

Fire

Continued from Page 2A

Whitewater drainage," wrote Dave Johnson, incident commander of the Whitewater Fire.

"This was deemed unsafe due to steepness, crumbly mountain hemlock snags and potential for rolling material to be very high," Johnson wrote. "At this point, all we could do is hold what progress was made and work with helicopters to slow progression."

The next day, July 28, fire teams "abandoned the east side entirely," Johnson wrote, essentially letting it burn into the wilderness.

The goal changed from putting the fire out to stopping it from advancing west toward State Highway 22 and private timberlands, while checking it on the north and east with helicopters drops, documents show.

Search and Rescue teams were sent to evacuate backpackers from Jefferson Park, a popular backcountry camping area, as the fire spread to 167 acres July 30. At this point, 127 people were assigned to the fire.

August 1-10

Fueled by high winds and temperatures in the 100s, the fire expanded five-fold 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 and crossed outside of the wilderness boundary.

"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.

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

The fire would end up burning 11,500 acres.

Did the Forest Service know about the Whitewater Fire before July 23?

One of the most frequent accusations against the Forest Service is that officials knew about the lightning-struck "smoldering tree," that would ignite the Whitewater Fire, far earlier than July 23.

Here's some background:

On the evening of June 25, a thunderstorm rolled across the Central Cascade Range and raked the forest with more than 100 lightning strikes.

The storm immediately sparked 12 different wildfires on Willamette National Forest. Conditions were still wet and the blazes were quickly doused.

The Forest Service continued to monitor the forest for any smoke because lightning often sparks fires weeks or months after the original strike.

They knew the general location of the lightning strikes, "but it's impossible to know which ones might develop into a fire," Willamette National Forest fire investigator Dirk Rogers said.

Documents show six other wildfires, including some in wilderness areas, popping up in late July near Detroit, all of which were extinguished by fire teams before they grew larger than one acre.

There is no documentation of the Whitewater Fire, or smoke or flames near Whitewater Trail, before July 23, according to reports and emails reviewed by the Statesman Journal.

Every Whitewater Fire report documents July 23 as the first day the Forest Service became aware of the fire.

McMahan said the confusion was likely caused by a briefing he gave in late July to landowners around the Mount Jefferson Wilderness. He told landowners about the small fires started by the June 25 lightning storm and updated them on the status of the growing Whitewater Fire.

McMahan said he regrets that he did not make it clear that the Whitewater Fire, while caused by a lightning strike in June, was not visible or located until July 23.

"The lightning strike tree was within easy sight distance from the Whitewater Trail," he said. "That trail receives heavy hiking use. If there was a visible fire there from June into July, a number of hikers would have reported a fire."

Did the Forest Service 'sit on the sidelines' until the fire was outside the wilderness?

This claim is another frequent accusation against the Forest Service.

Pictures, reports and eyewitness accounts show the Forest Service and fire teams fighting the Whitewater Fire while it was still confined to the Mount Jefferson Wilderness.

The Whitewater Fire didn't cross outside wilderness boundaries until Aug. 3 when it reached around 4,500 acres. More than 100 firefighters had been working the fire, both directly and indirectly, for a week and a half.

News releases detailing the progress of the fire while still in the wilderness are easily found online.

Did the Forest Service start the fire to keep people out of the Mount Jefferson Wilderness due to concerns about eclipse crowds?

This accusation mostly popped up on social media. There is no evidence the Forest Service intentionally started the fire. Prior to the fire breaking out, multiple emails detail the Forest Service preparing for an influx of people for the solar eclipse Aug. 21.

In one email, for example, officials detailed plans to bring wilderness toilets (called "Luggable Loos") into Jefferson

Park, while strategizing how to get them back out once they were full. Other emails consider overcrowded parking at trailheads.

There is no evidence the Forest Service was planning to keep people out.

How did a month-old lightning strike stay undetected for a month before starting a fire?

The Forest Service has consistently said that a holdover lightning strike, from the June 25 storm, was responsible for igniting the Whitewater Fire on July 23.

Fire investigator Dirk Rogers examined the area on July 25 and discovered a "strike tree."

"The general area around the point of origin was investigated and a lightning struck tree that had burned over and was horizontal on the ground was discovered," Rogers wrote in his report.

In an interview, Rogers said that when he investigated, he came across a fallen tree that stood out because it had a long groove, likely caused by a lightning strike, that had been burning from the top downward.

"Fire doesn't normally burn from the top down, it burns from the bottom up," Rogers said. "The groove in this tree was sitting upward, not underneath."

Rogers said an ember or spark was likely smoldering within the groove — putting out little heat or smoke. Then, the tree fell down and the fire ignited, he said.

"That's actually really common. Strike trees often won't put out much, if any, smoke until they get enough oxygen or fuel to kick it back up," Rogers said. "It's worth noting that that's exactly what happened with two other fires in the same area right around the same time."

Could the Whitewater Fire have been human-caused?

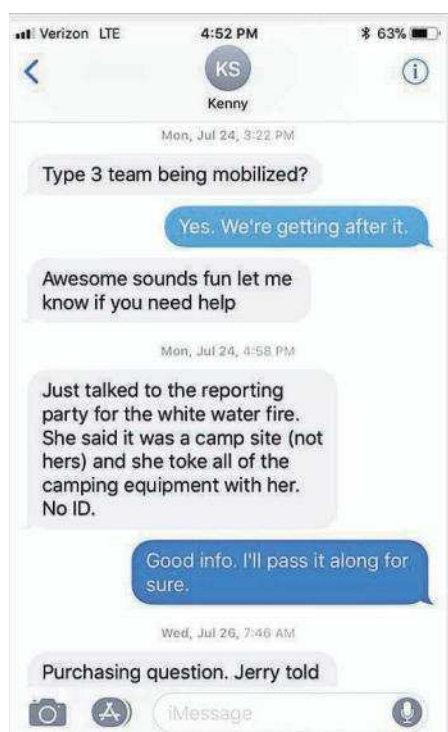
There was one thing missing in Rogers' report. In sections of the report that ask the investigator to consider whether a fire was human caused, Rogers wrote that there was "no evidence of any human activity ... noted in the area."

"There is a hiking trail within 200 feet of the origin area but origin area is not an ideal place to set up a camp. Better places are within 1/4 mile of the origin," he wrote.

But Lydia Segura, the 17-year-old who originally reported the fire, said she discovered an abandoned Kelty tent on the edge of the flames.

"The tent was set up, the stakes were down and it was starting to melt from the heat of the fire," Segura said. "It obviously had not been slept in and there was some toilet paper and trash, like beans and a pile of rice that looked as though they had been cooked and then dumped out."

"It was in a really strange spot, on the



Communication between former Forest Service official Kenny Schade and fire manager Brandon Coville.

PHOTO COURTESY OF THE U.S. FOREST SERVICE

side of the hill, and it struck me that it wouldn't be a place where I'd want to sleep."

Segura said she picked up the tent and garbage that was about to burn and packed it out.

Later, Segura relayed the information about the campsite to former Forest Service official Kenny Schade.

Schade passed that information to Forest Service district fire management officer Brandon Coville, documents show. But the information appears to have stopped there.

Fire investigator Rogers said he never got that information. But even if he had gotten it, Rogers said, it wouldn't have changed his opinion about how the fire started.

"There was no physical evidence that would lead me to determine it was human-caused, while on the other hand, we had a strike tree in the fire origin area," Rogers said.

Forest Service officials said once they had evidence of the lightning-struck tree conclusion from Rogers, they moved onto the next stage of tasks.

The 2017 wildfire season was one for the record books. The 70,000 acres that burned during three months in Willamette National Forest was more than burned during the last 20 years combined, officials said.

Zach Urness has been an outdoors writer, photographer and videographer in Oregon for 10 years. He can be reached at zurness@StatesmanJournal.com or (503) 399-6801. Find him on Twitter at [@ZachsOROutdoors](https://twitter.com/ZachsOROutdoors).

CALL TODAY



Save money
& stay warm all winter long...
by keeping
your furnace maintained.

Catch small problems **BEFORE**
they become **BIG** problems!

FREE ESTIMATE ON NEW HIGH EFFICIENCY SYSTEM!

No Charge for Service Call

With repair. \$59 diagnostic is waived when we perform any repair.

Must present coupon at time of service. Not valid with any other offers. Expires 12/31/17

\$500 OFF

Any New System

Free Estimate on New Systems

Must present coupon at time of service. Not valid with any other offers. Expires 12/31/17

\$50 OFF

Any Repair

Good with minimum repair of \$100 or more

Must present coupon at time of service. Not valid with any other offers. Expires 12/31/17

Call Our Heater Repair Experts & Breathe Easy

A cold house is the last thing you want to wake up to! If your heating system has failed for any reason, you can rely on us. Our professionals can provide immediate emergency service any time—24 hours a day, 7 days a week!.



a neighborly company



Independently owned & operated franchise.

503-967-9957 AIRESERV.COM