



Cars drive through the smoke along U.S. Highway 101.

Industry Spotlight:

Wildfires drove visitation to coast

Businesses plan for future trend of smoky summers

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At a time when traffic to the North Coast normally begins to slow down after Labor Day, hotels were suddenly at full capacity and stores were rushing to meet an increased demand.

The wildfires that broke out in other areas of Oregon and Washington in September drove many to evacuate their homes or to escape the hazardous air quality and head for the North Coast and the Long Beach Peninsula.

Strong lodging numbers

Jocelyn Weaver, front desk clerk at Gearhart by the Sea Resort, was very busy with the influx of guests in mid-September.

"We've been completely sold out from evacuees. We are completely slammed," Weaver said before promptly returning to check in guests.

Carol Zahorsky, media relations person for the Long Beach Peninsula Visitors Bureau, said hotels and restaurants on the peninsula saw a spike in business as well, with some at 100% capacity.

"We definitely did see an upsurge in people staying overnight to avoid the smoke," Zahorsky said.

She said a trend of smoky summers may happen in the future, but she's not going to market the peninsula as a place to escape smoke and fires.

"There's a lot of sensitivity to that, and it could turn at any moment and be on us as well," Zahorsky said.

The air quality index during the second and third weeks of September often indicated "very unhealthy" air on the North Coast, though it was still an improvement over the "hazardous" air in much of the rest of western Oregon.

Catering to different needs

David Reid, executive director of the Astoria-Warrenton Area Chamber of Commerce, said the type of visitors who came to the coast during this time were different than regular tourists.

"Not only were their reasons for being here different, but also their spending habits were different," Reid said, adding that those who had been displaced by wildfires were spending money on lodging and food, but not on attractions like gift shops or museums. "If we think this is going to be an ongoing thing, everybody needs to gear up for that and basically make their offerings useful for those folks."

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Front desk clerk at Gearhart by the Sea Resort

For example, he said, hotels could offer long-term rental deals during fire season, or stores could offer discounts for wildfire refugees and stock up on products that will ease their burden.

Product surge

Eric Peterson, assistant store manager for Fred Meyer in Warrenton, said the store sold a large number of air filters and purifiers during that time.

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