

Fire

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blacken one of the most beloved hiking and backpacking spots in Oregon.

All totaled, 117,000-acres and almost 30 miles of the Pacific Crest Trail

are closed to the public through eclipse day and beyond.

The fire likely won't be extinguished until winter rains arrive, fire officials said.

"We understand how disappointed people are," Willamette National Forest Supervisor Tracy Beck said.

"We threw everything we had at this fire when it started. But you can't get them all."

Smoldering tree undetected

It's fairly common for lightning to ignite a wildfire long after the actual strike.

When lightning storms come through with rain, some fires pop up immediately while others smolder in what are known as strike trees — trees hit by lightning.

As the forest dries from the storm, the spark can remain for weeks and even months before the tree falls down, or a gust of wind sweeps it into the forest to catch fire.

In July of 2015, a weeks-old lightning strike ignited a fire along the shoreline of Marion Lake, also in the Jefferson Wilderness, on a blue-sky day. The column of smoke came as a shock to the handful of swimmers at the lake that day.

The same thing appears to have occurred with the Whitewater Fire.

One of the lightning strikes from the June 26 storm hit a tree near the top of Sentinel Hills, about 100 yards off Whitewater Trail, a popular pathway to Jefferson Park.

Nobody was aware of the strike tree or smoldering spark, multiple Forest Service officials said. The agency does aerial patrols after lightning storms, but holdovers from previous strikes tend to pop up without warning.

"We can't check every tree in the forest," Beck said.

In any case, the lightning-struck tree eventually fell into a pile of dry brush and timber, igniting flames and sending up a smoke column spotted July 23.

"As soon as it was spotted, we hit it with everything we had," Beck said. "We used heavy helicopters, chainsaws, water pumps and engaged the fire directly. Our firefighters did everything they could to catch the fire before it spread."

Fighting wildfires in wilderness areas is controversial. The Forest Service is charged with maintaining the "wild character" of the congressionally designated areas, and fires are a natural part of the ecosystem.

Many fire experts also believe decades of suppressing forest fires has made them more damaging in the long-term.

"The Forest Service acknowledges that putting out today's fire will likely make tomorrow's fire bigger; yet every day they still try to put out damn



PHOTO BY JEREMY MITCHELL

This photo of the Whitewater Fire burning in the Mount Jefferson Wilderness was taken before Jefferson Park was closed to hikers and backpackers.

near every fire," said George Nickas, executive director of Wilderness Watch. "We need to stop seeing fire as something to fight, especially in Wilderness, just as we don't see snowfall, rainfall, or wind as something to fight."

Grady McMahan, Detroit district ranger, said the agency decided to fight the Whitewater Fire because it was so early in the year and had the potential to grow beyond the wilderness boundaries.

"Our goal was to put the fire out while protecting wilderness characteristics and private land and structures," he said. "It's a difficult balancing act."

Blaze spills over a cliff

By the evening of July 24, officials knew the fire wouldn't go quietly.

High winds threw embers half a mile, starting spot fires in a forest that was bone dry. The fire grew from 50 to 80 acres, crossing the Whitewater Trail and threatening popular Jefferson Park, where backpackers remained.

But firefighters who hiked 4 miles into the wilderness, amid boiling temperatures, made progress on the fire. They built hand lines and kept the blaze limited to 80 acres by July 27.

"Hard work pays off," said a press release from the fire. "The difficult, dirty and dangerous work by firefighters on the Whitewater Fire is starting to pay dividends."

The problem was the terrain.

Sentinel Hills, where the fire started, sits atop steep cliffs. Late that week, winds kicked up and the fire spilled downhill, with flaming trees and boulders crashing into the Whitewater

Creek valley. The fire roared down the cliffs and then burned back up it.

Hot shot crews analyzed stopping the fire as it spread downhill, but the danger was too high.

"Once it spilled over the cliff, there was really no way of stopping it without a high risk of injury or death to the firefighters," Beck said.

Search and Rescue teams were sent to evacuate backpackers from Jefferson Park as the fire spread to 167 acres July 30.

"You could feel the heat coming off the fire and see ash all over the snowfields at Jefferson Park — it looked like someone took a pepper shaker onto Mount Jefferson," said Jeremy Mitchell, a volunteer search and rescue team member. "We probably evacuated 25 people. I was surprised how many people were still there."

The next day, Jefferson Park and all surrounding trails were officially closed.

"That ended up being a really good call," Mitchell said.

Wind and heat fuel flames

At the same time the fire was spreading, weather conditions went from bad to catastrophic.

The fire stayed around 167 acres for two days before growing to around 297 acres.

Then it blew up.

Fueled by high winds and temperatures in the 100s, the fire expanded fivefold to 1,500 acres and then to 4,579 acres by Aug. 3.

Smoke and ash rained down on nearby Detroit as the fire spread within a few miles of State Highway 22.

"Record-setting heat, rugged terrain and top of the fire season — it

doesn't get any worse," said Steve Zeil, fire behavior analyst for the incident team during a meeting in Detroit.

"All the ingredients for extreme fire behavior (were) present."

Fire teams stopped engaging the fire in the wilderness and instead focused on building containment lines on Forest Service Roads outside the wilderness.

As the fire spread beyond wilderness boundaries, the broad goal was to stop the fire from reaching highways, Marion Forks and the Breitenbush Community.

No evacuations were ever ordered, and the fire has remained 3 to 6 miles from the small towns.

Going forward

The fire has slowed its spread in recent days, growing a limited amount as weather conditions improved.

Fire teams are now taking a more proactive approach, using controlled fire on containment lines to starve the blaze of the fuel it would need to grow.

With rain in the forecast, there's hope fire activity will damp down enough to stop smoke from obscuring the sky during eclipse day.

Still, no matter how much the fire improves, Forest Service officials aren't considering reopening Jefferson Park for the big day.

"One little rainstorm might slow it down, but it will still be a large, active fire that has behaved erratically this entire time," McMahan said. "I couldn't sleep at night knowing there were a hundred or a thousand people near a fire that with one strong gust of wind could turn things sideways in a moment."

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Council

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parking lots open to it, at building owners' discretion.

The bans are designed to cut down on scenarios where pedestrians have to walk through smoke while shopping downtown or recreating at parks – and also to reduce the number of cigarette butts left behind by smokers.

Outside one downtown bar, "the butts are all over the place ... I think it'd be great to get rid of that," resident Barbara Springer said at a council meeting.

How enforceable a smoking ban would be is a question Silverton Police Chief Jeff Fossholm was asked by councilors to address at future council meetings or work sessions.

The proposed bans on plastic bags and Styrofoam containers are straightforward. Businesses would no longer be allowed to give customers their purchases in either product, both of which are inexpensive but widely known to resist decomposition in landfills.

The idea of banning them was brought to the council by the Environmental Management Committee, an eight-person group. Councilor Dana Smith leads the committee with Silverton's public works director; a representative from Sil-

verton's waste contractor, Republic Services; and five citizens, including a high school student.

"It was a really good process, sitting back and evaluating where we were as a city in regard to environmental issues," Smith said.

Last year, the committee helped kick start a residential food composting program, and it's now exploring an expanded program with commercial food waste, she said. It's also initiated a new partnership with Silverton High School students, some of whom already test Silver Creek's water quality, to share data about the pollution caused by water runoff from city streets.

As for plastic and Styrofoam, some food establishments have requested a transition period, during which they can use up their bags and boxes before switching to more environmentally friendly products, Smith said.

Of the 1,108 households that responded to the 2016 community survey, majorities favored taking action on all four issues now being considered by the council. Support for bans on smoking in parks and on downtown sidewalks came in at 73 and 70 percent, respectively. Fifty-nine percent said they'd support a ban on retailers' use of plastic bags, while 66 percent said they'd support a ban on food-grade Styrofoam at grocery stores and restaurants.

Appeal Tribune

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