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Questions rise over Whitewater Fire

Forest Service accused of lying about when blaze was discovered, how it started

ZACH URNESS
SALEM STATESMAN JOURNAL
USA TODAY NETWORK

Heavy rain and snow brought the Whitewater Fire to an end nearly three months ago, but questions about how the blaze was managed have remained controversial in the Santiam Canyon.

The 11,500-acre fire, that burned in the Mount Jefferson Wilderness, was among Oregon's most damaging of 2017.

It cost \$39 million to fight, threatened private land, torched some of Oregon's most popular hiking trails and was blamed for harming summer tourism in Detroit and Sisters, especially during August's solar eclipse.

The main accusation is that the U.S. Forest Service either ignored or didn't take action against the fire in its early stages, essentially allowing it to grow out of control.

That narrative became so ubiquitous that even Oregon Rep. Kurt Schrader said he'd heard that version of events.

There also were claims the Forest Service lied about when they discovered the fire, misrepresented how the fire actually started, or set the fire themselves to avoid dealing with the mass of people expected for the Aug. 21 solar eclipse.

The Statesman Journal requested all public records related to the fire during its early stages and interviewed more than a dozen people about the Forest Service's handling of the Whitewater Fire.

In more than 300 pages of reports and inner-departmental emails, obtained through the Freedom of Information Act, a consistent timeline emerges of how the fire was attacked and how officials became aware of it.

Here are some of the things our reporting turned up:

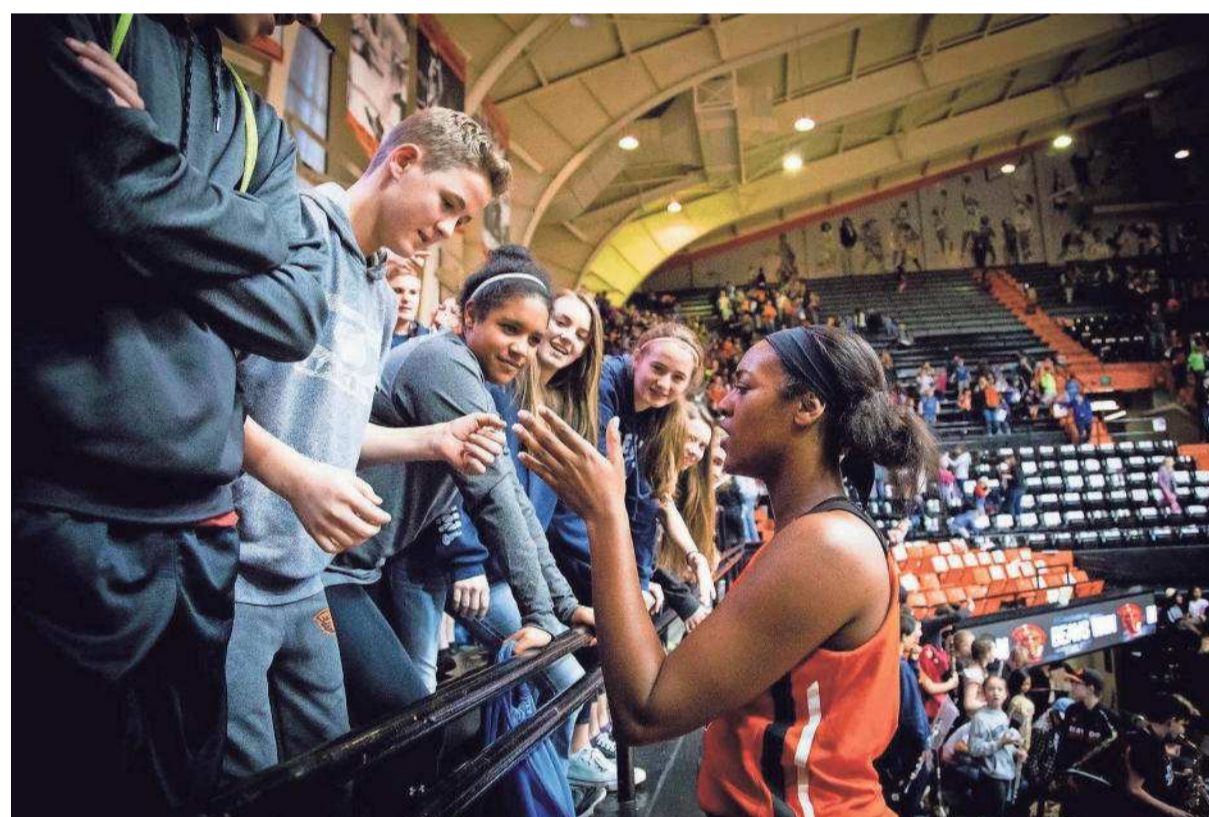
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The Whitewater Fire burns on Aug. 1. It eventually consumed 11,500 acres. PHOTO COURTESY OF U.S. FOREST SERVICE

A game that will 'change their lives'

Students experience Beavers Beyond the Classroom



Top: Oregon State women's basketball player Madison Washington visits with Silver Falls School District students following the Beavers Beyond the Classroom game on Dec. 13. Bottom left: Students enjoy the Oregon State women vs. Savannah State basketball game. Bottom right: Oregon State women's basketball player Kat Tudor signs programs for some Silver Falls School District students following the game.

TOP PHOTO: PHOTO COURTESY OF OREGON STATE WBB; BOTTOM PHOTOS: MEGAN LIERMAN/THE STATESMAN JOURNAL

JUSTIN MUCH
SALEM STATESMAN JOURNAL
USA TODAY NETWORK

Boarding a bus and heading from their rural schoolhouse to the big university was an eagerly anticipated foray for many school kids across the state on Wednesday, Dec. 13.

That's not surprising.

What may be surprising is the hosts at Oregon State University appeared equally enthusiastic.

The annual Beavers Beyond the Classroom unfolded with thousands of K-12 students pouring in from all corners of the state – including nearby Cascade foothills – to visit the university and take in a specially scheduled 11 a.m. women's basketball game vs. Savannah State.

Oregon State women's basketball coach Scott Rueck expressed his excitement for the event during an on-air news interview just minutes after his team defeated San Jose State a few days earlier.

"It's one of my favorite days of the year," Rueck said. "It's highly inspirational. I've been a public school teacher, and I'm still working in a public school. Here

"It's one of my favorite days of the year. It's highly inspirational. I've been a public school teacher, and I'm still working in a public school. Here we have over 6,000 school kids who get to watch their role models play."

SCOTT RUECK, OREGON STATE WOMEN'S BASKETBALL COACH

we have over 6,000 school kids who get to watch their role models play — and that's going to change their lives."

Reports from the foothills seemed to coincide with that.

"My 5th grade class had a blast yesterday, including some autograph time with a very kind and gracious

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Silverton appears unhurt by earthquake

STAFF REPORT

The earthquake that rattled Molalla and the surrounding area appears to have left the dam near Silverton undamaged.

The City of Silverton's Public Works Department reported that "all dam components are operating normally and as designed," on Dec. 14, the day after the seismic event.

According to the Pacific Northwest Seismic Network, the quake occurred southwest of Molalla at 5:24 p.m. on Dec. 13. The U.S. Geological Survey recorded its magnitude at 3.9.

Silver Creek Dam, located 2 miles south of town, is of special interest to residents because its failure could flood areas of Silverton. For this and other reasons, it's monitored via a remote system.

After the quake, city staff checked all systems and followed up with an onsite inspection. Close monitoring will continue, they reported.



The Silver Creek Dam, built in 1974, is two miles upstream from Silverton. Following the recent earthquake, the dam appears undamaged. APPEAL TRIBUNE FILE PHOTO

Silverton's transportation committee filled

CHRISTENA BROOKS

SPECIAL TO SALEM STATESMAN JOURNAL
USA TODAY NETWORK

With the appointment of five citizen members, Silverton's new Transportation Advisory Committee is up and running.

Now the committee can go about its business of recommending action to the City Council that its members think will keep Silverton moving smoothly and safely – on foot, by bike and via motor vehicle.



Matt Plummer

At their November meeting, councilors unanimously appointed Garron Lamoreau and Christopher Linn to 1-year positions; and Mark Rauch, Brianna Wolterman and Sarah Reif to two-year positions.

Councilor Matt Plummer and Public Works Director Christopher Saxs are also on the committee. Plummer said he hopes to soon develop a "good working list" of transportation projects for the city.