

THE SISKIYOU MOUNTAIN ADVOCATE

More focus on homes and communities is needed for fire safety

BY LUKE RUEDIGER

On September 8, climate- and wind-driven fires burned throughout Oregon. Extremely strong, dry, easterly winds created infernos out of previously slow-moving wildfires and new human ignitions. Vast swaths of Oregon's Cascade Mountains burned, along with small mountain towns.

In our region, numerous fires burned homes and threatened communities, including the Almeda Fire, which started in an Ashland neighborhood and quickly burned up the Bear Creek Greenway, before burning house-to-house in urban fuels throughout Talent and Phoenix. Nearly 2,400 homes, including my mom's home in Talent, were tragically lost in the Almeda Fire. Whole business districts burned to the ground.

Much of the Almeda Fire burned through extremely flammable urban environments that were officially deemed "unburnable" in both the Rogue Valley Integrated Community Fire Protection Plan, promoted by Jackson and Josephine counties, and the Rogue Basin Cohesive Forest Restoration Strategy, promoted by federal land managers. Continually underestimating fire risks within communities themselves, public officials have focused their efforts on logging and managing wildland fuels, thereby diverting funding and resources away from our communities, where they are needed most.

For more than twenty years, regional politicians, land managers, and county commissioners, working at the behest of the timber industry, have touted logging and manual fuel reduction, often on remote public lands far from homes and communities, as their sole solution to reduce wildfire risk. Many millions of public dollars have been spent and tens of thousands of acres have been "treated," yet



Luke Ruediger and his family sort through the ashes of his mother's home in Talent. Photo: Suzie Savoie.

home losses and impacts to communities continue to rise.

Not enough has been done to address public safety or home ignition problems during wildfire events. Local communities remain highly vulnerable, as logging on federal and private industrial land is increasing fire risks by creating flammable tree plantations, removing forest canopy and large trees, and developing young, dense woody vegetation in the understory.

I greatly appreciate the efforts of every first responder working on that tragic, windy, September day. I also recognize that the Almeda Fire demonstrates both the flaws in our current approach to wildfire and a severe lack of community preparedness. First responders were understaffed, and county officials failed to evacuate threatened communities, to identify evacuation routes for fleeing citizens, to secure adequate water for

targeted for fuel treatment on the same scale as public land. Additionally, little to no funding is provided to assist homeowners in making their homes less flammable and more resilient to wildfire impacts.

A new approach that works from homes and communities outward would be far more effective at reducing home losses, protecting local residents, and stimulating the local economy. Concentrating fire prevention work near homes and communities would produce jobs within communities while making them more fire resilient. It would support local businesses involved in construction, landscaping, irrigation, defensible space, fuel reduction, ingress/egress maintenance, and emergency planning, and would provide more staff to local fire departments, clearly a need for protecting homes and communities in future wind-driven fires. According to research by Natural Resource Economics, this approach will produce over twice as many jobs and significantly higher wages than the current widespread fuel-reduction approach in wildlands.

The Almeda Fire, the most destructive fire in southern Oregon history, had absolutely nothing to do with public land management. In the Applegate and throughout the West, if we are really interested in adapting to the changing climate, a concerted effort to build, maintain, and retrofit homes and their immediate landscapes to be more fire resilient should be the number-one priority.

Luke Ruediger
siskiyoucrest@gmail.com

fire suppression efforts, and to provide accurate information for residents in need.

The current emphasis on wildland fuels fails to address public safety needs, home ignition problems, and the impact of urban fire within our communities. Instead, we use the limited funding and resources to implement ineffective, backcountry logging projects, on remote public lands, which provide no benefit to surrounding communities.

A recent Forest Service analysis shows that the most threatened communities in southwest Oregon do not contain a significant public land interface and that private non-industrial land, residential land, and small woodlots demonstrate a far greater risk to communities, but these are not being

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