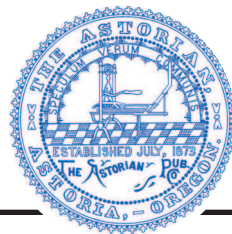


# OPINION



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## SOUTHERN EXPOSURE

# 'Everything just gone'

The Camp Fire started Nov. 8, in Butte County near the northern California city of Paradise. Before its containment on Nov. 25, the conflagration had burned more than 153,000 acres, destroyed almost 14,000 residences and 528 commercial buildings, and damaged thousands more.

County strike teams from around Oregon headed south as part of the emergency management assistance compact, a national state-to-state mutual aid system.

The Clatsop County strike team, led by Chief Jeff Golightly of Lewis and Clark, included 19 volunteers from Gearhart, Seaside, Olney Walluski, Knappa and Lewis and Clark. Two Clatsop County engines joined the Columbia County Strike Team.



**R.J. MARX**

Seaside Division Chief David Rankin's first impression was of "the wide scale of destruction," he said. "The amount of buildings, trees, vehicles — everything just gone. You thought: 'Wow, this could have been anybody you know trying to get out of this inferno.'"

### 'All you saw was black'

Rankin's assignment was outside of Paradise, along the road to Concow, a small community of 700 in the Sierra Foothills. Patrols looked for areas that might reignite and checked up on homes that hadn't burned or suffered damage.

"Later in the week we transitioned to structure assessment, going into areas that had been burned and looked for what was necessary to clean up or put out hot spots," Rankin said. "We supported big burn-out operations to help strengthen up the fire line."

Air quality was terrible, Rankin said, smoky throughout the whole valley. "The only way to get around it was to go onto the mountaintops."

Firefighters Aaron Smith, 26, and Troy Foster, 21, both of the Olney Walluski Fire and Rescue District, were among the department's younger members to head out. Smith traveled with the Clatsop County team, while Foster and his engine were detailed to the Columbia County team.

Smith, an eight-year volunteer, has fought wildfires within the state, but wanted to get experience on a bigger fire, including technical experience on bulldozers and hand crews.

He built hand lines, laid hose and extinguished hot spots within 100 feet of the road or any area that was unburnt.

"The second to last day there, we were patrolling a community on Concow Road," Smith said. "We reached the end of the road as far we could go, and it was basically bare land. All you saw was black. There were no trees standing, no grass. Most of the houses we came on were completely gone."

Foster has two years experience in Warrenton and about eight months with the Olney Walluski department, but this was his first major conflagration.

"I like firefighting and I just wanted to help people," he said.

He worked with crews in the town of Paradise, a community of 27,000, where the fire destroyed thousands of homes and killed dozens of people. They worked 24-hour shifts, constructing direct lines and holding control lines to mitigate the threat of fire escaping.

"Our job was to protect structures, but by the time we got there, there weren't many structures left in Paradise," Foster said.

Air quality was "poor when we got there, and it was poor when we left," he added.

### Gearhart firefighters

The Gearhart Volunteer Fire Department sent seven firefighters to California.

James Hutchinson, an intern and student, along with Jordan Chandler, who works with the Oregon Department of Forestry, were joined by Tanner Rich, Sean Kirby, Angels Vargas, Kayla Miller and Lindsey Wolfe.

When the state fire marshal came through, it "started the motion of things," Hutchinson said.

Firefighters were performing a fire prevention demonstration at Gearhart Elementary School when Chief Bill Eddy said two Gearhart engines were requested.

Volunteers responded within the hour, meeting at the staging area in Seaside.



Seaside Fire

**Jenson Segui of Seaside patrols the perimeter of a large back burn used to strengthen the fire line.**



Seaside Fire and Rescue

**Members of the Clatsop County strike team.**



Seaside Fire

**Brent Saulsbury (Lewis and Clark) and Scott Wheldon take the time to rehab their chainsaws during a break.**



Seaside Fire

**Lindsey Wolfe and James Hutchinson (Gearhart) on a dozer line keeping an eye on any flare-ups.**

### THE CAMP FIRE

Butte County's Camp Fire was the most destructive and deadly in California's history.

By the fire's containment on Nov. 25, Cal Fire reported 85 civilian fatalities and three firefighter injuries. The cause remains under investigation. A total of 1,065 fire personnel responded.

On Nov. 29, just under 200 people were still declared missing, and search crews are combing the area looking for remains, slowing the ability of cleaning crews to enter. Heavy rains flooded roadways, stranded vehicles and created the need for further evacuations.

Clatsop County's strike team included:

**Gearhart:** Jordan Chandler, James Hutchinson, Tanner Rich, Sean Kirby, Kayla Miller, Angels Vargas and Lindsey Wolfe.

**Knappa:** Amy Lenz, Scott Whelden

**Lewis and Clark:** Jeff Golightly, Flint Helisgo, Brett Saulsbury

**Olney Walluski:** Troy Foster, Aaron Smith, Ron Tyson

**Seaside:** Katie Bulletset, Matt Keefer, David Rankin and Jenson Segui.

### Gratitude

Firefighters stayed at the Butte County Fairgrounds in Chico, alongside newly displaced residents who had set up "mini-refugee camps," Rankin said. Tents and cars and tarps looked "like Third World countries popping up in the middle of town."

Nights were extremely cold, Miller said, with temperatures dipping to 22 degrees.

Firefighters slept in tents or yurts at the fairgrounds, or when on the fire sites — about 35 or 40 miles away — taking breaks in the engine, back seat or the stairwell of the engine to get "power naps to keep you going," Rich said.

Foster said he and his team received a visit from California's governor-elect Gavin Newsom.

Kindergartners presented Oregon firefighters with a thank-you card.

"The people in Chico were amazing," Foster said. "There were signs everywhere. They were amazingly thankful."

### Lessons learned

Firefighters recounted firefighting lessons learned.

"Keep your head on a swivel," Smith said. "Anything can happen, and what can happen, will happen."

Rich said he is a firm believer in Murphy's Law. "Anything can go wrong — even walking around structures, you can slip and fall. I never get the sense this is safe."

Vargas said "one of the things I got taught was never going thinking everything is OK. Weather can change within seconds, and you don't know when that's going to happen. You have to be on your guard constantly."

The Camp Fire reminded Rankin to always anticipate what can happen when incidents get compounded.

"The lessons don't just necessarily pertain to wildfires," Rankin said. "If you had a gas line explosion at a house, what if that was a gas line explosion at a hotel? If you have a little wildfire, what if you have a fast moving wildfire moving through town? Those are the kind of lessons I took. Don't get complacent with your regular emergencies, but contemplate what happens if they get bigger, past what you're normally used to."

Meanwhile, the 10 days away and long shifts gave way to a Thanksgiving weekend with families, and on Nov. 25, news that the Camp Fire had been fully contained.

"A lot of us have seen fatalities and we've seen the devastation before," Chandler said. "But none of us have seen what we saw down in Paradise. It's on a much larger scale than anything we've dealt with here."

Rich's family is getting accustomed to seeing him leave town every fire season — he volunteered at California's Santa Rosa and Thomas fires last year, he said.

"Going to wildfires has become the new norm," he said. "My brother's like: 'Man, you're gone again.'"

*R.J. Marx covers South County for The Daily Astorian and is editor of the Seaside Signal and Cannon Beach Gazette.*