

Eagle Creek Trail reopens in Columbia Gorge

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The new year has brought a new beginning for some of the most famous trails in the Columbia River Gorge.

Eagle Creek Trail, the iconic pathway that passes waterfalls and steep cliff edges, reopened Friday after 2017 wildfire damage kept it closed for more than three years.

The epicenter of the 49,000-acre Eagle Creek Fire, the trail is open for its entire length, from the trailhead near Cascade Locks to Wahtum Lake.

It wasn't the only high-profile pathway to reopen in the Gorge. Other trails that reopened include:

- Wahclella Falls
- Larch Mountain Trail between Multnomah Falls and Wahkeena Falls
- Gorge 400 Trail (specifically, Eagle Creek to John B. Yeon State Park and Ainsworth State Park to Horsetail Falls
- Elowah Falls and McCord Creek Falls at John B. Yeon State Park

A few trails do remain closed, including Oneonta Trail, which was impacted by a recent landslide and will reopen when it's cleared, officials said. Oneonta Gorge, an off-trail route down a narrow creek canyon, also apparently remains closed. Its status is unclear but will be updated.

Taken together, the reopening represents the end of a chapter following the Eagle Creek Fire, which raged across Portland's outdoor playground in the summer of 2017, shuttering businesses, burning buildings and closing Interstate 84 for an extended period.

Officials stressed the importance of volunteer work in making the reopening happen, singling out the Pacific Crest Trail Association, Trailkeepers of Oregon, Washington Trails Association and Friends of the Columbia Gorge.

"The reopening of the Eagle Creek Trail and other trails impacted by the Eagle Creek Fire has required working in community with each other and we



vEagle Creek Trail has reopened for the first time since September of 2017 when the Eagle Creek Fire ignited.

PHOTOS BY KAREN DAVIS / US FOREST SERVICE

would not have been able to get to this day without the dedication and service of our key partners and all the agency employees," Columbia River Gorge National Scenic Area Lynn Burditt said. "On behalf of our interagency team I would like to express our gratitude to the public for your patience and support and to all the volunteers whose unwavering commitment, dedication and resources, facilitated our ability to open these trails today."

The Eagle Creek Fire started September 2 after a 15-year-old Vancouver boy lit and tossed a firecracker from the Eagle Creek Trail. The teen was sentenced to five years of probation, 1,920 hours of community service and ordered to pay \$36 million in damages.

The fire trapped 150 people on the trail, who were safely evacuated after spending an unexpected night in the wild.

The Eagle Creek Fire was one of the last to ignite during a chaotic summer of 2017. The Whitewater, Milli, Separation, Blanket and Chetco Bar fires, among



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others, torched an area the size of Rhode Island over a drawn-out period from July to September of that season.

Eagle Creek Trail and a cluster of Gorge trails were the last to reopen from the 2017 season.

Tips for hiking Eagle Creek Trail and other wildfire-impacted pathways

Officials said hikers should be wary of burned areas during or immediately following high winds, heavy rains and winter storms, as these conditions can trigger tree fall and landslides.

"While we are very pleased to see the re-opening of this cherished trail system in the Gorge, we urge those who chose to explore to employ caution," Hood River County Sheriff Matt English said. "Historically, we see a very high volume of search and rescue calls in that area. A large portion of those incidents are avoidable as they have been attributed to lack of preparation or engagement in high-risk behaviors. While you may just plan on a quick hike, we implore people to wear appropriate clothing and bring necessary supplies."

A closure order for the fire-affected area remains in place and there are still some trails within the Eagle Creek fire perimeter that remain closed.

To plan around closures and to find open outdoor recreation areas, please visit ReadySetGorge.com.

"Be mindful to avoid crowded areas, large groups, practice social distancing, and wear face coverings when needed," Columbia River Gorge National Scenic Area officials said in a news release.

The main exit to Eagle Creek Trail has been closed a number of times in recent days due to landslides. Hikers should check TripCheck.com before heading out.

To check the status of Forest Service hiking trails in the Gorge, visit this site.

To check the status of Oregon Parks and Recreation Department sites, visit this site.

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Crews from US West, Morello Construction and U.S. Army Corps of Engineers work to complete the first Santiam Canyon FEMA trailer site in Mill City.

BRIAN HAYES / STATESMAN JOURNAL

Trailers

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tricity.

Corah said FEMA doesn't maintain a large stockpile of the temporary housing units. Typically, after the units are vacated — such as the 145,000 that were brought in for survivors of Hurricane Katrina in 2005 — they are sold.

"We don't want to use these," Corah said. "This is our last resort."

The first FEMA trailers for Oregon started arriving in Jackson County near Medford — an area where more homes were destroyed than any other in the state — in early November. Approximately 47 families are already housed there.

Corah said the advantage that area had is there are trailer parks with available spots or available land adjacent to trailer parks where utilities could be extended and run to the housing units.

In Linn and Marion Counties, however, there weren't any available sites with the necessary sewer, water and electricity.

"Our only option is to build our own trailer parks," Corah said.

Finding a site for the trailer park

The Mill City site, which FEMA is leasing, will house people who previously lived between Lyons and Detroit.

The Army Corps of Engineers has sent engineers to oversee construction while Morello Construction of Chiloquin

and US West Construction of Gresham are preparing the site.

The units — some will be travel trailers and others resemble manufactured homes — destined for Mill City are being built in Texas and will be shipped to Oregon in the coming weeks.

"For the mobile homes, a lot of them are coming from Texas," Corah said. "That's where the big manufacturer places are. We'll buy them anywhere, but we have very specific uses for them. They're not the most luxurious things, but they're nice. They're one to three bedrooms."

FEMA spokesperson Jeremy Hollen said the project is expected to go from start to completion in 20 days.

"They're just working hard," Hollen said of the contractors. "That's been the case so far in this disaster. They've been hitting it hard."

Hollen said the survivors will be able to live in the units for 18 months after the disaster — until about March 2022 — but they may be able to stay longer.

The housing is free to residents, but they must pay for the utilities.

"We take that on a case-by-case basis and we have additions you can sign up for and things like that," Hollen said.

Corah said FEMA has paid about \$30 million for housing for those impacted by wildfires in Oregon.

Because the wildfires received a federal disaster declaration, FEMA is paying for up to 75% of the cost for the housing while Oregon is required to cover the rest.

Corah said Oregon's congressional delegation has appealed to the federal

government to pay for the full amount, but President Donald Trump hasn't made that decision.

"Emergency funds are kind of running out because of COVID and all these

other things," Corah said.

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