

# The tribulations of evacuation

By Jim Cornelius  
Correspondent

The Milli fire burning west of Sisters reared up like an angry dragon and roared forth in flame and billowing smoke on Wednesday, August 16, exploding from 150 acres to over 3,000 in an afternoon. Neighborhoods in the fire's shadow were put on notice to be alert to the danger looming on the horizon.

The next day, that alert went to Level 2 in the Crossroads and Edgington Road areas — be ready to leave at a moment's notice. And on Friday, with the fire continuing to roar and roll through the forest, the order came down to evacuate those neighborhoods. Soon, areas along Forest Road 16 were included in the evacuation, sending hundreds of Sisters-area residents out of their homes.

Deschutes County Emergency Services Manager Sgt. Nathan Garibay told *The Nugget* that the decision to order evacuations is made in consultation among multiple agencies — the Deschutes County Sheriff's Office, the team fighting the wildfire, local fire district officials and others — and it's based on a

variety of criteria.

"It's a dynamic decision," he said.

Criteria include the resources available to hold containment lines and to conduct an evacuation, and how the ingress and egress to a neighborhood might effect traffic. Above all, there is the question of potential fire behavior. Even if a fire is not moving directly toward a neighborhood, fire managers have to bear in mind that the wind can shift. When a fire is big and angry, the situation can change in a hurry, and nobody wants to deal with an evacuation under pressure.

"People hurriedly trying to leave in a smoke-filed environment can certainly be an unsafe situation," Garibay said.

The sergeant said that all the decision-makers are aware that evacuations cause significant disruptions in peoples' lives, but "at the end of the day, public safety trumps everything else."

When neighborhoods are evacuated, structural protection units move in. They patrol neighborhoods looking for spot fires and work to improve the defensibility of homes. They also scout out their safe



PHOTO BY JEFF PRICHER, DIVISION CHIEF

A member of the Columbia County Task Force, engaged in one of the more prosaic duties of firefighters who provided structure protection coverage for evacuated neighborhoods of Sisters.

zones and emergency egress points. Garibay noted that sheriff's deputies also patrol the deserted neighborhoods.

Seven structural fire protection task forces were assembled from across the state under the Conflagration Act.

"We are really fortunate that we were able to get the structure protection in," Garibay said. "That really increased the margin of safety for the Sisters community."

The decision to lift an evacuation and allow residents back in to their homes is a complicated one, Garibay said. The last thing authorities want is to lift an evacuation and then have to re-impose it.

"That's always a tough one," he said. "We're not going to lift evacuations until there's confidence that it's absolutely safe. It changes every day and it's always based on current expected fire behavior."

As of press time, the multiple agencies involved in the decision were planning to meet on Monday to evaluate the situation.

Garibay said that "people have been very understanding and we really appreciate the patience and understanding Sisters has shown. It's just another example of what makes Sisters a great community."

## VOLUNTEERS: Funds will go toward bike park project

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Tom Lyons of Blazin Saddles bicycle shop in Sisters is heavily involved in the project. He said that organizers have met with contractors and selected dirt; they will soon take delivery of 1,000 yards of dirt to begin construction on new features.

"We'll have some decent-sized dirt jumps out there, too," he said. "Something for everybody is what we're shooting for."

Work on the project will be underway this fall and in the spring of 2018.

To volunteer for the September 16 event, email info@sisterstrails.org.

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"Pets Just Wanna Have Fun" - by Valerie Fercho-Tillery (45.5"w x 57.5"h)