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WILDFIRE SEASON'S TALLY

826,000 acres, 174 homes

Records set for poor air quality, but the state's largest blazes stayed mostly in remote areas

Zach Urness Salem Statesman Journal
USA TODAY NETWORK

The 2021 wildfire season didn't bring the level of destruction seen during last year's Labor Day Fires, but it did set records for poor air quality and burn an area larger than Rhode Island during a historically hot and dry summer in Oregon.

Wildfires scorched 826,217 acres and destroyed 174 buildings this summer, largely in south-central Oregon, while

smoky air plagued southern, central and eastern parts of the state, according to state and federal data.

Bend, Klamath Falls, Lakeview and Oakridge set or tied records for the most days where air quality dropped to "unhealthy for sensitive groups" or worse, according to data from the Oregon Department of Environmental Quality.

Fire season started as early as managers could remember, with red flag warnings in April and significant infernos by mid-June that strained firefighting resources and cost over \$499 million to fight – the second-most on record behind 2018. The cost estimate won't be final or complete until year's end.

Over half the acres burned in 2021 came on the 413,717-acre Bootleg Fire, the state's third-largest blaze since

1900. The megafire, which ignited July 6, burned 161 homes, cost \$100 million to suppress and at one point created its own weather patterns while chewing across drought-plagued forest northeast of Klamath Falls.

"The fire behavior on Bootleg was something we've never seen before in that area," said Alex Robertson, regional fire director for the U.S. Forest Service. "We knew it was dry – and it was an area we spotlighted before the season – but to see it grow by 60,000 to 80,000 acres per day was just something outside our experience."

Beyond Bootleg, Oregon's largest blazes stayed mostly in remote areas, threatening but never sweeping into communities such as Oakridge, Days Creek and Lakeview.



Victor Sanchez, left, and Geoff Whatcott, firefighters with Utah Taskforce One, work to secure a fire line on the Bootleg Fire east of Klamath Falls in late July. The Bootleg Fire roared to become one of the largest in Oregon's modern history.

CHRIS PIETSCH/THE REGISTER-GUARD

Western Oregon had wildfires up and down the Cascade Range, including the Bull Complex (24,000 acres), Middle Fork Complex (31,000 acres) and the Rough Patch/Devil's Knob complexes (120,000 acres).

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Volunteers and employees work at the Marion Polk Food Share in Salem.

Absence of financial support leads to new program

Fund offers help to undocumented workers

Dora Totoian Salem Statesman Journal
USA TODAY NETWORK

Throughout the pandemic, undocumented people have been ineligible for federal and state unemployment benefits and stimulus checks.

In Oregon, the absence of that support led to the creation of the Oregon Worker Relief Fund, part of a program that provides financial relief to undocumented Oregonians who have lost wages due to the pandemic.

A coalition of 100 organizations such as Farmworker Housing Development Corporation, Centro Cultural de Washington County and the Oregon Food Bank is overseeing the fund. It received \$76 million from the Oregon Legislature and millions more from cities, counties and private organizations, including a recent \$5.5 million contribution from Portland using some of its American Rescue Plan Act funds.

The fund has distributed more than \$58 million to more than 33,000 people since June 2020.

But there are an estimated 110,000 undocumented immigrants in Oregon, mostly from Mexico and Central America, according to the Migration Policy Institute.

"Our inboxes are still receiving messages from people who need help," Francisca Garfia, a spokesperson for CAUSA, said in an email to the Statesman Journal in June. "Many are asking if we'll be providing a second payment, resources for jobs, or any additional help as they are still working too few hours."

As the pandemic stretches on, the relief fund will distribute second payments as many hoped.

Last Tuesday, the first day to apply for a second payment, the Oregon Worker Relief Fund received 14,000 calls, said Martha Sonato, chair of the fund and political director at PCUN, Oregon's farmworker union.

"The rest of the population has been able to receive multiple stimulus checks. Our undocumented community has not," Sonato said. "We definitely heard loud and clear that a one-time payment wasn't enough and that they'd really benefit from a second round of payments."

Help for workers, businesses

To qualify for the Oregon Worker Relief Fund, people must be undocumented, at least 18 years old, an Oregon resident and have lost wages and experienced hardship due to the pandemic.

The average payment from the first round was around \$1,700, Sonato said. It's need-based, using MIT's living wage calculator to determine one month of expenses based on the number of children and working adults in a family. Payments cover about 70% of recipients' demonstrated need, she said.

The Oregon Worker Relief program also administers a small enterprise fund for business owners who were ineligible for the Paycheck Protection Program. The program also runs a fund, temporarily closed, for agricultural workers who must quarantine for two weeks after a COVID-19 exposure.

The funds have brought relief to a population that the federal and state government has largely ignored.

Some recipients have sent messages of gratitude to CAUSA, Garcia said. Messages like: "Doy gracias a Dios y a ustedes por el labor que hacen. Dios los bendiga...Amen. (I thank God and you for the work you do. God bless you...Amen)"

COVID-19 has outsized impact

In Oregon, Latinos have made up 17.7% of COVID-19 cases, despite representing only 13.4% of the state's population, a disparity attributed to being less likely to work from home and more likely to work in a

Fewer in US turn to food banks

Ashraf Khalil ASSOCIATED PRESS

Hunger and food insecurity across the United States have dropped measurably over the past six months, but the need remains far above pre-pandemic levels. And specialists in hunger issues warn that the situation for millions of families remains extremely fragile.

An Associated Press review of bulk distribution numbers from hundreds of food banks across the country revealed a clear downward trend in the amount of food handed out across the country, starting in the spring as the COVID-19 vaccine rollout took hold and closed sectors of the economy began to reopen.

"It's come down, but it's still elevated," said Katie Fitzgerald, COO of Feeding America, a nonprofit organization that coordinates the efforts of more than 200 food banks across the country and that provided the AP with the national distribution numbers. She warned that despite the recent decreases, the amount of food being distributed by Feeding America's partner food banks remained more than 55% above pre-pandemic levels. "We're worried (food insecurity) could



Gayle George of Keizer inspects a packaged salad while volunteering at the Marion Polk Food Share.

PHOTOS BY CONNOR RADNOVICH/STATESMAN JOURNAL

increase all over again if too many shoes drop," she said

Those potential setbacks include the advance of the delta variant of the coronavirus, which has al-

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Find out how big your 2021 tax surplus 'kicker' will be

Alia Beard Rau
Salem Statesman Journal
USA TODAY NETWORK

Due to the state's nearly \$1.9 billion tax surplus, Oregonians who filed a 2020 tax return and owed taxes will get a record high tax surplus "kicker."

The high number was driven by a strong 2020 tax season and economic growth, despite the coronavirus pandemic.

Here's how to find out how much you'll get, and when to expect it:

How much will I get?

To figure out your amount, multiply your 2020 tax liability before any credits (line 22 on the 2020 Form OR-40) by 17.341%. Taxpayers who claimed a credit for taxes paid to another state need to subtract that credit

amount from their liability before calculating.

Or, go to oregon.gov/dor/Pages/index.aspx and click on What's My Kicker. Type in your Social Security number and filing status and it will do the math for you.

What if I don't have to file taxes?

Even if you aren't required to file a 2021 tax return for any other reason, you must file a 2021 return to claim the 2020 credit.

When will I get it?

Instead of checks, the state will return the surplus to taxpayers through a credit on their 2021 state personal income tax returns filed in 2022.

For questions or additional information, call 503-378-4988 or email questions.dor@oregon.gov.

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