

# State can provide little in the way of aid to fire victims

By Mateusz Perkowski  
Capital Bureau

SALEM — Although Gov. Kate Brown said the state will do everything it can to make sure victims of the Canyon Creek Complex fire have the tools, resources and knowledge they need to rebuild, the state can provide little in the way of direct aid.

The state's only aid program for fire victims — the wildfire damage housing relief program — has strict income restrictions that will exclude all but the poorest of applicants.

Earlier this year, state lawmakers passed a bill that dedicated \$50,000 in financial assistance to very low-income residents who lose their primary homes to wildfire, with claims limited to \$5,000 per household.

To qualify for the program, a household's income must be 25 percent below the federal poverty level. For example, a household of four would have to earn \$18,188 or less per year to be eligible.

Organizations that serve needy Oregonians in the fire area expect that the criteria will likely prevent some homeowners from getting help from the program.

"There definitely are people within that income bracket, but there are more people that need help also," said Margaret Davidson, executive director of Community Connection of Northeast Oregon, an agency that serves Grant County.



George Plaven/EO Media Group

**Gov. Kate Brown visited the Incident Command Center of the Canyon Creek Complex fire in John Day. While Brown says the state will help connect victims with resources to help them rebuild, the only state program that provides direct aid has strict income requirements.**

When the organization learned of the program, "We thought, 'This is going to exclude a lot of people,'" she said.

The \$50,000 allocated to the program may not be sufficient if many homes are lost to wildfires in one year, Davidson said.

### State could shift money

It is possible for Oregon Housing and Community Services, which administers the program, to shift money from other parts of its budget into the wildfire relief fund if necessary, said Rem Nivens, assistant director of public affairs for the agency.

The program is aimed at closing the financial "gap" that low-income residents face when they suddenly

need to relocate after a fire, said Scott Cooper, executive director of NeighborImpact, a nonprofit that serves central Oregon.

"It's \$5,000 max, so it's not going to rebuild your house. But at least it can help you figure out the next steps of your life after you've lost everything," he said.

The program will help those who would have "fallen through the cracks otherwise," Cooper said. "You're talking about people who could not afford to pay an insurance premium."

### Some wanted more money

Rep. Mike McLane, R-Powell Butte, originally wanted to devote \$200,000 to the wildfire damage housing relief program, but the amount was scaled back by legislative leaders, said Kara Walker, his spokeswoman.

The Legislature's Emergency Board — which makes emergency funding decisions — may decide to increase the overall amount and ease the income requirements, she said. McLane is a member of the board, which meets next month.

ements, said Bob Estabrook, spokesperson for the agency.

### Depends on disaster declaration

Sorting out funding for repairs to roads and other infrastructure will have to wait until the fire is under control, said Dave Thompson, spokesman for the Oregon Department of Transportation.

Exactly how much state and federal money is used to repair highways and county roads will depend on the wildfire being declared a disaster by the federal government, he said.

Right now, the focus is on fighting the fire and saving lives, Thompson said. "Quite frankly, the funding thing we'll worry about later."

The Canyon Creek Complex fire has caused more destruction to homes in Oregon than any blaze in recent history, said Rich Hoover, community liaison for the Oregon State Fire Marshal's Office.

So far, roughly 50 homes have been destroyed by the fire. In 2002, 18 homes were lost in the Eyerly fire in Jefferson County, and before that, 19 were lost in the Skeleton fire near Bend in 1996, he said.

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