

# Santiam Canyon residents burned out by trauma, red tape

By Molly Rosbach  
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CORVALLIS — More than a year after wildfires devastated Oregon's Santiam Canyon, an Oregon State University report paints a challenging picture: Residents are struggling to find housing, wrestling with government bureaucracy, and worried about toxins in the water, air, and soil, all while burdened by the trauma of losing their homes.

For the Santiam Canyon Community Health Impact Assessment, OSU researchers conducted surveys and interviewed dozens of canyon residents, community leaders, and agency personnel. They heard firsthand the toll the fires continue to take on survivors' mental and physical health.

"One thing that really came across is just the excruciating chronic stress that these folks were dealing with on a daily basis, in the context of the trauma they experienced — losing their homes, losing all their possessions, fearing for their lives," said Sandi Phibbs, co-author on the report and the innovation, evaluation, and research manager in OSU's Center for Health Innovation. "They weren't able to live the way they were before. From diet to relationships, it impacted every corner of their lives."

Starting just before Labor Day in 2020, massive wildfires burned through more than a million acres in Oregon. At least nine people died and thousands of homes were lost, with the Santiam Canyon towns of Detroit, Gates, and Mill City being among the most severely affected. The report focused on Santiam Canyon because Marion County had community development block grant funding and reached out to the OSU Extension Service to partner on a study.

In studying the aftermath, OSU researchers looked at five main areas of concern: environmental health; housing; mental and behavioral health; food security and adequate healthy eating; and personal health.

Detroit did not have functioning infrastructure for drinking water until seven months after the fire, but while the water is now clean, residents are having a hard time trusting it, said coauthor Amanda Rau, an assistant professor of practice and regional fire specialist with the OSU Extension Fire Program.

While 28 percent of survey respondents said breathing problems presented at least "some difficulty" for them prior to the fires, that number jumped to 55 percent after the fires.

"They were still sick because they were breathing in heavy metals and other contaminants stirred up by wind from the buildings that burned, but that's not being tested for or accounted for," Rau said, noting that current air quality monitors do not capture heavy metals. "So residents are controlling what they think they can control — water — but they're actually suffering from what they can't control."

More than 700 families lost their homes, but one year after the fire, only 13 percent of displaced households managed by the Santiam Service Integration Team, which provides case management for residents and links them with resources, had entered permanent re-housing. The remaining 87 percent were still in temporary housing, such as hotels, RVs or couch-surfing. Others may have left the area entirely.

One Canyon resident said in a focus group interview, "The way I describe it is I feel like I've been erased ... I just look around where I'm staying now, and I just

feel like my whole life has been erased. Because I can't go back and tell any stories about where this came from, and this belonged to your great-grandmother, and you know, so what happened to my life? It's gone."

The lack of permanent housing ripples into every corner of people's lives, said principal investigator Marc Braverman, a professor and Extension research and evaluation specialist in OSU's College of Public Health and Human Sciences. For example, the limited space in RVs makes it hard for people to cook healthy meals or find ways to exercise.

And while it's important to ensure that building permits are not granted for substandard housing, Braverman says residents need some form of relief from the bureaucracy and paperwork as they try to construct new homes.

"It's literally a roller coaster that you have to live 15 times over. Because each agency wants verification," a focus group participant said. "And I mean, you give up. You give up after the fourth time."

On top of paperwork challenges, many residents cannot secure housing appraisals because the fires destroyed all the nearby homes that might have served as "comparables." And in the year since the 2020 fires, construction costs rose roughly 25 percent, and many residents' home insurance policies do not cover costly items like wells or septic systems.

The report's authors include several key recommendations for addressing these issues, including streamlining paperwork when possible, addressing the shortage of mental health providers in the area, creating a health registry to track survivors, and establishing more concrete emergency response plans for future disasters.



PHOTO PROVIDED

The legacy of the devastating fires of 2020 lingers.

"We need to be prepared to support the people who are most vulnerable, especially in rural communities in Oregon," Rau said. "Having services set up in advance for people to go for support for trauma, so they can

get healed emotionally to be able to deal with the recovery process and life after the fire."

The final coauthor on the report was OSU public health graduate student Elijah Penner.

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