

Fire

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► The Forest Service attacked the fire when it was small and confined to the Mount Jefferson Wilderness, but also faced delay and a crucial day without aircraft dropping water.

► The Forest Service was aware of lightning strikes in the area where the Whitewater Fire started, but there's no evidence they were monitoring the fire before it was reported July 23.

► The Forest Service didn't follow up on a potentially important detail about how the fire started. They say it's a minor detail and doesn't change their opinion of the fire's origin.

Birth of the Whitewater Fire and how it was attacked

On the evening of July 23, Lydia Segura was hiking down Whitewater Trail in the Mount Jeffer-

son Wilderness, east of Detroit, when she came across smoke and flames.

It was around 5:30 p.m. and the 17-year-old was returning from a long hike to Jefferson Park during a day off from her summer job at Big Lake Campground.

"I hadn't seen anything when I passed that spot in the morning, but when I hiked back, I could see a lot of smoke just off the trail," she said. "I walked closer and could see flames — every time the wind picked I could really see the flames blowing in the treetops."

Segura called 9-1-1 to report the fire, which was about 2 miles from the Whitewater Trailhead and 50 to 100 yards off the trail.

She also discovered a small, one-person Kelty tent and a pile of garbage on the edge of the fire.

Around the same time as Segura's call, a "small blue column" of smoke was reported from Coffin Mountain Lookout.

A helicopter was dispatched to assess the fire, documents show, but De-

troit district ranger Grady McMahan decided not to take action to fight the fire that night.

"The helicopter had a mechanical problem and had to return to base," McMahan said. "Due to distance, lateness of the day, and snags, the firefighters decided to return in the morning."

July 24
Firefighters arrived at the Whitewater Trailhead at 8 a.m. and found smoke drifting down the trail.

Because the fire was within a wilderness area, the use of mechanical tools had to be approved. Documents show chainsaw and water pumps were approved at 9:49 a.m.

The firefighting team hiked up Whitewater Trail to the blaze, which was around one acre in size. They cut down burning trees and started building a line around the fire, hoping to starve it of fuel. They used water from a bladder bag and pumps.

But there was a problem: The water-dropping helicopters and smoke-jumpers requested to

help fight the fire never materialized.

Then, fueled by winds, the fire began spreading.

By 12:42 p.m., the fire had grown to 12 to 15 acres. And records show frustration among the crew over whether helicopters were coming.

"Do we have an update on ships?" said one member of the team over radio communications.

"With air support, the folks on the ground think we can catch it," said another communication.

By 3:30 p.m., the fire had grown to an estimated 60 acres, according to radio communications.

"We asked for helicopters with buckets to drop water and smoke jumpers," McMahan said. "Unfortunately, there were other fires breaking that day across the region and we were not seen as high priority by the agency command in Portland that assigns resources."

That night, the fire team slept at Whitewater Trailhead.

The fire had already started creeping into the steep Whitewater Creek

drainage.

July 25
A new fire team took command and headed toward the fire with a crew totaling 85 and five helicopters dropping water.

But even with water drops from helicopters, and pumps pulling water out of Whitewater Creek, the fire grew.

High winds sent out blasts of embers, starting 15 to 20 spot fires by the afternoon. The fire pushed east along Sentinel Ridge and toward Jefferson Park, still filled with hikers and backpackers.

The team attempted to suppress the fire "while going easy on the land," according to orders from McMahan. One example: helicopters weren't allowed drop fire retardant, only water.

Retardant was not used in the early stages of fighting the fire, even though some members of the team requested its use, according to radio communications.

In general, Forest Service policy "discourages the application of fire-re-

tardant chemicals" in wilderness areas.

By day's end, the fire was 75 acres and four trails had been closed.

July 26 - 31
One of the first maps produced of the Whitewater Fire shows the challenge that firefighters faced.

While they could cut a hand line around the fire's northern perimeter, near the Whitewater Trail, the southern side was on steep cliffs dropping into Whitewater Creek.

The fire had "slopped over the ridge" on the first day of firefighting, but by July 26, it began spreading downhill fast, with flaming trees and boulders careening into the valley.

A hotshot team assessed the situation to determine whether the fire could be stopped on the downhill side.

"A lot of discussion took place and two (hotshot crews) turned down the mission to go direct on the south end where it dives off the rim into the

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Students from the Silver Falls School District sit in the stands as they watch the game. SPECIAL TO THE STATESMAN JOURNAL/MEGAN LIERMAN

Game

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(OSU senior center) Marie Gülich," Victor Point teacher Cindy Ziesemer shared.

"After the game, Marie Gülich came right up through the band section and started visiting with students and signing autographs," Ziesemer said. "I thanked her on behalf of our school, saying that on our own we could never pull off an experience like

this. She smiled, leaned in and said, 'Actually, this is our favorite game of the year.'"

That surprised Ziesemer. She said Gülich told her there was nothing like coming out of the chute and seeing all the kids dancing and singing in the rafters.

That youthful energy is buoyed by numbers. This marked the sixth Beavers Beyond the Classroom game, each drawing large crowds; attendance in 2015 was 7,824, while last season's crowd was cramped by in-

clement weather but still tallied 5,168.

Wednesday's topped both, drawing 8,280.

A year ago Scotts Mills Elementary was among those snowed out of the experience. This year the school was happy to add its contingent to the energetic mix.

"It's a great opportunity to have our students visit a college campus and experience the excitement of a college-level basketball game," Scotts Mills Elementary School Principal Kristin Jorgenson said.

"The OSU staff does a great job of making it very student friendly with the music played and activities during the timeouts and halftime.

"It's also really fun for staff to enjoy such a fun event with students — cheering, dancing, and enjoying the fun."

Ziesemer was among the staff element having a "blast" on the day. And she kept her ears tuned into her students to gauge their experiences.

Ziesemer shared a number of her students' thoughts she overheard, including:

"That was the best first college basketball game I've ever seen!"

"It was the best basketball game ever! They even came up and signed our posters...That made our day!"

"We'll never forget this day."

Rueck shared the sentiment.

Later in the day the OSU coach tweeted: "A huge THANK YOU to everyone who worked hard to make today possible! Today was so fun and the 3rd largest crowd in program history!"

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