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Oregon senators introduce bill to stop power line fires

Zach Urness

Salem Statesman Journal
USA TODAY NETWORK

In the wake of a historic wildfire season blamed in part on downed power lines, Oregon's two U.S. senators introduced legislation Tuesday to "reduce the risk of fire through power system upgrades."

The "Wildfire Resilient Power Grid Act of 2020" would help fund fire safety equipment installation and proper vegetation management, according to senators Ron Wyden and Jeff Merkley, who authored the bill.

"Fire after fire ignited this summer because the aging power grid could not withstand a major windstorm during the season's hottest and driest days," Wyden said. "Many utility companies are already working to improve the resiliency of their power grid, but the sheer costs of these investments must not come at the expense of rural utility customers. Congress must do all that it can to stop the catastrophic wildfires decimating the West, and that means improving rural infrastruc-



On the night of Sept. 7, downed power lines ignited a fire at the Gates School and former Beachie Creek Fire incident command team post. PHOTO COURTESY OF INCIWEB / US FOREST SERVICE

ture. By partnering with utilities around the country, we can increase wildfire mitigation efforts at a modest cost — a fire prevention investment that will pay divi-

dends by saving lives, homes and businesses."

The legislation does not require utilities to shut down power in cases of extreme fire danger — something that had been pushed for after a mixed response from utilities during the Labor Day windstorm. Some utilities did shut down power in response to the "extremely critical" fire danger the night of Sept. 7, while others, including Pacific Power, did not.

The wildfires that ravaged the Santiam Canyon are believed to have been caused by a combination of wildfires growing out of the Mount Jefferson and Opal Creek wilderness, combined with downed power lines that ignited on high winds within towns much closer to Detroit, Gates and Mill City.

Marion County Commissioner Kevin Cameron said he supported the legislation.

"The improvements resulting from Senator Wyden and Merkley's bill will reduce disasters in the future, but improve everyday reliability for our citizens who

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Firefighter paramedic Grayson Engels-Smith performs a check on an engine on Wednesday at Marion County Fire District No. 1 in Salem. The district has made large budget cuts after two of its operational levies failed in the past two elections. ABIGAIL DOLLINS / STATESMAN JOURNAL

Marion County fire to lay off firefighters

Bill Poehler

Salem Statesman Journal
USA TODAY NETWORK

Months after helping fight the worst wildfires in Oregon history, nine firefighters from Marion County Fire District No. 1 will be laid off.

After voters rejected the second operations levy in as many elections, the fire district that covers 55,000 people over 80 square miles of Marion County was forced to cut \$2.4 million from its \$19.7 million budget.

Marion County Fire District No. 1 laid off three firefighters after the first levy failed in May — the first one it ever had that failed — and will trim its staff to 41 people, including 32 in operations as firefighters or paramedics, after failing again in the Nov. 3 election.

"It's the toughest thing that I've had to do in my fire service career," Marion County Fire District No. 1 chief Kyle McMann said. "I've lost a lot of sleep since May knowing that we lost a levy for the first time in our history."

The department also will close stations in Macleay

and Labish Center by removing furniture and transferring staff to other stations. Additionally, the Four Corners and Chemeketa/Middle Grove Stations will have their staffing reduced.

McMann said the remaining firefighters had to accept cuts to wages through furlough days and health care benefits.

He said the cuts will result in longer response times on some calls and a reduced ability to fight fires in some remote areas.

Wildfires put spotlight on district

The Labor Day wildfires illustrated the role Marion County Fire District No. 1 plays in the county.

Though the district mostly covers rural areas, it also backs up other fire departments in the county when they are called out.

McMann said only a small portion of the district near Pratum and Macleay east of Salem were directly

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Silverton Wine Bar & Bistro sold, closed until spring

Emily Teel

Salem Statesman Journal
USA TODAY NETWORK

Chef Joel Autry has owned the Silverton Wine Bar & Bistro, a beloved dining destination in an historic building on Silver Creek in Silverton, since 2015.

On November 28, Autry announced in a post to the business' Facebook page that he has sold the business to new, "highly experienced" owners who plan to re-open in spring 2021 when the business can return to more normal operations.

"I will miss so many things about serving you all. The laughter, the friendships, the support are things I

will carry with me for the rest of my years."

Autry got his start in the culinary world making barbecue sauce and participating in barbecue competitions.

In his five-year tenure at Silverton Wine Bar & Bistro regulars loved his menu of homey, yet polished dishes including basil baked salmon, spicy meatloaf, Swiss fondue and key lime pie.

Autry said he hadn't been looking to sell the business when the buyers expressed interest.

"I probably wouldn't have if we weren't going through what we're going through," he said, but be-

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Silverton firefighters exposed to COVID-19

Virginia Barreda and Bill Poehler

Salem Statesman Journal
USA TODAY NETWORK

At least 20 Silverton firefighters were exposed to COVID-19 while attending a training session in late November.

Two days after participating in the agency's firefighter academy training Nov. 21, the person told the agency they were experiencing symptoms, according to officials from the Silverton Fire District. The training event was for new volunteer firefighters.

On Nov. 30, the individual was notified they tested positive for the virus.

Silverton Fire District assistant chief Ed Grambusch said the training took place at a tower at the district headquarters at 819 Railway Street NE in Silverton where the new volunteers were training for search and rescue inside a burning building.

Twenty members of the fire district who attended the all-day class "may have had high-risk exposure" while training. Those 20 were notified Nov. 30 of the possible exposure and instructed to get tested or isolate until Dec. 5, 14 days after the exposure.

Grambusch said firefighters are instructed to remain 6 feet apart while inside the station under its COVID-19 protocols. The station is deep cleaned after each training exercise.

He said the department is paying for the costs associated with COVID-19 testing for the 20 people identified as close contacts, though not all have chosen to get tested.

"I've got some who said they are going to get tested and I've got some who are going to wait until the end of Saturday," Grambusch said.

Grambusch said the department has six paid staff members and about 75 volunteers and has plenty of staff to continue to operate and respond to calls. Silverton-area residents have not been jeopardized and the public has not been put in any danger due to the exposure, he said.

The district entered into agreements early in the pandemic with neighboring agencies to help cover calls in the case of an outbreak.

A high-risk exposure is one where people are within 6 feet of a confirmed COVID-19 individual for a cumulative total of 15 minutes or more, regardless of whether one or both of them were wearing facial coverings, fire district officials said in a release.

So far, none of the individuals exposed during the training are showing virus symptoms, officials said Tuesday.

Though the infected firefighter felt COVID-19 symptoms and was tested Nov. 23, they didn't get results of the positive diagnosis until Nov. 30.

"The whole situation, the whole COVID-19 with testing and everything is so extremely frustrating," Grambusch said. "I don't know why we don't have a system for first responders to get a rapid test."

The district provided a timeline of events regarding the exposure:

- Nov. 21: All day firefighter training takes place at the district training facility.
- Nov. 23: The district is notified by a training participant that they have COVID-19 symptoms.
- Nov. 23: All personnel receiving the training or instructing this training are notified.
- Nov. 30 (morning) — The fire district is told the individual tested positive for COVID-19.
- Nov. 30 (morning and afternoon) — District has a consultation with Marion County Health. All affected personnel notified and all personnel who may have had the high-risk exposure are told to self-quarantine through Dec. 5 and get tested for the virus.

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