

# North Fork, Opal Creek will stay closed

Zach Urness Salem Statesman Journal  
USA TODAY NETWORK

A new set of gates will further limit access to the Little North Santiam Canyon and Opal Creek area and stay in place at least through the summer of 2022, Marion County officials said this week.

The narrow river canyon east of Salem and northeast of Mehama, often known as the North Fork, has been closed to visitors since March, following extensive damage from the Beachie Creek Fire.

The latest move will mean only residents and their guests will be able to drive into what was once among Oregon's most popular recreation destinations.

The gates will be placed on North Fork Road, Gates Hill Road and Pioneer Road near each road's junction with Highway 22 in late August or early September.

Before last year's wildfires, the North Fork and Opal Creek area was a popular place to hike, swim, kayak and camp that could see upwards of 5,000 people visiting on a hot weekend, according to Forest Service data from 2020.

The decision to shut the area down with gates came for multiple reasons, Marion County spokeswoman Jolene Kelley said. The area remains dangerous and despite the earlier closure and signs threatening \$2,000 fines, people have been trespassing into the area on a regular basis this summer, officials said.

The Marion County Sheriff's Office issued 237 warnings or citations to people trespassing into fire-burned areas this summer.

"The decision to install temporary gates in this area was based on Marion County's commitment to public safety," Kelley said in an email.

She referenced thousands of severely fire-burned trees that "can come down at any time with no warning," along with dangerous rock fall, noxious weeds and chemical changes in the soil that have made it more prone to erosion.

"These issues exist in other areas of Marion County, but the hazards in the Little North Fork Santiam River corridor are more numerous and severe than in other parts of the county, prompting additional measures to ensure safety," she said.

There have also been reports of rampant theft at home construction sites in the canyon, according to multiple local residents.

The Marion County Sheriff's Office did not directly comment on the concern other than to say:

"As people are working through the rebuilding process, the theft of building materials is definitely something we are paying attention to and have worked with people in the area to find ways to help prevent being a victim to thefts," Marion County Sheriff's Office spokes-



A closure sign stands at the beginning of the Little North Fork Canyon.

WESLEY LAPOINTE/STATESMAN JOURNAL

man Jeremy Landers said previously.

## How will residents access the area?

While the area will remain closed to the public, local residents will be able to access the canyon two ways, Kelley said.

- By long-range key cards to open the gate — The county will issue up to four cards per property owner.

- Each property owner will be issued a unique entry code — this can be given to guests or hired contractors or used as a backup method to the key cards.

"In addition to property owners, Marion County will issue entry codes, key cards and other remote entry devices to emergency response agencies; federal and state agencies; and to federal, state, and county-hired contractors that need access the corridor," Kelley said.

## When will the gates be removed?

It's unclear when the North Fork or

Opal Creek area will reopen. Kelley said a removal date for the gates "has not been set, but we expect the gates to remain in place at least through summer 2022 depending on the pace of recovery work."

"There is a lot of hazard mitigation work to complete within the parks and along county roads," Kelley said. "This is going to take time."

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Closure sign at entrance of the North Fork Road WESLEY LAPOINTE/STATESMAN JOURNAL

## a good soaking

### Tress benefit from deep watering once a month during the driest months

Oregon Department of Forestry

Oregon is in the grip of a deepening drought ranked as severe to exceptional in more than half the state. Our yard and street trees are particularly hard hit by the prolonged dryness. That's why Trees for Life Oregon and Oregon Community Trees have again declared the last week in July and the last week in August as Soak It Week. Oregonians are reminded that to keep their street and yard trees healthy, give them a good, slow soaking in their root zone.

"Unlike a lawn, trees are a long-term investment well worth the water needed to get them through our dry summers," according to Kristin Ramstad, ODF's Urban and Community Forestry Assistance Program Manager. "People enjoy multiple benefits from healthy, mature trees. They not only clean the air and reduce noise pollution, they also keep things cooler through shade and releasing water from their leaves into the air. There are also mental health and social benefits, such as improved focus and less stress."

Deciduous trees under three years need weekly watering in Oregon from the time they leaf out until their leaves turn in the fall. The recommended amount is about 15 gallons. Young evergreens need watering once winter rains end and until fall rains return.

If you're lucky enough to have a drought-tolerant Oregon white oak that may be all the watering you need to do. But most other species of trees still benefit after they are three years old from a good soaking every other week until they are established (typically at about 10 years). After a tree is



Remember to deeply water trees, especially young ones, and apply mulch when hot temperatures hit.

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established, it benefits from deep watering once a month during the dry months of July and August (hence Soak It Week).

Oregon Community Trees President Samantha Wolf says, "Well-watered trees grow faster and are less likely to suffer scorching of their leaves and premature leaf drop. So watering gives you a better-looking tree over time than ones that struggle through our increasingly dry summers."

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