



The sign for Ben and Kay Dorris Park was toppled by the Holiday Farm Fire and the park sustained substantial damage near Vida on Thursday.

ANDY NELSON, THE REGISTER-GUARD

Busted: Officials douse wildfire arson rumors

Ali Swenson

Associated Press

SEATTLE (AP) — Ragging wildfires in the Pacific Northwest have fueled a barrage of false information this week as unsubstantiated social media posts blamed coordinated groups of arsonists from both the far left and far right for setting the blazes.

Officials turned to Facebook on Wednesday and Thursday to squash competing narratives — some posts blamed far-left antifa activists and others said the far-right group the Proud Boys were responsible for fires that have scorched wide swaths of Oregon and Washington state.

"Remember when we said to follow official sources only," the Douglas County Sheriff's Office in Oregon posted. "Remember when we said rumors make this already difficult incident even harder? Rumors spread just like wildfire and now our 9-1-1 dispatchers and profession-



Damage to power lines from the Santiam Fire on Wednesday, Sept. 9 in Mill City, Ore.

ABIGAIL DOLLINS / STATESMAN JOURNAL

al staff are being overrun with requests for information and inquiries on an UNTRUE rumor that 6 Antifa members have been arrested for setting fires in DOUGLAS COUNTY, OREGON."

As fires heavily damaged the small Oregon towns of Phoenix and Talent, the Medford Police Department posted on Facebook that officers had not arrested anyone affiliated with the Proud

Boys or antifa, which is short for anti-fascists, a range of far-left militant groups that oppose white supremacists.

Police also debunked a fake graphic spreading online that used the department's logo and a photo from an unrelated 2018 arrest to falsely claim five Proud Boys had been arrested for arson.

And BuzzFeed dispelled a Clackamas County woman's social

media post that her husband saw two people trying to ignite a hay bale in a field near their house while evacuations were underway. A Portland videographer and his girlfriend, who grew up in Molalla, were getting images of the wildfire.

It's not yet clear how some of the fires began, but officials said high winds and dry conditions made them worse in a region whose cool, wet climate has historically protected it from intense fire activity. Oregon Gov. Kate Brown said the state could see the greatest loss of life and property from wildfires in its history.

Far-left and far-right groups have been clashing during protests in the Northwest, particularly in Portland, Oregon, where a caravan of President Donald Trump's supporters drove pickup trucks through the liberal city last month. An antifa supporter shot and killed a member of a right-wing group and was fatally shot by Washington state

authorities a week later.

False social media posts shared

A social media post shared widely on Thursday featured a picture of a woman along with claims that she tried to start a fire near a high school in Springfield, Oregon. Springfield police told The Associated Press that they spoke to the woman Wednesday and that wasn't true.

Another post claimed a landowner called police after arsonists threw Molotov cocktails on his land in Clackamas County and they got into a shootout. The Clackamas County Sheriff's Office told the AP that no such reports existed.

Thousands of Twitter and Facebook users shared posts trying to link the fires to antifa activists, including from Paul Romero, a former Republican candidate for U.S. Senate in Oregon.

Reached by phone, Romero blamed the surge in fires statewide on a coor-

dated "army of arsonists" but offered no evidence to support that claim.

Police are investigating a fire that originated in Ashland, Oregon, as a potential arson after finding human remains, Jackson County Sheriff Nathan Sickler told reporters Wednesday.

However, Ashland Deputy Police Chief Art LeCours confirmed to the AP that the case has "no connection whatsoever to antifa."

The Jackson County Sheriff's Office has launched an investigation into the fires, but no arrests have been made and there is no evidence at this point of a coordinated effort, spokesman Mike Moran said.

"These investigations take time," he said. "They're intense. They're fast-moving. And so people ought to consider: 'Does this even make sense?' They should question anything they see in a social media setting."

White House approves Oregon's emergency declaration

Bill Poehler

Salem Statesman Journal
USA TODAY NETWORK

For the past week, Marion County has funded the disaster relief of wildfire evacuees at the Oregon State Fairgrounds in Salem out of pocket.

The county has been coordinating relief efforts with organizations like the American Red Cross and the United Way, but it has spent its own money to fund much of the operations.

And with a budget already stressed by the COVID-19 pandemic, the county has been burning through its budget trying to help those displaced by the most significant natural disaster to hit the county in decades.

The county will now get help.

The White House on Friday approved Oregon's request for an emergency declaration in response to the state's wildfires, allowing counties like Marion County to receive reimbursement from FEMA for the money it is spending.

"Right now, we've been spending thousands and thousands of

dollars just keeping this place running," Marion County Commissioner Colm Willis said. "We have 220 people in our hotel in Woodburn right now."

"It costs us a quarter million to run. We just need the federal help to keep supporting this. We're looking at in the not too near future, if we don't get federal support, we're going to run out of money."

Nearly 900,000 acres in Oregon have burned from over 35 wildfires in the state and tens of thousands of people have been displaced due to the wildfires.

Gov. Kate Brown requested the emergency declaration Wednesday and the state's senators and representatives pressed the White House in the days that followed for him to approve the aid.

Brown confirmed that she spoke with President Donald Trump Thursday and informed him the situation was "extremely dire."

"He promised us all of his support, and we are working to make sure that all the resources and

people power that we need is provided," Brown said.

Approval of the FEMA funds means that direct federal assistance will be available at 75% for funding in Oregon counties including Marion and Clackamas impacted by wildfires.

"This isn't our first rodeo, unfortunately, with disasters," U.S. Rep. Kurt Schrader said. "The name of the game is make sure that you account for absolutely everything so that we can maximize the aid we can get you so you can truly get reimbursed for all of the up-front costs."

"That will help us help them hopefully in short order."

With conditions in impacted Santiam Canyon communities like Gatos and Mill City still too volatile to visit, Senators Ron Wyden and Jeff Merkley and Rep. Schrader toured the Oregon State Fairgrounds in Salem Friday along with a host of local leaders.

They saw some of the hundreds of people and animals staying at the fairgrounds because they can't return to their

homes.

"I think the president's emergency step is a good start," Wyden said. "It makes it clear that people are going to get individual assistance associated with them being safe."

"But there's a long, long way to go, and that's what I'm involved in. My last stop was to determine that the senior citizens are going to be safe. So many families have said, what's going to happen to grandma? I was able to make sure that the Red Cross said they can stay here until they go home."

There are more than 1,000 animals housed at the State Fairgrounds from nearly 400 horses to cats and dogs to 700-lb. pigs that have tried to escape.

Schrader, a former veterinarian, was among those who toured the livestock being housed at the fairgrounds.

He said he was working in his equine practice during the Mount St. Helens eruption in 1980 and had seen the challenges animals can face during such natural disasters.

He said rebuilding impacted communities like

Detroit, Lyons and Idanha will be a priority.

"The senators think there will be no trouble, but you want to make sure you really account for all the costs, the actual losses you have then we can aggregate them properly," Schrader said.

"Between insurance companies, FEMA, frankly donations to the citizens themselves and sweat labor, hopefully we can rebuild these com-

munities."

FEMA announced Dolph Diemont will be the coordinating officer for federal response operations for Oregon's wildfires.

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