

# Experts say more planning, resilience needed to protect against wildfires

By **GEORGE PLAVEN**  
Capital Press

CORVALLIS — While the 2021 fire season isn't over yet, experts at Oregon State University say communities should be planning ahead to increase resilience in the face of future large blazes.

OSU hosted a virtual forum on Sept. 21 to discuss ongoing wildfire and drought conditions statewide.

Chris Dunn, an ex-fire-fighter and fire science researcher in the College of Forestry, said there is still a risk of sparking new fires in Oregon, though the worst of the season should be over as temperatures fall and humidity rises.

"We're really in that transition time," Dunn said. "All of that helps to keep fire behavior moderated."

According to the U.S. Drought Monitor, nearly all of Oregon remains mired in "severe" to "exceptional" drought. Gov. Kate Brown has declared a drought emer-



U.S. Forest Service/Contributed Photo, File

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gency in 25 of Oregon's 36 counties since late March.

Larry O'Neill, state climatologist with the Oregon Climate Service — part of the College of Earth, Ocean and Atmospheric Sciences at OSU — said this year's historically dry

conditions are a precursor for what the state can expect with climate change going forward.

"The drier conditions and drought will become more intense as the climate warms," O'Neill said.

Part of that will mani-

fest in a shift of seasonal precipitation, with summers projected to be drier and winters becoming wetter overall, O'Neill said.

"Up in the higher elevations, we're going to have more precipitation fall as rain rather than snow," he

added. "All of this will impact a variety of fire systems, as well as just the general ecology of the area."

Erica Fischer, an assistant professor in the School of Civil and Construction Engineering, said communities in the wildland-urban interface should assess wildfire risk and develop long-term plans for protecting critical infrastructure.

She compared the effort to planning that has already taken place for communities threatened by a major earthquake in the Cascadia Subduction Zone in the 1990s.

"I think we need to take a page from that book, and not reinvent the wheel," Fischer said.

Tom DeLuca, dean of the OSU College of Forestry, said communities need to shift their mindset about fire being not simply a disaster, but something people live with in the West that is part of the ecosystem.

"We have to learn how to live with fire and build

more fire-adapted communities," he said.

At the same time, he said, land management agencies should be focused on strategies to make landscapes more fire-resilient.

James Johnston, a research associate in the College of Forestry who studies historical and contemporary fire patterns across the Pacific Northwest, said more can be done using prescribed fire to eliminate a backlog of forest fuels that are driving larger, more destructive wildfires.

On a larger spacial and temporal scale, Johnston said the only way to fight fire is with fire.

"There's got to be a much larger role for fires that we start," Johnston said.

Dunn echoed that sentiment, saying that while fire is inevitable in the West, land managers can do more to lessen their severity.

"Our choice now is what fire do we want?" Dunn said. "And we do have agency in that."

## LOANS

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general claims, and request for relief as in the present case," she said.

However, the judge said the Dunlaps can ask to lift the stay if they opt out of the class action lawsuit, which they and other farmers are trying to do.

The couple are among a group of 12 farmers who've

filed a motion to opt out of the Texas case because they "should be allowed to pursue their chosen claims, with their chosen counsel, in their chosen forums."

These farmers argue the class action complaint more broadly attacks USDA programs for alleged racial discrimination while they are specifically targeting the loan forgiveness program.

The class action lawsuit also includes different legal theo-

ries, they claim.

"At a minimum, it reveals key differences in litigation strategy that support allowing Movants to opt out," the motion said.

These farmers argue the debt relief program violates the Administrative Procedure Act while the Texas lawsuit does not, and they worry the class action will be subject to delays for reasons their own complaints would not be.

## RELIEF

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doesn't align with where we see the value in the commodity."

The heat dome that developed in June scorched the leaves of nursery crops, leaving some growers unable to sell most of their Japanese maples or hydrangeas, said Jeff Stone, executive director of

the Oregon Association of Nurseries.

"The trees are technically not dead but they're not salable," he said. "You can try to rehabilitate a tree or a plant but it's not ready for a customer."

Conservatively, nurseries expect to lose \$50 million in sales due to the heat wave, he said. "117 degrees (Fahrenheit) will harm a plant no matter what you do."

Pay-outs from the USDA's livestock forage program have proven insufficient for ranchers whose rangeland suffered from the drought, Cooper said.

The program compensates for roughly 60% of the value of forage, but that's generally a low amount for rangeland compared to irrigated pastures that aren't common in the West, she said.



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