

ECONOMY: Air quality has had a big negative impact in Sisters

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and August being their busiest season, the smoke isn't helping.

"It really came at a bad time for us," he said. "The course is in the best condition I've seen in the seven years I've been here. It's a shame no one's using it."

The Black Butte Ranch Big Meadow Golf Course has seen similar effects. Before the Milli Fire started, the golf season was profitable as usual. But now with the smoke of surrounding fires filling the air, people are cancelling reservations. Residents and visitors are expressing concern over the air quality.

As of August 24, Big Meadow has recorded over 200 round cancellations due to concerns over air quality.

"The smoke in Sisters deters people from the Ranch," said Jeff Fought, director of golf at the Big Meadow Golf Course. But unlike smoke conditions in

town, Black Butte Ranch has fared better being farther north. "We've had our smoky days, but we're generally clear up here."

Management has made an effort to reassure customers of the wildfire status and air quality conditions.

"We're all about wildfire here. We have to. People want to know," he said.

Valuing honesty with patrons, Jeff has worked to keep people informed through daily emails and printed material informing people about fire conditions.

"We have to be honest with people. The smoke may be uncomfortable and they need to take necessary precautions," he said. "It's our business to communicate with people and keep them informed."

At the Lakeside Activity Center, they had to close two of their outdoor swimming pools due to ash falling in the water and making it difficult to keep clean.

A Level 1 evacuation remains in place for the Ranch as well.

While businesses focused on outdoor recreation are finding their way through

the smoke, stores and restaurants are feeling the impact as well.

Sharri Bertagna, owner of the Hike-N-Peaks outdoor gear store, has noticed a difference. As a new business started in May of this year, she experienced a promising summer leading up to the fire.

"Business in July predicted August would be good. And business was great, until it got smoky," she said. "The smoke won't make us or break us, but it has impacted our sales."

While customer count has faded, Sharri has seen a steady flow of unexpected shoppers due to the local fires. PCT thru-hikers — diverted by trail closures — have made occasional visits to the new store. And firefighters from the Milli Fire have been her main customers during some of the smokiest days.

The iconic Sno Cap Drive In has seen its decline in customers as well. Over the past week, it has frequently closed early due to slow business. Traffic has remained frequent in front of the restaurant, but few are stopping.

The smoke and fire conditions have affected events scheduled to come through Sisters too. In a recent decision, the Cycle Oregon 2017 Classic cancelled its annual event.

The course, a seven-day expedition on bicycle, was set to come through Sisters on its seventh and final day, bringing over 1,000 riders and visitors to town.

In a statement released by Executive Director Steve Schulz, Cycle Oregon explained the impact and decision to cancel its iconic event.

"After discussions with numerous authorities including the Oregon Department of Forestry, the U.S. Forest Service, the Bureau of Land Management, the Oregon Department of Transportation and others and conducting on-site personal meetings with incident commanders at the fires, we have come to the most difficult decision to cancel the 2017 Classic event," it read.

Expressing its utmost concern for rider safety, the Cycle Oregon board and staff decided the surrounding fires are too much, calling the decision "unprecedented in Cycle Oregon history."

There's no doubt the smoke from Oregon's fires has obscured expectations and shrouded profitable opportunities. Businesses, large and small, have been affected in their own ways at the sight of fewer tourists, and locals often choosing to stay home during the smokiest days.

What Sisters relies on for revenue isn't a failed hope, though. A few businesses have noticed support from their local community during times of hardship, and feel encouraged that things are not all bad. A community driven by local support can create an impact rivaling the depths of visiting pockets. Supporting locals and their businesses is Sisters' best hope of pushing through this smoky season.

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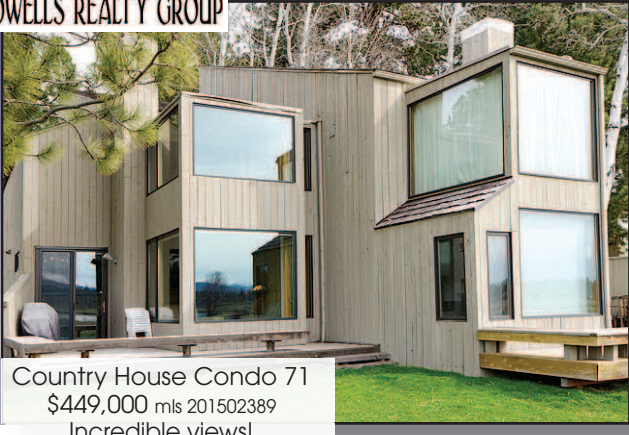
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