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Large swath of Opal Creek burned by wildfire

Damage to popular spots described as 'horrific'

Zach Urness
Salem Statesman Journal
USA TODAY NETWORK

The 34,000-acre Opal Creek Wilderness and Recreation Area was burned across some of its most beloved destinations after a historic windstorm Labor Day evening brought the fire roaring to life.

The fire destroyed the bridge over Henline Creek — the main access point to the area from Salem. It also killed many of the trees, including old-growth giants, on iconic Henline Falls and Opal Creek trails and in the surrounding area.

All of the buildings at the Opal Creek Ancient Forest Center at Jawbone Flats burned, except one. The site's outdoor classroom and water treatment plants also survived.

"It's horrific," Ancient Forest Center executive director Dwayne Canfield said after getting pictures of the area from fire crews. "It's not a total wasteland, and there's some green. But overall, it's really bad."

It's unclear the impact to every spot across the sprawling temperate rainforest, but the fire appeared to burn very hot down the Little North Santiam canyon.

"We do know that large swaths of the Opal Creek Wilderness were subject to high-severity fire," U.S. Forest Service spokeswoman Joanie Schmidgall said. "Overall, the fire burned in a mosaic pattern with areas of high and low severity, and we do think there's some large green islands out there."

A more detailed report is expected in the coming

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Pictures taken after the Beachie Creek Fire of the Opal Creek Trail and Jawbone Flats area show major impact to the forest. It's likely the area will remain closed for the foreseeable future, officials said.
SUBMITTED PHOTO

Classical pianist Hunter Noack performs Sept. 29 at Gates Community Church of Christ.
ABIGAIL DOLLINS/STATESMAN JOURNAL

Pianist brings music to wildfire victims

Abigail Dollins
Salem Statesman Journal
USA TODAY NETWORK

A 9-foot Steinway grand piano that has seen mountains, deserts and forests made its way to Gates. Hunter Noack's fingers fluttered along the black and white keys as melodies from Bach and Chopin filled the surrounding trees with sound.

Noack is a classical pianist with In a Landscape: Classical Music in the Wild, an outdoor concert series that travels around the Pacific Northwest. With 50 performances canceled this summer due to the COVID-19 pandemic, he began searching for ways to help communities affected by the wildfires. Noack hopped in his truck, with the piano towed on a trailer behind, and started down the road.

"Usually I wake up and I'm not sure which direction down the road I'm going to go," he said.

Noack found Gates Community Church of Christ, one of the few buildings that survived the wildfires in town. Volunteers with the church work to help the community by serving breakfast, lunch and dinner. Noack set up his piano and began to perform during each meal.

"Sometimes it's background music; sometimes they come and sit closer to the piano," he said. "It's just been really amazing to hear how meaningful listening to music is for people who have lost so much."

Gates residents, volunteers and first responders gathered under a canopy as they listened to Noack play music from afar. They trade stories about what they went through just a few weeks prior.

"People have volunteered their stories," Noack said, recalling one woman's experience. "The way she was talking about that loss, I felt like she had given me a gift by sharing her story."

Watch a video of Noack performing in Gates online at StatesmanJournal.com/life.

ELECTIONS 2020 HOUSE DISTRICT 17

Wildfires, COVID-19 key issues in House District 17 race

Pete Martini
Salem Statesman Journal
USA TODAY NETWORK

It has been quite a year for Oregonians, especially residents in Oregon House District 17.

From the coronavirus pandemic and all of the associated issues, to the wildfires, the area has been hit hard.

These recent issues are at the forefront of the House District 17 race between Republican Jami Cate and Democrat Paige Hook, with election day set for Nov. 3.

"This year has been a challenging one for everyone, and candidates are no exception," Cate said. "There is no handbook on 'contact-free' campaigning, and in the aftermath of these historic wildfires, it can feel like campaigning simply needs to take a back seat so we can focus instead on the devastation in our communities."

Hook shares Cate's concern for the residents impacted or threatened by the wildfires.

"The wildfires put fear into thousands of households that they would lose everything, and hundreds of households in our district did, in fact, lose everything," Hook said. "My dad was in Level 3 zones, and since my family was one wind shift away from mandatory evacuation, I had to do what many in the western part of the Santiam Canyon had to do and decide quickly what mattered most that could fit in the trunk of my car.

"So as someone who experienced the anxiety and threat of the fire firsthand," she added, "I'm committed to doing what it takes to rebuild and recover."

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ELECTIONS 2020

Measure 107 about campaign finance reform

Oregon among 5 states with no limits on political donations

Capi Lynn
Salem Statesman Journal
USA TODAY NETWORK

Joe Baessler and AFSCME Council 75 were among the opposition the last time a referendum on campaign finance reform went before Oregon voters, but a lot has changed since 2006.

Measure 107 has widespread support and appears poised to quash Oregon's reputation of having one of the most wide-open political campaign finance systems in the nation.

"There's been a shift by a lot of labor and other progressive organizations," said Baessler, associate director of the union that represents 24,000 state, county and municipal workers across the state. "Part of it's because the limits aren't defined in this measure, and there will be a deliberative process to figure those out in the next legislative session. It's also because the level of money in campaigning feels like it's on a different scale."

Tipping the scale was the 2018 race for Oregon governor, which shattered records and resulted in nearly $40 million combined campaign spending by the candidates.

Measure 107 would amend the Oregon constitution, allowing not just the state but local governments to enact laws that limit campaign contributions and expenditures and require their disclosure. The measure also would require political campaign advertisements to identify who paid for them.

Salem, for example, could pass an ordinance to limit donations for city council races if the measure passes. A record-setting 2020 campaign season resulted in more than $200,000 in contributions, the priciest city government election in Salem history.

Support for Measure 107 stretches from Gov. Kate Brown's office, across chambers and the aisles in the Oregon Legislature, and into the homes of likely voters.

Oregon is one of five states with no limits on political campaign donations and ranks No. 1 in per-capita corporate political donations.

"Our campaign finance system favors the wealthy and well-connected," said Sonny M. Mehta, a spokesman for the pro-107 campaign.

Mehta said imposing limits and requiring disclosure would shine a much-needed light on big-money special interests trying to influence state politics. He said it would also open doors for the underrepresented in public office, including women, people of color and residents of rural communities.

Oregon lawmakers approved sending Measure 107 to voters. If it passes, it'll be up to them to come to a consensus on what limits and disclosure look like.

Among arguments in favor of the measure is one from Sen. Jeff Golden, D-Ashland, and Sen. Tim Knopp, R-Bend.

"We see many issues very differently, but we agree on this: Before we can achieve lasting solutions to Oregon's problems, we have to loosen the grip of big money, provided by donors with big stakes in how issues are decided, on our elections," their statement says in the voters' pamphlet.

Golden and Knopp referred to the appeal of five- and six-figure contributions.

"Even for officials of the highest integrity, it can be nearly impossible to keep the mind from wandering to what the big donors are likely to think," their statement says. "That distraction, right on the brink of critical decisions, doesn't lead to sound government of, for, and by people."

Public opposition to Measure 107 has been limited.

Kyle Markley, a Libertarian candidate for Oregon Secretary of State, provided 14 of the 15 opposition arguments in the voters' pamphlet. Markley argues the measure is an attack on everyone's freedom of speech and doesn't protect against corruption.

Past attempts to curtail campaign financing have

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