

# Experts scrutinize hazard tree removal project

By CASSANDRA PROFITA

Oregon Public Broadcasting

Gates Mayor Ron Carmickle is walking alongside a grove of burned trees off Highway 22 near his city in Oregon's Santiam Canyon.

"The ones you can see here are marked," he said, pointing to a line of trees with blue spray paint on their trunks.

He's brought two tree experts with him: arborist Rick Till and forest health specialist Dave Shaw with Oregon State University.

"That one's got pretty high scorch," Shaw said, pointing to one with blackened bark stretching more than halfway up the trunk and then moving on to another tree with less bark scorch. "This one's a little edgy."

The blue spray paint is how contractors with the Oregon Department of Transportation are marking what are deemed to be hazardous trees within areas that were burned in last year's wildfires and need to be cut down for safety.

ODOT's goal in the state's ongoing hazard tree removal operation is to protect people from burned trees that could fall onto roads or buildings. But deciding which trees actually pose that risk is complicated, and a growing number of people say ODOT's contractors are hastily marking too many trees for removal — including trees that aren't actually hazardous.

The operation faces multiple allegations of mismanagement and excessive tree-cutting. Gov. Kate Brown has allowed the work to continue despite calls to stop the project and order an investigation, but state lawmakers are asking a lot of questions, and critics like Carmickle are taking a closer look at the trees marked for removal.

He invited Till and Shaw to come check the state's work by examining some of the trees with blue dots.

## Overcutting

Shaw uses an axe to scrape away a thin layer of blackened bark on a Douglas fir tree that's marked with a blue dot. Just under the surface, the bark is golden brown.

"See how limited the



Dave Shaw, an Oregon State University professor and forest health specialist, scrapes char off the bark of a burned tree marked for removal off Oregon Highway 22.

Cassandra Profita/Oregon Public Broadcasting

char is?" he said. "That's not really severe bark char. It's not really deep."

But the top of the tree doesn't look very healthy, he said, so he wouldn't challenge that removal decision. In contrast, Shaw points to another tree with a blue dot that has black bark but is full of green needles on top. That's probably going to live, he said, so it doesn't need to be cut down for safety.

"The crown is completely undamaged," he said. "I don't know. I'm suspicious about this tree. I mean, that one in particular doesn't really look like a high likelihood of mortality."

Carmickle says that kind of conclusion adds to his concerns that ODOT contractors are overcutting trees just to make more money. And he wants to stop them before they cut any more of the blue-dotted trees in his city.

"I mean, these trees are 60, 80 years old, it's going to take that long for this to rejuvenate," he said. "So that's what we're facing in this here. When they just clear-cut all this stuff out, we're facing, you know, a whole generation before this ever

comes back."

The mayor's fears are compounded by firsthand reports from multiple people who worked on the state's hazard tree removal project.

Eric Phillips is one of several whistleblowers who told lawmakers about

the tree-cutting operation in response to the litany of complaints.

After the hearings, state Sen. Jeff Golden asked the governor to stop the project

and order an investigation. "We'd better get real clear on what's going on out there now, soon," the Ashland Democrat said. "If we've gone astray, if this project has gone astray, let's find out and correct it right now."

He worries the state could lose federal disaster funding. So far, ODOT and its contractors say they've fixed many of the reported problems.

ODOT manager Mac Lynde told lawmakers his agency has hired an independent arborist to review

the problems he saw while working for an ODOT contractor on Highway 224.

"It was a very 'Hurry up. Let's get trees cut and cut as many trees as we can,'" Phillips said in a recent legislative hearing. "There's so much mismanagement. So much lack of accountability. It's like people just want to get paid."

He said workers with no arborist experience were marking trees for removal, that he saw contractors falling trees into wetlands and cutting trees that weren't marked as hazardous, and

and order an investigation. "We'd better get real clear on what's going on out there now, soon," the Ashland Democrat said. "If we've gone astray, if this project has gone astray, let's find out and correct it right now."

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to look at a representative sample and confirm before the trees come down that it matches with the expectations of what our program is designed around," Lynde said. "We hope this will build more confidence with others around our project. At minimum, I think it will validate some of the work that's been going on or it will help inform additional changes."

Lynde said the secretary of state will also be auditing the project, and that the state's monitoring firm, CDR Maguire, has initiated its own internal review in response to the whistleblower allegations.

"As more information comes out about what those reviews identify, we'll certainly take swift action," Lynde said.

## 'Stop the cut!'

But environmental groups are still calling on the governor to stop the tree-cutting and activists recently forced the work to stop by occupying a tree-removal site east of Eugene. ODOT has also reported some activists spray-painting over the blue dots on marked trees to prevent falling crews from cutting them down.

At a rally in Salem this month, protesters dressed up in various costumes and chanted: "Gov. Brown, stop the cut!"

ODOT and the governor say wildfire recovery is too important to stop the removal of hazardous trees. They want to make sure roads can reopen and homeowners can rebuild on their burned properties, and they say the state can continue to address the reported problems without stopping the project altogether.

Right now, the state is about a quarter of the way through marking and removing an estimated 140,000 hazardous trees left by last year's wildfires.

"Certainly our emergency response operation is an adaptive operation, and it looks a lot different today than when we started," Lynde told lawmakers on Monday. "This is something that has never happened before in Oregon. Never has a program this size been launched. As we recover from these wildfires, we're constantly refining our operation and learning from our experiences."

## Stepson addicted to methamphetamine

**Dear Annie:** I started dating my husband 11 years ago, married six years ago. Our biggest problem is his 29-year-old son. This man has never held a job because he has been addicted to drugs including meth and heroin and is still using. Also, he has warrants out for his arrest. I have made it clear he can not live in our house, and I do not want him over if my husband is not home. I know his son hates me and the combination of hate and drugs

does not always end well. Needless to say, he always slips his way back in, and then I blow my top, and my husband runs him off again. It is a never-ending rollercoaster. How do I get my husband to understand I am done with it? I wouldn't allow my grown daughters to live in my home, jobless and sleep on my couch, I refuse

**DEAR ANNIE**



ANNIE LANE  
Creators  
Syndicate Inc.

to support a grown 29-year-old man! — *Tired of the Coaster*

**Dear Tired:** Addiction is indeed a roller coaster, but you need not go along for the ride. Let your husband know — empathetically but firmly — that you are not comfortable with your stepson staying with you any longer. If he continues to let him into the house anyway,

tell your husband that you will need to insulate yourself from the dysfunction and make a plan to do so, finding your own place temporarily, with a relative or friend. I encourage you to attend meetings of a support group such as Nar-Anon or Families Anonymous, which might afford you some peace and in turn clarity in the situation. And if ever you feel you are in danger, call 911. I'm sorry your family is dealing with this.

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Personally, Renae Nelson, owner

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