

ILLUSTRATION BY CHELSEA PLOUFFE

Smoke Gets in Your Lungs

Wildfires bring bad air quality to the Willamette Valley BY JESLYN LEMKE

The hellish wildfire smoke seen in the southern Willamette Valley last August and September 2017 was, by all counts, the worst summer of smoke this region has ever seen.

Peoples' lungs were burning. A white-hot bank of smoke choked our every horizon. The smoke broke every record in history in this area. A perfect storm of powerful wildfires surrounded Eugene-Springfield to the south and east. The forests burned and burned and burned — for weeks.

"What made last summer particularly bad is it was many days of high smoke concentration. It was bad and it was bad for a long periods of time. So we had people more impacted," says Merlyn Hough, director of Lane Regional Air Protection Agency (LRAPA), which monitors air quality for Lane County.

Twenty-eight out of 50 days last summer (July 30 to Sept. 17, 2017) were measured as moderate to very

unhealthy levels of smoke in the air, according to LRAPA records.

The sprawling forests of western Oregon are dry earlier than normal this year, heightening the chances of an earlier fire season, according to Jim Gersbach, public information officer with Oregon Department of Forestry in Salem.

"If you were to walk in the forest and get a sense of how dry the trees and dried grasses are now, it's about what they would be at the end of July and beginning of August," Gersbach says.

A 36,500-acre wildfire, the Klamathon Fire, has already been tearing apart whole mountainsides on the California-Oregon state line, prompting crews from northern California and Oregon to respond.

"Many of our fire districts are reporting that conditions on the ground are two to three weeks ahead of where you would expect to see them this time of year. ... We are already in a position if an ember were to land, there's a

good chance it would start a fire," Gersbach says.

Multiple fires are already burning across Oregon's west side: near Hood River in Memaloose State Park, Coos Bay where the Lobster Creek fire is now mostly contained, and another fire outside Medford that started July 5 and burned about 100 acres before firefighters calmed it.

The huge acreage of scorched earth left behind by fires in the Willamette Forest last year may or may not give rise to worse fires this year, Gersbach says.

"It depends entirely on how much of the fuel the fire consumed when it was burning. In some cases, if you have a complete moonscape and the fire reached a high intensity and it burned down all the young trees and brush and it burns the stumps down to charcoal, you might not have much of a fire risk there the next season."

In other areas, if a fire rushes through quickly at a lower heat, it could leave behind miles of trees that die months later. Those dead, dried trees make easy fuel for next year's