

# Appeal Tribune

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## Why didn't residents know about catastrophic wildfire until last second?

Whitney Woodworth and Zach Urness

Salem Statesman Journal  
USA TODAY NETWORK

Vallery Kesterson awoke at her normal time Tuesday morning in Mill City, right around 5:45 a.m., as her alarm rang to remind her about the day ahead.

But when she opened the front door, she saw bright red in the sky and was hit by a wall of smoke and ash. At that moment, she knew it was time to escape. She and her husband, Todd, grabbed what they could and drove through a tunnel of fire on Highway 22.

"Todd did get a text message telling us to evacuate at 2:30 a.m., but we had our phones on silent and we slept right through it," she said. "We had some power

surges and noises at night, but never heard the sirens or got any knock at the door. We're both pretty tech-savvy so were in total shock."

Stories of confusion and chaos have become commonplace from Mill City and Gates residents forced to flee as the Beachie Creek/Santiam Fire torched down the canyon at breathtaking speed.

And it's left many wondering why officials weren't better prepared to notify residents in an organized way, even though forecasters had predicted for days of historically dangerous wildfire conditions — essentially bringing hurricane-force winds slamming into two active wildfires pushing west.

Marion County Sheriff's Office spokesman Deputy Ethan Griffith pointed to many obstacles during the

evacuations.

He said cell service was spotty in some areas in the Santiam Canyon and power lines were down. Deputies went by homes in the North Fork Road area and Elkhorn Community around 9 a.m. on Monday and notified residents of the Level 2 evacuation status. Residents between Gates Hill Road and Brietenbush Road SE, including the city of Detroit, were set to be placed on Level 2 the next day, on Tuesday.

But high winds kicked up Monday night and the fires exploded, merging and moving westward at an alarming speed.

"It jumped to Level 3 almost immediately in some

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Volunteers gather at the Stayton Park and Ride before heading to Lyons to search for 13-year-old Wyatt Tofte and his dog Duke in Stayton, Oregon on Wednesday, Sept. 9, 2020. BRIAN HAYES / STATESMAN JOURNAL

## A desperate rescue

### father's heartbreaking attempt to save his family from a raging fire

Capi Lynn

Salem Statesman Journal  
USA TODAY NETWORK

Chris Tofte blew past the blockade, his green Jeep Cherokee aimed for the bowels of the raging Beachie Creek Fire.

It was around 4 a.m. Tuesday morning, and he was desperately searching for his wife, son and mother-in-law. The family lived 4½ miles up North Fork Road SE, about 10 minutes from Lyons and 30 minutes from Salem.

Halfway there, the road flanked by walls of fire and fallen trees, he stopped for a man whose arm was badly burned. The man wanted a ride but didn't get in when he found out Chris was headed deeper into the wildfire.

Chris agreed to pick him up on the way down, but

the man wondered out loud whether he'd make it.

Back in the Jeep, struggling to navigate a road once so familiar but now shrouded by smoke-filled darkness, Chris almost ran over what looked like a bikini-clad woman on the road. Once he was closer, he realized she was wearing underwear. Her hair was singed, her mouth looked almost black, and her bare feet were severely burned.

He impatiently tried to help her into his car, explaining how he needed to find his wife and son, feeling like she was resisting.

Finally, she spoke. "I am your wife."

He felt like he was going to pass out. He thought he would start crying. Instead, he said something turned off in him. He didn't feel anything.

Once they were in the car and he got turned around, which was tricky with the borrowed trailer in tow, he sped down the road. As he approached the blockade, he honked the horn to get the attention of nearby paramedics.

While Angela was being tended to, he tried to ask about Wyatt.

Their 13-year-old son was missing.

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## Uncertainty hangs in the air

### Fire evacuees desperate for info, little available

Connor Radnovich

Salem Statesman Journal  
USA TODAY NETWORK

As more wildfire evacuees trickle into the evacuation point at the Oregon State Fairgrounds, many are desperate for information about the homes and possessions they left behind.

But the best they can hope for are rumors and speculation, with even emergency personnel at a loss for what has happened in the evacuation zones.

"The uncertainty and the lack of information is prevalent because it's a disaster," said John Allen, a volunteer with the American Red Cross. "I am in the dark as much as they are."

For those who left in the pre-dawn hours on Tuesday, it has been more than 24 hours displaced from their homes without knowing if they have a home to go back to.

Patrick Lee of Lyons was told by another evacuee that the area where his home stands was destroyed by the fire. But sometime later, the electric company called him to confirm that electricity at his home had been restored.

"How can everything be gone, but PGE is calling me to say the power is back on?" Lee asked.

Also from Lyons, Stan and Sue Hurst — 80 and 72, respectively — said they've been trying to get information about their home since they evacuated a little after 2 a.m. Tuesday.

One evacuee at the fairgrounds was using a forest map to track the movements of the fires and try to give folks a sense of if their homes were in danger. According to their reading of the map, the fire had not yet burned over the mountain above Lyons.

The Hurst's have lived in Lyons for 31 years. They said that if the fire came over that ridge, it could run straight into Lyons and cause significant damage.

"We're hoping we can get some news and head home," Sue said. "We just want to go home."

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## Will fires ruin Willamette Valley wine harvest?

Emily Teel

Salem Statesman Journal  
USA TODAY NETWORK

Harvest has begun in the Willamette Valley and masked vineyard workers are picking clusters of grapes flaked with ash under sepia skies.

"Jose, how's it taste? Good?" called Clay Wesson to vineyard worker Jose Mendoza during Willamette Valley Vineyards' first harvest of the year. They popped Pinot noir grapes, picked from a vineyard site in the Dundee Hills to make sparkling wine, into their mouths.

"Sometimes you can taste it," viticulturalist Wesson said of the smoke and ash, spitting out seeds, "I don't taste it yet, but it's just like a lingering, campfire type of a taste."

With wildfires burning throughout the Willamette Valley, Oregon's largest wine region, fire, smoke and ash are sources of potential harm to both the crop and the people picking it.

The September to November window of harvest season is always an intense time wherein vineyard workers and winemaking teams work long hours to produce the season's vintage. This year, COVID-19 and wildfires represent rival pressures on the local industry.

How wildfires burning locally will impact the 2020 harvest season remains uncertain, but Willamette Valley winemakers have little choice but to push through, even as vines are jeopardized and people prepare for possible evacuations.

Smoke, a new challenge

Rollin Soles, winemaker and co-owner of Roco Winery in Newberg stayed awake late into Tuesday evening, listening to the radio feed of Tualatin Valley Fire & Rescue as the agency worked to contain the Chehalem Mountain-Bald Peak fire, the fire closest to the winery.

"In 35 years we've never seen smoke like this," Soles said.

When exposed to wildfire smoke over a period of time, wine grapes can absorb and accumulate aromatic compounds that give resulting wines a smoky flavor. Traditionally called "smoke taint," it's considered a flaw.

In 2018, California-based winery Copper Cane canceled contracts for more than 2,000 tons of Southern Oregon grapes — a \$4 million dollar collective loss for more than 15 growers — allegedly for smoke taint.

Mitigating smoke taint (or smoke impact, as some industry experts call it) is a subject of ongoing research at Oregon State University's Oregon Wine Research Institute. With wildfires increasingly common in the West's wine-producing areas, it's an increasingly pertinent issue. Though, with the exception of the fruit impacted by the Columbia Gorge fires of 2017, not one with which local winemakers have had to directly contend.

At Roco, Soles is hopeful smoke impact won't yet be an issue, "you need to be able to really smell the

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Grapes for sparkling wine harvested under smoky skies at a Willamette Valley Vineyards site in Dundee on September 10, 2020.

EMILY TEEL/STATESMAN JOURNAL

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