

Rising: Farmworkers say it's going to be a long, cold winter

Continued from Page 1

ture Southern Oregon's agricultural economy.

Path of destruction

Along South Pacific Highway in Phoenix, both sides of the road are blackened: skeletons of buildings, twisted chairs, entire RV parks flattened.

In nearby Talent, too, whole neighborhoods are soot. There are mangled trampoline frames, signs warning of toxins in the ashes, doll heads among other children's playthings in a burned-out room.

This is the work of the human-caused Almeda Fire, technically called an "urban conflagration," fueled by 40 mph winds that left a path of destruction from Ashland to Medford.

Jackson County records estimate 2,659 structures were destroyed, 2,482 of which were residential. The total market value of damaged property, according to the latest assessor's estimates, was more than \$265 million.

Dee Anne Everson, CEO and executive director of the local United Way, a charitable organization, said 18 mobile home parks were destroyed in addition to two low-income apartment complexes, one senior assisted living complex, two residential motels and two entire subdivisions and part of another.

"The applications we got for help were heartbreaking," said Everson. "One of my applications said, 'It wasn't much, but it was mine.'"

Infrastructure, including power lines, is also gone, along with six public buildings, including a fire station and an educational building that served migrants.

The South Obenchain Fire, which burned near Butte Falls and Shady Cove, blackened more land — 32,671 acres — but burned only about 90 structures.

Farmworkers suffer

The Federal Emergency Management Agency, or FEMA, has not yet disclosed demographic data on fire victims. Officials say that data is likely inaccurate anyway. Many Latino families did not apply to FEMA for help because they are undocumented.

U.S. Census data show Jackson County's Latino population has been growing. They were 6.7% of the population in 2000, 10.7% in 2010 and an estimated 13.5% in 2019.

Anecdotally, officials say that in the neighborhoods that burned, the percentage of Latino families appeared to be much higher.

One resident whose mobile home burned in south Talent estimated at least half of her neighbors in the park were Latino, the majority of whom worked in agriculture.



Sierra Dawn McClain/Capital Press

In Phoenix, Ore., not only homes but also businesses burned.

Farms confirm that the losses to farmworkers were great.

The Almeda Fire burned the homes of 30 employees at Naumes Inc., a Medford-based orchard company. At Harry & David, one of the area's largest farm employers, 102 employees lost homes.

Employers helping employees

Farmworkers say they are grateful for support from their employers during and after the disaster.

According to spokeswoman Kathleen Waugh, Harry & David created gift baskets for fire victims, helped employees find housing, fed them in the company cafeteria and provided transportation.

Naumes Inc. set up an emergency relief fund and contributed \$35,000 to their employees' needs.

Fry Family Farm, an organic farm with production sites in Medford, Phoenix, Talent and Ashland, helped its employees with grant applications and other needs.

"Four families (at Fry Family Farm) lost their houses and the farm did so much to help them out," said Elise Higley, board member of Our Family Farms, a Jackson County nonprofit that has raised more than \$250,000 to help farmworkers.

FEMA aid

FEMA has also helped victims. The agency recently installed temporary housing units for 325 Southern Oregon families and has given many victims a maximum of \$35,000 in aid per household. Undocumented workers are ineligible for these federal benefits, but a family may receive aid if at least one person in the household has qualifying immigration status.

Amber Fry said she wishes there were more local organizations like Our Family Farms because many farmworkers don't feel safe approaching government agencies.

Paul Corah, a public information officer for FEMA, said he has never heard of a case of FEMA turning over an undocumented family to another agency.

"It doesn't mean we can't, but since I've been here, we



Sierra Dawn McClain/Capital Press

Amber Fry, of Fry Family Farm, said her farm business experienced some crop and infrastructure damage during the fires, but the greatest loss by far to Southern Oregon's agricultural community was farmworkers' homes.

never have. That's not our goal," he said.

Corah, who grew up in Oregon, called this disaster "very close to my heart."

Public generosity

Further help came from the public.

As of December, local charitable organizations have received millions of dollars in donations from all 50 states and several foreign countries.

"It speaks to the understanding of how badly torn the fabric of our community is," said Everson of the United Way.

One fire victim, Everson said, received a grant from United Way, then turned around and immediately gave \$100 of it back to help others.

"It takes your breath away," she said.

But locals say the needs are still significant.

"Everybody has short-term situations. But the long-term solutions (are) the tough thing," said Mike Naumes, who operates the orchard company.

Housing crisis

Southern Oregon was already facing a housing crisis before the fires.

In Jackson County, the housing shortage was acute. Jackson Care Connect, a coordinated care organization, estimated the vacancy rate was 1.5% before the fires. According to Oregon Housing and Community Services, one-third of residents were already "severely rent burdened," meaning rent took more than 50% of their monthly income.

Many people who lost homes, experts say, won't be able to stay in Southern Oregon without affordable housing options.

Housing authorities told the Capital Press that many people previously paid \$350 to \$650 in monthly rent. Now, there are "bidding wars" across Southern Oregon, with most rents starting at \$1,600 a month.

People with smaller households and no pets are likelier to win those rentals, officials say. That puts at a disadvantage Latino families, who often have larger, multigenerational households.

To secure housing, some people have had to give up pets; others won't let go. One family of farmworkers that talked to the Capital Press kept their dog in their car for months while waiting for housing.

Insurance

Officials say of those who owned their houses or mobile homes, most were uninsured or underinsured.

Jocksana Corona, 36, who lost her home in Talent and is sleeping with her family on cots at the Medford Girl Scout Center, said she was among the minority with insurance.

She and her husband purchased their home in 2003, which at the time required insurance coverage. Although they had the freedom to drop the policy later, it never occurred to them to do so.

"I feel that we are the exception. By the grace of God, we never changed that policy," she said.

Corona worked in agricultural labor and similar jobs

HELP & RESOURCES

Our Family Farms: Donate to the farmworker fire housing fund.

If you have an RV or trailer you are not using and would like to donate (for a tax deductible donation) to house agricultural workers, please email contact@OurFamilyFarms.org or call 541-690-8053.

If you are a licensed mental health professional, call Karyn Wheeler at 503-528-6122 to volunteer to help families recovering from the fires. Anyone can volunteer to help run waiting rooms.

The cleanup process is still in the toxic debris phase requiring trained professionals, but when all toxins have been

removed, consider volunteering to help with cleanup.

To donate money to help farm employees at Harry & David, call 541-864-5098. The company is matching donations dollar for dollar.

Free crisis counseling is available to both children and adults, in English and Spanish, through the National Disaster Distress Helpline. Call 1-800-958-5990 (press 2 for Spanish) or text "TalkWithUs" to 66746 (for Spanish, text "Hablamos") to connect with a trained crisis counselor.

Check out Rogue Valley Rebuilds for post-fire resources.

Donate money to United Way of Jackson County to help Southern Oregon's fire victims.

before recently completing a college degree and starting work as a drug and alcohol counselor. It is because of her new income combined with the insurance payout that her family can buy a house.

But a friend of Corona, a single mother hit hard financially by the pandemic, canceled her home insurance in August, just one month before the fire took everything.

Rebuilding

Officials say rebuilding Southern Oregon won't be easy.

The Housing Authority of Jackson County reports most mobile homes in the area were built 40 to 50 years ago. Some mobile home parks cannot be rebuilt with the same density under new zoning and building codes; others can't be rebuilt at all because they were on newly designated floodplains.

The cost of building materials is also up due to high demand from communities along the West Coast trying to rebuild after the fires that stretched from Southern California to Washington state.

And before construction can move forward, there is still massive cleanup work to do. Walk through Talent or Phoenix and you'll see work crews still removing toxic chemicals such as motor oil, paint and asbestos from the ruins.

Oregon lawmakers on Dec. 22 voted to appropriate \$100 million from the state's General Fund to the Emergency Board for the state's wildfire recovery, prevention and preparedness activities. It's a start, Southern Oregon officials say. But they have estimated cleaning up hazardous debris from the Almeda Fire alone could cost upward of \$170 million. According to John Vial, director of Jackson County Emergency Operations Center, phase two of the cleanup will likely cost around \$48 million.

"This is nowhere near done," said Everson of United Way.

Agriculture interrupted

The fires are more than a human tragedy; they are also a major economic disruption.

At Rogue Valley International Airport in Medford, visitors are greeted by a series of 26 vibrant panels, each 3-by-5-feet, depicting local farms and farmworkers by artist Betty LaDuke.

These panels, locals say, capture the agricultural heartbeat of Southern Oregon.

Now, some locals fear an exodus of farmworkers.

"I think the concern has been that some communities just lost a lot of people, so there's no reason to be here anymore. So everybody's scared it could rip apart the ag economy," said Mike Naumes of the orchard company.

According to the United Way, many fire victims are homeless; thousands are doubled up with family and friends. At the latest count, 550 are living in hotel rooms, but others have already left.

Charitable organizations have already given millions of dollars to fire victims who left the state. Some had relatives or friends in other areas. Others suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder after escaping the flames and never want to come back.

Rogue Valley officials have drawn parallels to what happened after the 2018 Camp Fire that devastated Paradise, Calif. Gov. Gavin Newsom's office reports Paradise has lost 90% of its population since the fire. The Almeda Fire displaced about a quarter as many people, so farmers don't predict a migration as extreme. But they're still concerned.

Joan Thorndike, a grower at Le Mera Gardens, Southern Oregon's largest certified organic flower farm, said she is worried about an impending labor shortage come spring.

"A very huge number of fire victims were agricultural workers. That has a tremendous, immediate impact of whether we'll be a farming valley anymore," she said.

DEQ: Agency also found 20 pesticide-related chemicals in wells

Continued from Page 1

fertilizers and can be harmful if consumed, especially by infants.

Of the 100 wells sampled, only one had nitrate levels slightly above the safe drinking water threshold of 10 milligrams per liter. Twenty percent of wells, however, did have "elevated levels" of nitrates above 3 milligrams per liter, hence the need for continued monitoring, Haxton-Evans said.

"This shows it is common to have nitrates leaching in through soils," she said.

Some 37% of wells had some level of coliform bacteria, including three wells with E. coli. Haxton-Evans said the findings reinforce public health recommendations that well owners test for bacteria annually.

DEQ also found 20 pesticide-related chemicals in wells, representing 12 parent pesticides. The most common was desethylatrazine, a breakdown product of atrazine, which is used primarily on crops and turf grass.

None of the pesticides exceeded EPA health standards.

Lead was found in trace amounts in 69 wells, three of which exceeded the EPA's safe drinking water level



The Oregon Department of Environmental Quality sampled 100 residential and agricultural wells around Milton-Freewater in northeast Oregon as part of a groundwater quality study in 2016. The results were published Dec. 22, identifying 41 chemicals in the water.

of 0.015 milligrams per liter. Haxton-Evans said the Oregon Health Authority has already contacted

those well owners. The study did not detect any amount of arsenic in groundwater.

For the first time under the Statewide Groundwater Monitoring Program, DEQ did test for perchlorate in the Walla Walla Basin. Perchlorate is a compound found naturally in arid environments, as well as in some nitrate fertilizers.

Seven wells did contain perchlorate, at a maximum concentration of 1.64 micrograms per liter. That is below the safe drinking water threshold of 7 micrograms per liter for children, according to the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry.

Haxton-Evans said she is not certain how the data may impact farms and ranches, though it is useful for them to know which chemicals are in the groundwater, and understand levels may change over time.

"We don't really investigate sources of contamination," she said. "That's outside the scope of this study and report."

DEQ has published similar reports on groundwater quality in the North Coast and Mid-Rogue Basin watersheds. Haxton-Evans said a report on Harney County groundwater in southeast Oregon should be completed in early 2021.

Labels: Federal rule pre-empts state laws

Continued from Page 1

alleging meat packers were enriching themselves at the expense of ranchers and consumers with misleading labels.

The judge ruled the labels were USDA approved and that the Federal Meat Inspection Act gave the agency sole control over labeling meat. The federal rule pre-empts state laws, according to the judge.

The state agriculture department said the ruling likely would apply to posting signs in grocery stores to mark off beef raised in the U.S.

Tyson Foods, Cargill Meat Solutions Corp., JBS USA Food Company and National Beef Packing Company were the defendants. The rancher and consumer who filed the suits have appealed to the 10th Circuit Court of Appeals.