It's not so much about stopping it, but about what you can do so people don't get hurt."

While Syncline patrons and staff evacuated, Mantone reported to the fireline. For 14 hours, without cell power, he worked to contain the blaze, unable to contact family. "I knew they'd gotten out," he said. "I was doing everything I could to protect other people's property."

Twenty hours later, as the Burdoin churned on nearby, Mantone laid eyes on Syncline for the first time since the fire started. While the winery's main structure stood tall, the property suffered extreme losses that would impact operations for the remainder of the year. Syncline lost roughly a half-acre of vines scattered throughout the property, spoiling the entire crop. Mantone and staff had to repair close to nine miles of trellis, four miles of fencing, and nine miles of irrigation.

Such a toll, Mantone stressed, paled in comparison to the devastation others in the Lyle community experienced — and are still experiencing — with many losing their homes entirely. "It's a huge blow to the community," he said. "There are neighbors out there who won't be able to afford to rebuild. I hate to see people being pushed off their land."

Now, emerging from a warm winter that saw historically low snowpack levels across the Western U.S., Gorge wineries are bracing for another intense fire season. "People are a little extra jumpy right now," Mantone said.

Still, Syncline's preparation will look largely the same, implementing mitigation practices that they've learned and mastered over the years: keeping vegetation mowed short, discing, and adding firebreaks. Mantone believes the winery redirected the Burdoin to the north last year through a combination of vegetation management and timely watering from its automated irrigation system, inadvertently protecting some houses.

Earlier this year, Syncline worked with horticulturists at Washington State University to research wines from their current harvest and further educate themselves on wildfire risk management.

"I've been doing this for 30 years; there's been multiple vintages where we've had fires," Mantone said. "It can be dispiriting, but I believe in this area for wine."

### COR Cellars

Another Lyle-based winery, COR Cellars, was founded by winemaker Luke Bradford in 2003, soft-launching over the next couple of years until its tasting room officially opened in 2005. Like Syncline, COR has grown into a Gorge vino staple over its 20-plus-year existence.

During this time, Bradford has witnessed plenty of fires come and go at a sporadic pace. "We had one surrounding us. There was one adjacent to us in 2020," he said. "Burdoin was the first one that really burned through."

Bradford and his family were traveling out of state when the flames took hold, prompting a mad dash back home after staff called with the terrifying update. "We immediately booked a flight home, scrambling to get all of the information we could," he said. "It was out of our hands."

While they were away, Burdoin burned through the property. Upon return, Bradford had a chance to survey the damage before the authorities shut the area down for the next week. Thankfully, COR didn't suffer any major building damage during the blaze, but it lost a pump house, a couple of small sheds, deer fencing, metal and wood posts, and landscaping. The fire destroyed about a quarter of an acre of vineyard, and smoke damage prevented any further picking. "We kind of got lucky," Bradford said. "I hesitate to feel bad for myself because my neighbors lost their homes … a neighboring winery lost its building."

As with Syncline, COR's spent the following months, discarding debris, rebuilding infrastructure, and waiting for the land to bounce back, but it represents a fraction of the devastation that impacted the Lyle community at large. "It's a lot of despair," Bradford said. "Seeing what happened to people that you know and care about."

For COR, Burdoin also illuminated challenges specific to businesses in the highly-regulated alcohol industry. "You have to make sure your valuables are packed and ready to go," Bradford said, pointing to years' worth of computer records. "Being a winery, you not only have to do all the regular business practices, but also work through the Alcohol and Tobacco Tax and Trade Bureau and the Liquor Control Board."

Finding quality insurance poses yet another concern for people who live in wildfire hotspots, Bradford explained. "It's a real struggle, especially in this county where I've heard horror stories from people having issues, not just paying out of [Burdoin], but keeping their coverage moving forward."

Bradford expects COR to stick to their usual mitigation practices this year, stressing that low snowpack doesn't necessarily mean another brutal season is in the cards. "It's so hard to tell. It's going to be hot. Maybe it's not," he said. "We don't think about it differently other than being on high alert … being extra vigilant."

Part of that mindset stems from the fact that most fires are human-caused (e.g., discarding cigarette butts, fireworks, dragging a chain on a trailer, and train operations), which shifts the focus to raising awareness and encouraging local, state, and federal politicians to invest in emergency services.

Something COR has learned about fire season, no matter what sort of winter precedes it, is that no amount of risk management, though critical, can truly stop one; the firefighters, boots on the ground on the day of, are the real heroes. "Local fire departments aren't big enough to handle all of it — they're spread thin," Bradford said. "It's about boosting funding, because at the end of the day, that's what helps."

Whether the 2026 fire season arrives quietly or with force, winemakers in the Columbia River Gorge will endure. From the vineyard to the fireline, those who serve the region will always remain, and the beautiful land that sustains them, though scorched time and time again, will always bounce back.

A dead oak tree, likely several hundred years old, found in the Burdoin Fire scar. (Hattie Fletcher for size reference). "When you see the bark pull away from the live cambium like that, whole sections exposed through gaps or peeling and the texture reduced to smooth char, the fire was too hot to survive," said Lindsay Cornelius with Columbia Land Trust. Emma Renly photo

## OAK
## Uniquely fire-adapted

Continued from page A1

on the western end, Cornelius says, due to fire suppression. "But if you look, the oaks are still there. Many of them are dying in the shade of conifers, but they are there."

The Oregon white oak is the sole native oak in Washington state, and one of three primary native oaks in Oregon. Cornelius says its adaptability and hardiness are what make it so valuable.

The fire resilience of the Oregon white oak is a multi-tiered story — their deep root system can extend wider than the crown, accessing soil and water other trees cannot. Their bark is thick like a "heat blanket," protective against the flame. And their waxy leaves, when hydrated, are difficult to ignite.

"If you've ever built a burn pile out of just pure oak wood, it's really hard to get it going," Cornelius said. "In extreme fire weather conditions — hot, dry, windy — almost anything will burn. And if oak wood gets going, it'll add heat to the flames."

Inside the Burdoin Fire scar from last summer, many of the Oregon white oaks have charred bark and burnt limbs, but in between the branches and at the crown, there is bright new green growth.

"The oaks are well adapted to this landscape, which historically experienced low to moderate-severity fires," Cornelius said. "If fire kills the crown of an oak, they often resprout after moderate severity fire ... they still have enough resources in that tap root to support a new crown."

She added that because the new growth is starting from an existing system, it is a considerably faster turnaround than waiting on seedlings — the tree is slow-growing.

Fire regime, she explained, is how frequently a landscape experiences fire based on climate and vegetation. In the oak woodlands of the Gorge, it was every 8-15 years until the early 1900s. Removal of Indigenous people and their lifeways to reservations, commercialization of forest products and construction of permanent infrastructure in the landscape altered that cycle.

That, and impacts from the Big Burn in 1910, led the U.S. Forest Service to adopt the 10 a.m. policy in 1935 — put any fire out by 10 a.m. the next morning. This initial belief in total fire suppression for land stewardship caused a build-up of fuels on the ground floor — litter, duff, coarse wood and even trees.

"Fire is going to move through these overstocked forests hotter and faster than it would have historically because there's just more fuel," Cornelius added.

The fuel build-up contributes to higher-severity fires, which burn hot and leave a black scar with over 75% tree mortality, according to Oregon State University.

When the Oregon white oaks die, the impact on biodiversity is significant — many wildlife species, from squirrels to caterpillars to blue jays to larger mammals like deer, elk and bear, depend on the trees for shelter and food.

Cornelius says that on this landscape, we need to expect fire and reintroduce it to the land through prescribed burns. Both Mt. Adams Prescribed Burn Association and Mt. Adams Resource Stewards have assisted in bringing back fire to parcels owned by Columbia Land Trust.

"We've safely burned more than 300 acres of fire-adapted forest, with plans for much more," Cornelius said.

Through the East Cascades Oak Partnership, Cornelius wants to highlight information that can improve the health of oak trees and habitats. She suggested their website, eastcascadesoakpartnership.org, to get connected with resources and potential funding opportunities specific to the Columbia River Gorge.

Still, Cornelius knows researchers are still discovering the adaptability of the Oregon white oak, especially in the face of climate change, such as increasing drought and intensifying fire behavior.

"Monitoring and sharing our observations will help us learn and adapt as we go," she said. "It's true of all systems — the more you know, the more you don't know."

# Avoiding flammable plants

■ By Sean Avery
*Columbia Gorge News*

THE GORGE — The Columbia River Gorge is rich in vegetation, home to more than 800 species of plants, including 15 wildflowers that exist nowhere else on the planet.

But as wildfires become more frequent and unpredictable, some plants in the region are best avoided, particularly when it comes to landscaping around your property.

Flammable plants, such as Arborvitae and Juniper, contain volatile oils and gummy resinous sap; have aromatic leaves; and are prone to accumulating dry, dead matter. We can't control the wind, the heat, or the negligent actions of fellow humans. We can, however, do our part to mitigate risk and avoid adding fuel to the fire by implementing firewise landscaping.

Firewise landscaping requires proper plant selection, placement, and maintenance to reduce the chance of stray embers igniting structures or slow the progression of an existing blaze.

### Selection

First and foremost, property owners must consider native plants, which have adapted to the Gorge's dry summers and are less likely to ignite: fire-resistant species feature watery, odorless sap; open-branching patterns; and wide, supple leaves. While prone to damage, they do not act as fuel.

Combinations of low-growing deciduous shrubs, herbaceous flowers, and groundcover plants are less likely to combust and spread to surrounding vegetation. When selecting new plants for your home landscape, consult Oregon State University's publication Fire-resistant plants for Home Landscape, which offers an array of aesthetically pleasing, non-flammable options.

### Placement

Ornamental conifers, used by orchards as pesticide screens, are better planted 30 feet or more from your home, while Portuguese laurel or Oregon grape work as potential alternatives. Defensible space serves as a buffer against the spread; avoid placing any plants within 5 feet of the structure, and limit the 5-30 foot "Intermediate Zone" to fire-resistant flora. Moreover, linear arrangements offer continuous pathways for flames; allow gaps of at least 10 feet between planting groups to create a firebreak.

### Maintenance

Even the most fire-resistant plants are rendered ineffective if not properly maintained. Regular watering helps keep plants healthy, but avoid overwatering, which can cause excessive growth, disease, and dead plant buildup. Prune plants regularly and remove dead material, especially any hidden within dense growth.

Trees add shade and beauty, but should be maintained to reduce fire danger. Trim lower branches 6–10 feet from the ground, and clear away pine cones, fallen branches, dead leaves, and dry grass around the base to prevent ladder fuels. When choosing new trees, deciduous varieties are generally less flammable.

# ROWENA

## 'It became this burden to tell people'

*Continued from page A1*

everything with it," Jensen said. "A high-capacity interstate. You have residential areas. You have the topography, the wind. You have the low humidity and high temperatures, and then the power lines that are running through. All those are complicating for the air and ground resources that we have in the area."

Meyer State Park served as the command center, and by the time Harris and Sirois arrived at Stansbury's, responders were preparing to burn the hillside. While brush trucks and water tenders could refill at the Columbia River with relative ease, they have limited capacity, whereas backburns can eliminate a wide swath of combustible fuels in a fire's path.

The conditions need to be manageable, though, and on-scene supervisors must have confidence in their crew and understand what's going to happen once the drip torches come out, Jensen explained.

"In a grassy area with the wind blowing and low humidity, no matter how much experience you have, that's still a technical burn," he said. "Nobody does that every day."

Harris recalled that Stansbury, who recently had hip surgery, was skeptical. Harris grabbed a hose and started spraying the vegetation lining his back porch, and while a burn scar now surrounds the property, Stansbury's house is still standing. Crews also performed another backburn on the flat face of Sevenmile Hill just west of the Columbia Gorge Discovery Center and Museum.

Coupled with a bulldozed fuel break around the fire's southwest flank approaching Chenoweth, which was completed by Thursday morning, those two operations played a key role in halting any further spread toward The Dalles. In the initial stages, however, responders focused on tallying how many people had decided to remain on their property.

"Our primary concern was for the homes under threat at that time, and frankly, the life safety aspect of it. During the fire, we didn't know how many people were still in there," Jensen said. "It's life safety first before property protection and the environment."

Harris and Sirois stayed until late evening, apart from a brief hiatus. After spending about an hour with Stansbury, they drove Sirois' pitbull and another friend's Mercedes out to Thompson Track. There, Sirois got a text from Don and Monte Dickinson explaining how they had left $400 in the barbecue for a prior job, so they got back on the historic highway.

Tooley Terrace hadn't yet burned, Harris said, but flames were nearing the Dickinson's property. As standard procedure during wildfires, Northern Wasco County PUD officials cut off electricity to the unincorporated community, rendering hoses useless. Harris started up his lawnmower in a last-ditch effort and quickly ran out of gas. Once an old pine torched in their yard, there was nothing else he or Sirois could do.

"We got smoked out. I didn't get to see it actually catch, and Renee's on the phone with Monte as it's happening. It was heavy," Harris said. "I'm running out this way, she ran that way, so we got separated. I could hear her yelling and screaming."

They found each other back on the highway, wanting to leave, but noticed the fire had crawled up the fence that connected a portion of their trailer park. For whatever reason — Sirois accidentally leaving the water on, Rowena Crest Manor having an independent water tank — they still had half pressure.

Hoses in hand and shovels to spread gravel, the two saved four manufactured homes while explosions, maybe propane tanks, maybe transformers, rippled in the background. Ten others got reduced to nothing but scrap metal, and in addition to the Dickinsons, both fielded calls from homeowners asking about how their property faired all afternoon.

David Jensen, chief of Mid-Columbia Fire and Rescue since December 2024, stands in his office on Feb. 10.
Helen H. Richardson photo / special to Columbia Gorge News

"It became this burden to tell people — took the wind out of me," Harris said. "The last person that called, I didn't even answer him."

Harris and Sirois checked in with one final person, neighbor Jack Garvin, to see if they should grab any of his belongings before leaving around 8 p.m. Many of the firefighters on scene, however, worked through the night, faced with impossible decision after impossible decision.

As Jensen explained, the highest priority places to protect are where people remain, whether it's due to disability, lack of transportation or simply not wanting to let go. When those areas are accounted for, each home becomes a calculated risk based on many factors: adequate turnaround space for a truck, minimal vegetation lining the driveway, a supplemental water source and more all enhance firefighter safety.

And since wildland fires inherently burn in places without adequate infrastructure, once a house catches, it's almost impossible to snuff out.

"Concentrating on a house that's already on fire sometimes will mean that other houses burn," Jensen said. "We tell people that your life is not worth anybody's property. Our crews will risk a life to save a life, but they won't risk to save what's already lost."

By Thursday, June 12, the Wasco County Sheriff's Office had lifted all evacuation orders, and the Rowena Fire was largely contained. Active personnel dropped to 80 on Saturday, and crews focused on suppression repair over the weekend. In his seven years at MCFR, Jensen has never witnessed a faster state response, and he remains adamantly proud of the station's crews.

"We asked them to do more than what we as a community should expect any one person to do. We sent firefighters to the hospital that next morning based off what they were enduring, to try to save people's homes and try to save people's lives," Jensen said. "I didn't hear a single complaint from anybody that they just wanted to go home, or they were tired.

"Fire doesn't move like we all predict. Every wind gust and every temperature change creates a different impact," he continued. "I don't think anybody would say that we could have used some more support in this area, but some things just lined up on that particular day that overextended anywbody's capacity — seven plus fire simultaneously. Each fire prepares us for the next one."

Now many months removed, Harris lives in an RV on the Dickinson's property and Sirois is back in her original trailer. With so many people still displaced, work has been slow, and Harris continues to navigate the psychological toll. He thinks it's post-traumatic stress, the fear of not knowing what else will crumble.

"When the wind blows, you hear the leaves crackling — that sounds like the fire," Harris said. "Even now, when it's really windy at night, I don't sleep. I'm waiting to go talk to somebody about it. I've been having a hard time since the fire."

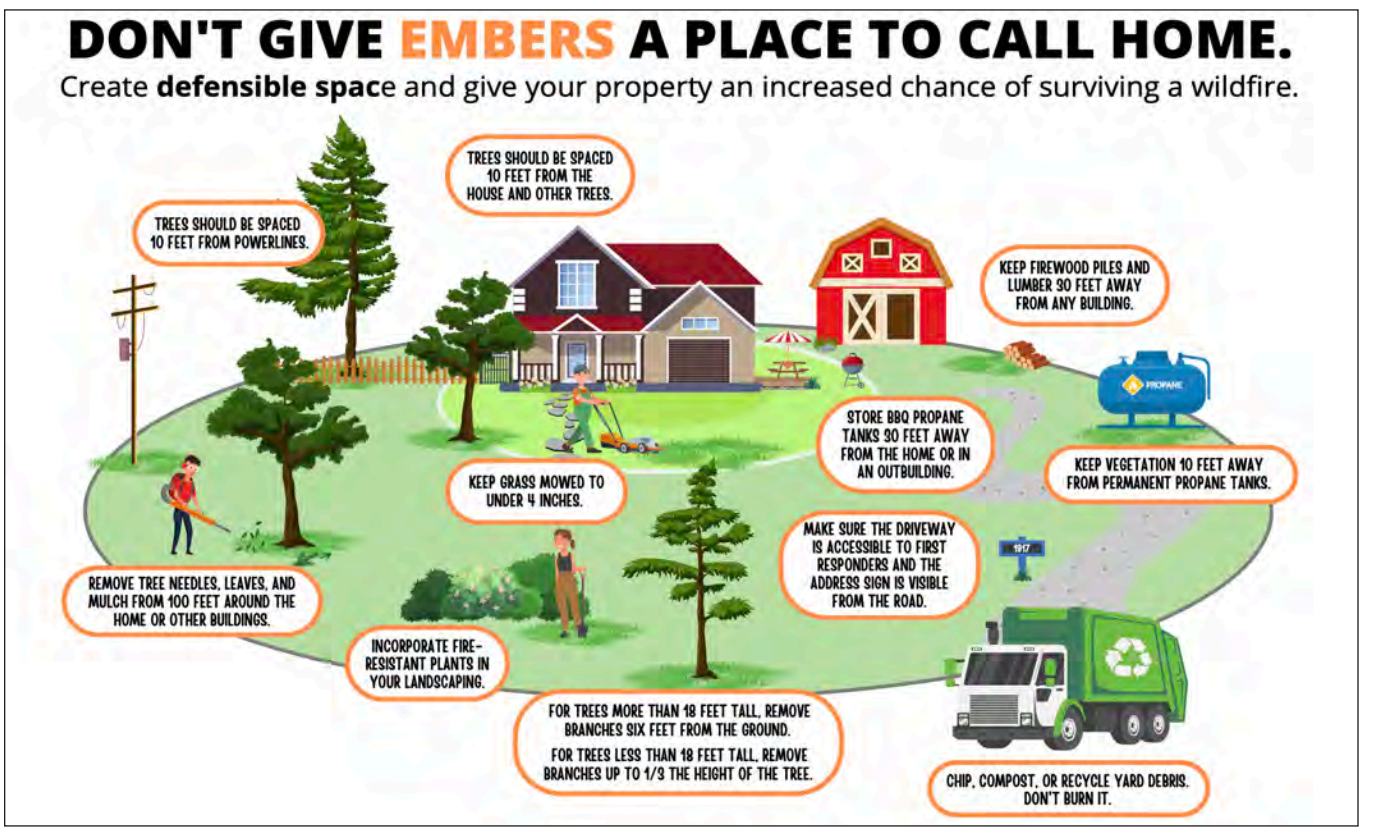
•••

*Columbia Gorge News* plans to explore how Rowena residents are recovering, and what barriers they face, next. If you'd like to share your experience, please contact Nathan Wilson at natew@gorgenews.com.

# "Think like an ember"

## How to make a defensible space around your home, and significantly reduce the chance of ignition

■ By Martin Gibson
*Columbia Gorge News*




**A graphic that demonstrates many of the basic tenets to defensible space. Not included, but critical, is removing all combustible fuel within five feet of your home.**
**Graphic courtesy of the Oregon State Fire Marshal**

WASCO CO. — "When I perform Home Ignition Zone assessments, I tell people to 'Think like an ember,'" said Melissa Napoli, Wasco County wildfire coordinator.

Most homes catch fire not from flames or radiant heat, but falling embers — little fragments of burning material, coasting on the wind. With some effort, homes can be made more inhospitable to embers.

Besides, firefighters can only protect a building if they can find it, access it, and stay around it without clear danger to their lives.

"The priority is life over property — always, including firefighters' lives over property," said Patrick Richardson, a local crew superintendent with over 34 years of experience in California, Colorado and recently the Pacific Northwest.

Defensible space and home hardening are considered the best ways to keep your house from burning, the Oregon State Fire Marshal's office said.

According to the pocket incident response guide every firefighter carries, they use four structure triage categories. The best case scenario, called "stand alone," involves a house with such well-prepared defensible space that wildfire can burn around it without hurting it, allowing crews to focus on more endangered homes. If the structure is at risk, but has safety spaces — that is, open areas multiple times wider than the height of any surrounding trees — firefighters can survive in should the fire blow up, they may "prep-and-hold."

Without safety zones, they can "prep-and-leave," returning after the worst danger is over to knock fire down off the house if possible. In the worst-case scenario, with intense fire threatening an unsafe building, firefighters and deputies do "rescue drive-by," making sure the houses are empty before they burn. Disabled people can flag themselves with their county dispatch office in advance of an emergency, so that dispatch computer systems will flag them for help during evacuations.

When firefighters "prep" a home, they're doing just what they ask homeowners to do for defensible space: moving woodpiles, limbing branches and clearing vegetation near the house.

### How to get started?

Get some loppers and start chopping.

For taller trees, remove all branches on the lowest 6-feet of trunk. The aim is to remove "ladder fuel," low-hanging plants that could allow a ground fire to climb into your trees.

In Oregon, you can ask a professional firefirghter to look at your residence and make recommendations, for free, through the State Fire Marshal's Office website.

"[W]e need to re-evaluate things like debris in gutters, firewood stored on decks, and bark chips in flower beds. In a wildfire, these things can become kindling. Simple steps can really make a big difference. Great starting points include keeping gutters and roofs clear of debris, trimming any overhanging branches away from the roof, and clearing vegetation and bark chips from the first five feet around the home," Napoli said.

Other steps: replace any broken shingles, cover vents with 1/8 inch mesh, and mow the grass to four inches or less. Get rid of woody debris, if possible. Keep any firewood and BBQ equipment 30 feet from the house.

The Oregon Fire Marshal's Office suggests putting up reflective address signs, leaving gates wide open during fires, and making driveways 20 feet wide and safe for very tall vehicles.

Trees can be the hardest part, being dangerous and expensive to remove. Cutting large trees can also be dangerous. But trees and bushes that stand within 10 feet of powerlines, houses, chimneys, or even each other should be cut down.

The aim is not only to remove ladder fuel but also to keep fire from dancing along between tree crowns and adjacent buildings.

More expensive measures include changing out the roof, siding and fencing for fire-resistant material like metal, clay, or asphalt.

### How much does it cost?

Napoli emphasized many of the most impactful efforts are low-cost to free, depending on someone's ability to complete the labor themselves: cleaning gutters, limbing trees, moving firewood, etc.

Other costs vary: a roll of metal screen to cover vents and windows can cost $25; replacing a roof, tens of thousands.

As for time, work can take place year-round, but managing vegetation in summer as part of the regular lawn-care or gardening routine can be immensely helpful.

For tree removal, financial help is sometimes available. The Community Wildfire Defense Grant program has funded nearly $400,000 in hazard tree removal projects in South Wasco County since 2024. Unfortunately, that money's gone; now they're looking for more dollars to keep the program going.

Napoli recommends contacting the Oregon Department of Forestry, The Dalles unit, at 541-296-4626 and adding your name to the waiting list for that program, if you need help with a tree.

### Is it effective?

The Rowena Fire last summer was one of the most severe disasters Wasco County Sheriff Lane Magill had ever seen at the time, he said.

Nine homes in that area got risk assessments from the fire department before it ignited. Seven of those nine property owners followed up by removing combustible material within five feet, and reducing it within 30 feet, of their homes.

All but one house survived the flames.

That lone home could be due to combustibles built up on the roof, in the gutters and below the deck, said Mid-Columbia Fire & Rescue (MCFR) Division Chief Chris Grant. Or it could have been the slope, where high winds drove the ground fires and embers onto the property, or the wood stored near the garage. Or embers could have entered through the 1/4 inch screen vents; the fire department recommends finer, 1/8 mesh.

"A good rule of thumb is if a pencil will fit in the screen opening, it is large enough for a flaming ember to enter and potentially ignite the insulation or combustible storage in the attic or crawl spaces," Grant wrote over email.

Since the fire, several more home assessments have taken place and two communities on the westside are working with MCFR and the Oregon Department of Forestry to develop a Firewise Community.

Free assessments take between 30 minutes and an hour. A firefighter will walk the property with its owner and then give them a comprehensive report.

If you live in the MCFR service area, you can ask for an assessment at www.mcfr.org or by phone. Outside the area, contact the Oregon State Fire Marshal or any local fire department.

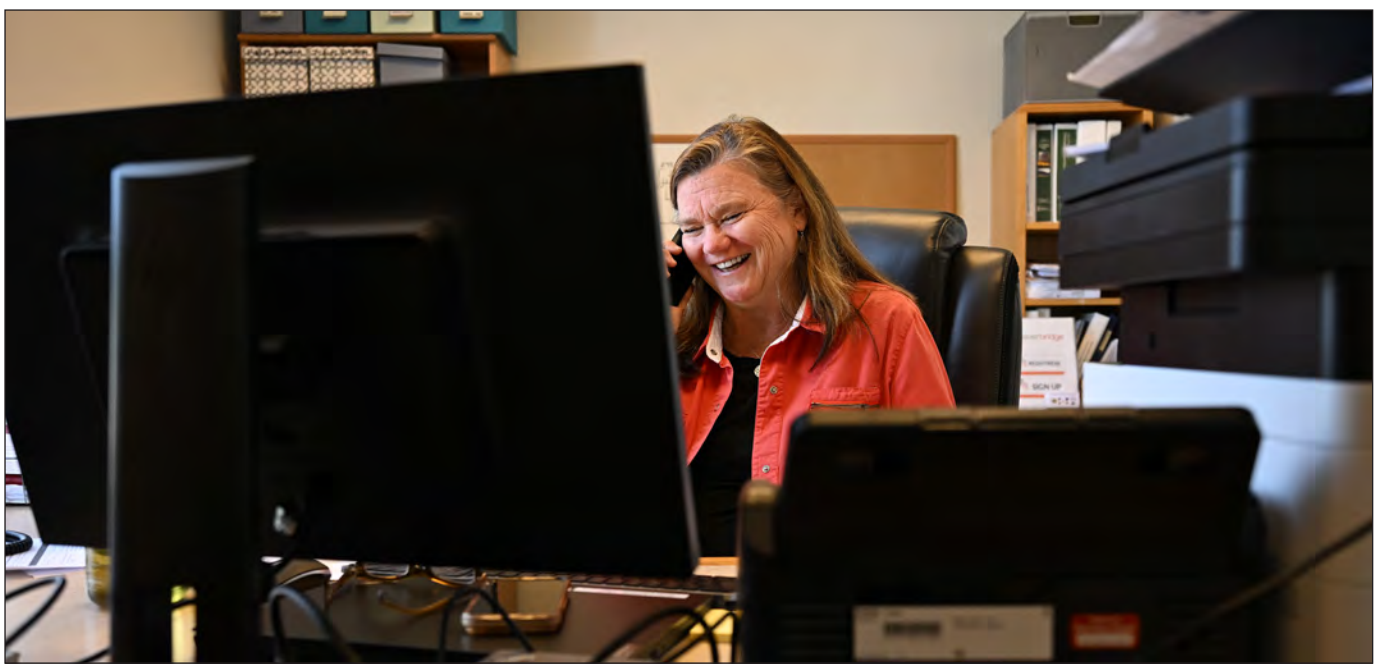
### Resource list

For free defensible space assessments: www.oregon.gov/osfm/wildfire/pages/defensiblespace.aspx.

Neighborhood-level organizing: www.nfpa.org/education-and-research/wildfire/firewise-usa.

In Wasco County, visit www.wascocountyforests.org/resources.

Fire Coordinator Melissa Napoli can help direct people to resources: melissan@wascocountyor.gov.



Katie Skakel, Hood River's new emergency and resilience program manager, is pictured in her new office on May 7.
Helen H. Richardson photo / special to Columbia Gorge News

# New EM in Hood River County

■ By Aziza Cooper-Hovland
*Columbia Gorge News*

HOOD RIVER — Katie Skakel is now Hood River County's emergency and resilience program manager. After a career across the country preparing for and recovering from disasters, Skakel returns to Hood River County with a goal to update the plans and procedures for different calamities. Skakel previously held planning positions in both Hood River and Multnomah counties.

"I see the role of an emergency manager to be ready for a natural hazard event. In our current time frame, we're looking strongly at wildfire," said Skakel. "My background comes at it from more of a resilience standpoint, where we're doing work to be more prepared for an event causing a lot of damage." She spoke about being a resource, convener, and coordinator of all the agencies that emergency management touches.

Skakel began her career in emergency management in Massachusetts, where she worked as the state hazard mitigation officer, and has spent a total of 35 years in planning and management. For the last five years, she's overseen community engagement and outreach for Colorado State University's (CSU) Center for Risk-Based Community Resilience Planning, holding a job with the U.S. Federal Emergency Management Agency in between.

At CSU, the focus was on creating an open-source model for communities to assess their current state of resilience and to estimate the costs and benefits of actions to improve. "It was a complete interdisciplinary, multidisciplinary team of engineers and planners. Really just amazing work," said Skakel.

In addition to a B.S. from St. Lawrence University, advanced studies in environmental law and land use planning from Tufts University, soil Science and wetland delineation at UMass Amherst, and site planning and design at Portland State University, Skakel is a certified climate change professional.

Skakel spoke about the unique challenges the Gorge faces in responding to and preparing for disasters, especially highlighting the trouble caused by heavy semi-truck traffic on the Interstate 84 corridor.

"It gets very gridlocked, which creates a great bit of concern if you're dealing with high winds," said Skakel. "We've been talking with our Oregon Department of Transportation partners. They have plans, but really bringing those to the forefront so that the trucks coming through on the I-84 corridor aren't getting trapped in the Gorge." This would involve diverting before the Gorge and keeping traffic moving safely through.

"I'm looking at what's referred to as lifeline planning," said Skakel. Potential relief valves include making small improvements to secondary roads, personnel planning, and better coordination. "I think there's some low-hanging fruit that we might be able to do to improve some things," she said.

For wildfire, ice storms, and other disasters, Skakel is working on getting the county prepared with implementing the measures called for in an updated multi-hazard plan. "It's a very active document, and it addresses all of our hazards," including the wildfire protection plan, because her priority is, "making sure people are cared for and protected, and particularly the more vulnerable populations," she said.

She also asked that, as wildfire season arrives, the public do its part to help keep our area safe. "If they see someone with a cigarette, they might not be from around here. They might need to be told [to] be careful with that cigarette," she said. "Snowpack is low. It's heightened awareness right now."

The resources in this guide, and from the county and the all lands partnerships between the county, local fire departments, forest, health, and emergency managements are a good place to begin preparing your own home.

# Counties issue burn bans

■ **Compiled by Trisha Walker**
*Columbia Gorge News*

THE GORGE — Klickitat County has issued burn bans for Zones One and Two on May 18; fire chiefs in Zone 3 have yet to pick a start date, as previously reported.

"At the discretion of the fire chief, Fire Protection Districts are exempt from this ban for the purposes of live fire training activities," reads a Klickitat County press release.

"Said ban on open outdoor burning shall be in full force and effect from May 18 until rescinded. The public is directed to check with the appropriate authorities concerning burning restrictions within the corporate limits of any city or town."

Residential barbecues are allowed.

## Hood River, Wasco counties

The Oregon Department of Forestry's (ODF) Central Oregon District declared the beginning of fire season on May 8. The district's fire danger level is "Moderate," and there is an Industrial Fire Precaution Level (IFPL) in Hood River and Wasco counties.

"With record low snowpack, relatively low spring rain in lower elevations, and anticipated high temperatures, fine fuels — such as grasses — in the district have begun to dry out," said ODF in a press release.

West Side Fire District further added that escaped debris burns are the number-one human related cause of wildfires in the state.

Wasco County declared a burn ban beginning May 8, and Hood River County on May 15. The ban prohibits all open burning, including debris piles and burn barrels.

## Fire districts seek volunteers

Not everyone needs to become a career firefighter to make a difference.

Fire districts throughout the Gorge need volunteers, EMTs, support personnel, and community members willing to serve. Training is often provided, and many departments welcome people with no prior experience.

Departments and volunteer programs throughout the Columbia River Gorge include:

- Cascade Locks Fire & EMS
- Stevenson Fire Department
- Skamania County Fire District 2
- South Wasco Fire & Rescue
- South West Fire & Rescue
- Hood River Fire & EMS
- Mid-Columbia Fire & Rescue
- Columbia River Fire & Rescue
- Hoodland Fire District
- Dallesport Fire District
- North Bonneville Fire Department
- Klickitat County Fire Districts and rural volunteer agencies throughout the Gorge

Contact your fire district directly to for more information.

•••

# Use caution when burning yard debris

■ The Oregon Department of Forestry

OREGON — The Oregon Department of Forestry (ODF) is urging everyone to exercise caution when disposing of yard debris this spring. There have already been 23 escaped debris burns for a total of 83 acres reported on ODF-protected land in 2026. Last year at this time, ODF had responded to 37 escaped debris burns for a total of 69 acres.

More than 70% of wildfires every year in Oregon are human-caused, with escaped debris burns topping the list. With record low snowpack and an abnormally warm winter, forecasters are anticipating a hotter and drier summer than usual. As grass and vegetation begin to dry out, the risk of a fire creeping away from a debris burn pile increases. Make sure to weigh your options and have all the required fire prevention tools in place before lighting the burn pile or incinerator.

The Central Oregon District of the Oregon Department of Forestry has already declared the beginning to fire season. This declaration brings regulations based on fire danger level. Restrictions now include requiring a permit to burn debris on private lands, including in Hood River and Wasco counties.

Besides burning, options for brush removal include chipping, composting or recycling. Check with your local disposal company for recycling options. But if burning now is your only option to dispose of yard debris, be sure to follow safe burning practices.

**Call before you burn** — Regulations vary by location. Call your local district, fire protective association, fire department, or air protection authority to learn about current burning restrictions or regulations, and if you need a permit. An easy way to check is to use the new tool beforeyouburn.net. Access the website and find the guidance for where you're located.

**Know the weather** — Burn early in the day and never burn on windy days because fires can spread out of control more easily.

**Always have water and fire tools nearby** — When burning, have a shovel and charged water hose—meaning a water hose connected to a reliable water source with the valve open at the source and a nozzle near your burn ready at a moment's notice — or a bucket of water on hand to put out the fire.

**Clear a 10-foot fuel-free buffer around the pile** — Make sure there are no tree branches or power lines above.

K**eep burn piles small** — Large burn piles can cast hot embers long distances. Keep piles small, a maximum of 4 feet by 4 feet. Add debris to the pile in small amounts as the pile burns.

**Burn only yard debris** — State laws prohibit burning materials, treated wood or trash that create dense smoke or noxious odors.

**Never use gasoline or other flammable or combustible liquids to start or speed up your fire.**

**Stay with the fire from start to finish** — NEVER leave your debris burn unattended. State law requires monitoring debris burn piles at all times until they are out cold. This law is intended to ensure sparks or embers that jump from the fire can be put out quickly.

**Put the fire out cold/completely** — Drown the pile with water, stir the coals, and drown again, repeating until the fire is cool to the touch.

**Recheck burn piles** — Return to the burn site periodically over several weeks to check for heat or smoke and refrain from adding new yard debris on top of old ashes. Burn piles can retain heat for several weeks and rekindle when the weather warms up and winds blow.

**Costs of runaway debris burns** — State law requires the proper clearing, building, attending and extinguishing of open fires all year. If your debris burn spreads out of control, you may have to pay for suppression costs, as well as any damage to your neighbors' properties, which can be extremely expensive.

As the summer fire season quickly approaches, consider putting off any burning until next fall or winter, when conditions are more favorable. Just cover a portion of the pile with plastic, such as a tarp, to keep dry until you decide to burn. Delaying your burn plans will give the debris more time to cure and prevent spring holdover fires.

More tips on wildfire prevention, including campfire safety, motorized equipment use, and fire-resistant landscaping can be found on the Keep Oregon Green website. You can check public use restrictions for ODF-protected lands statewide online.

•••

Our journalism needs your support. Subscribe and read more at columbiagorgenews.com.

# Evacuation Checklist

**15 Minutes to Pack:**
Load with car facing out, and write names and emergency contact phone numbers on everyone 's forearm
-Critical Medical Items: Hearing aids, prescriptions, canes, oxygen, etc.
-Pets, leash, carriers
-Cash, wallet, purse
-Birth certificates, passport
-Keys: cars, house, shop, work, safety deposit box
-Phones, charger, power bank
-Laptop, computer, drives
-Flashlight, headlamps
-Coat, hat, leather shoes and gloves, N95 masks
-Home Insurance info
-Titles, deeds
-Kid's special comfort item
-Infant supplies

**30 Minutes to Pack ADD:**
Tell non-local emergency contact you are evacuating
-Valuable or family jewelry
-Photos including framed, Home Videos
-Address book/phone List
-First aid kit
-Clothing for 3-7 days
-Pillow, sleeping bag, blanket
-Battery radio
-Gas can
-Drinking water
-Irreplaceable heirlooms
-Cremains

**1 Hour to Pack ADD:**
Take photos of contents of each room, and take or safeguard guns, ammo
-Special artwork
-Financial and medical files
-Wills, powers of attorney, legal documents
-Genealogy records
-Appraisals/receipts
-Fire extinguisher
-Chain saw (if rural)
-School items
-Military decorations awards and records
-Special diet items
-Extra eyeglasses
-Personal hygiene items
-Feminine sanitary items
-Kid activities
-Pet food, meds, license, litter, toys, crates

**2 Hours to Pack ADD:**
Relocate or pack secondary vehicles and move them to safe place; pack items in luggage
-Collectibles
-Journals, diaries, letters
-Valuable cameras, electronics, tools
-Camping equipment
-Awards
-Christmas ornaments
-Ice cooler with food, drink
-Non-perishable snacks
-Heirlooms/mementos
-Work files
-Sanitizing wipes

**General Notes:**
-Evacuate livestock and vulnerable family members at level 1 or 2.
-Constrain pets to be easily caught.
-Keep neighbors informed, check on vulnerable ones.
-Make sure you know which direction to drive.
-Do NOT assume you will have a chance to go back or that it's just a precaution.
-Imagine what you will need for a week staying on a cot in a school gym.
-Dress to protect yourself from fire and smoke.

**Tips to prepare your home for firefighters as time allows:**

-Turn on all lights.
-Turn off HVAC and gas, unplug appliances.
-Close all windows, interior and exterior doors.
-Open all gates.
-Place fire proof tarps over wood piles.
-Ladders in front yard.
-Hoses hooked up with squeeze nozzle sprayers.
-Move propane tanks, flammable or explosive items, outdoor furniture 30 feet away from the house.

A prescribed burn from 2024 in Goldendale's oak-woodland ecosystem. Emma Renly photo

# Prescribed burns more important than ever

■ By Emma Renly
*For Columbia Gorge News*

THE GORGE — "We're ready for things to be drier than normal," said Lucas King, fire and fuels program at Mt. Adams Resource Stewards (MARS). The organization works to put good fire, more commonly known as prescribed burns, on the forest floor of fire-adapted landscapes in the Gorge.

The data supports a dry summer — from January to March 2026, Skamania County recorded 5.67 inches below normal precipitation, and Hood River County 4.29 inches below. This, along with a low snowpack, 39% of the historical median as previously reported by the Columbia Gorge News, is a recipe for heightened wildfire risk.

Because of the conditions, King said that fuel reduction efforts are more important than ever, as the forests in the Gorge are far from their historic conditions due to a century of fire suppression. With prescribed burns, the built-up surface fuels — small trees, litter and duff (mostly pine litter and grass) — are recycled back into the soil, creating a healthier ecosystem and possibly preventing a high-severity, catastrophic wildfire.

"We've seen forests respond well — large trees have less competition with small trees and brush," King said, adding that the flora, such as native grasses, also perk up after surface fuel burns.

According to King, the Gorge typically has short burn windows — a month or two in the spring, around April to June, and another in the fall. This year, that time allotment shifted to weeks earlier than normal.

On April 8-9, MARS conducted its first prescribed burn of the season on a Ponderosa pine unit with Columbia Land Trust north of Glenwood. It was an early start for the season and, anecdotally, dryer than average — King says it was a scramble to get the planning, preparation and permitting required, ready in time.

"We probably missed a week, or even two weeks, of burning prior to that just because we weren't really ready to go," King said. He says having local staff ready to take advantage of the early burn window is important, especially since they're aware of the larger climatic conditions and weather influences.

Precipitation, wind, relative humidity and temperature are all closely monitored, along with factors like location, topography and management objectives, when deciding when and where to burn.

Kinds says despite the uncertainty of the weather over the next few months, MARS is approaching the burn window with cautious optimism. "And still, with the urgency that we need to, to try to mitigate the risk of summertime wildfires," he added.

The Gorge is no stranger to these. Over the past few years, high-severity wildfires have swept the Gorge, altogether burning more than 27,000 acres — Burdoin Fire (2025), Rowena Fire (2025), Williams Mine Fire (2024), and Tunnel 5 Fire (2023).

This year, the fire outlook from the National Interagency Fire Center is predicting above-average wildland fire potential in the Pacific Northwest for June and July. With the potential for high-severity wildfires, King says at MARS, they want to be radically proactive in their work.

"With prescribed fires, we're kind of flipping wildfire on its head," King said. "We're starting with 100% containment, and unlike wildfire, we are able to control where, when, how and what kind of fire we're applying."

King pointed to the local organization Mt. Adams Prescribed Burn Association (mtadamspba.org) as an avenue for anyone, even without fire experience, to visit a prescribed burn. He hopes seeing the effects firsthand helps take the fear out of fire.