

Trail closures disrupt busy season at Oswald West

By KATIE FRANKOWICZ
The Astorian

Two trail sections at Oswald West State Park, including a popular route up Neah-Kah-Nie Mountain near Manzanita, could be closed until 2023 because of damage caused by high winds last summer.

The trail closures come at a time when visitor numbers to the coast continue to surge, the summer tourism season approaches and more people are seeking outdoor activities during the coronavirus pandemic.

On the North Neah-Kah-Nie Mountain Trail, the damage is measured in trees down. On a short, less well-known section of the Oregon Coast Trail near Arch Cape, the damage is measured in acres.

The same east winds that knocked down trees in September also fueled the catastrophic Labor Day fires across Oregon. Smoke from the fires darkened the skies at the coast, but the fires never threatened towns or trees. The wind was a different story. It rushed through private timberlands at the back of state parkland and, with little to soften the blow, pummeled portions of Oswald West State Park.

"I've never seen anything like it," said ranger Eric Crum as he surveyed damage on the Arch Cape trail during a recent visit.

The trail, its entrance blocked by a closure sign, starts off normally enough. Coastal woods close around you. Salmonberry sends a riot of new growth over the trail. When Crum and another ranger went to scout out the damage, they hiked along for a short while, chainsawed through a few downed trees and thought, "This isn't so bad."

But as the trail climbed into the woods, suddenly there was daylight ahead, an entire sky where before there had been shadow-drenched forest. Fallen trees — giant



A sign blocks the entrance to the North Neah-Kah-Nie Mountain Trail at Oswald West State Park.

Hailey Hoffman /The Astorian

Sitka spruce, hemlock, Douglas fir — piled on top of each other, masses of roots upended. Some trees still stood in the clearing, but the wind had snapped them in half.

Crum reported back: "The whole forest blew down."

The winds also damaged a trail at Cape Lookout State Park farther south, closing down the entire North Trail that connects a day-use area to the Cape Trail, one of the most popular hikes on the North Coast, according to the Oregon Parks and Recreation Department.

All three trail sections are impassable. The state expects to use helicopters to remove fallen and dangerous trees within 200 feet of either side of the trail. But these same crews are still busy elsewhere in the state, cleaning up damage caused by the fires. The North Coast trails will have to wait their turn.

And the state is not even sure of the full extent of the

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damage on the trails yet.

"We don't have the whole picture because we can't get to some of the areas to assess the damage," said Diane Navarrete, a spokeswoman for the Parks and Recreation Department.

"We don't have the whole picture"

While costs are difficult to tease out at this point, helicopter removal work will likely be the most expensive portion. A rough estimate of the work breaks down to a cost of \$47,000 per acre. Trail repair and restoration work is estimated to cost \$63,000 at Arch Cape, \$297,000 at Neah-Kah-Nie Mountain and \$89,000 at

Cape Lookout. The parks department estimates that just under 200 acres were damaged across the three trail areas.

"Steep and hard-to-access topography is the main challenge at Neah-Kah-Nie," Navarrete said. "The sheer volume of down trees at Arch Cape and Cape Lookout means more planning and expense to haul out all those trees."

Until trees are removed, the state will not know if any trails will need to be realigned. The trails were already built in challenging terrain where reroutes — moving large sections of trail — are not feasible.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency is expected to reimburse 75% of the costs of the helicopter operation and other costs will be offset by selling marketable downed wood removed from the trails, according to Navarrete.

"We're not sure of the exact makeup of the affected area, so we can't speculate on how much money we could earn, but we can say it won't be enough to offset the helicopter costs," she said.

Some trees — like large Sitka spruce — may be left on site as nurse logs for habitat, or given to partner agencies for habitat, Navarrete added.

Though helicopter removal is expensive, the state ruled out using ground crews to remove debris — it would be unsafe and impractical and could cause more damage to the forest, Navarrete said.

Oswald West State Park is designated as critical habitat for marbled murrelet — a

threatened seabird that nests in old growth and mature forests — while Cape Lookout State Park is considered potential habitat for the bird. Both forests are considered potential habitat for northern spotted owls, also listed as threatened.

The Parks and Recreation Department is working with the state Department of Fish and Wildlife and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to figure out what environmental regulations apply and what work windows will be allowed.

Other options

Both Oswald West and Cape Lookout have a number of other trail options for visitors. Hikers can still reach the summit of Neah-Kah-Nie Mountain by parking at a trailhead farther south on U.S. Highway 101 and walking the South Trail.

Still, the trail closures could put more pressure on other trail systems and will impact the small trickle of Oregon Coast Trail through-hikers that rangers and park managers sometimes see.

With the Arch Cape and Neah-Kah-Nie trails closed, there are not great options for these hikers, said Ben Cox, Nehalem Bay unit manager for the Parks and Recreation Department. In this steep, cliffy area, hikers can't simply drop down and walk along a beach to the next available trail section. The narrow highway shoulder becomes their only alternative if they remain on foot.

But trail closures due to natural disruptions have become a common concern in the North Coast's more southern state parks. At Ecola State Park, landslides and stormy weather continue to cause seasonal damage to the park's entrance road while, recently, an entire trail section between Ecola Point and Indian Beach had to be rerouted around a large slide.

"We've had to, unfortunately, be in this position for a quite a while," Cox said.

County affordable housing strategy takes shape

By NICOLE BALES
The Astorian

Clatsop County is moving forward with a strategy to support new affordable housing projects.

The county and cities completed a housing study in 2019 that recommended the county address an affordable housing shortage by doing more to support diverse housing at higher densities and control vacation rentals.

Since then, the county and cities have grappled with how to balance the growth in vacation rentals as the North Coast becomes a more popular tourist destination, but little progress has been made. Meanwhile, homebuying has surged during the coronavirus pandemic as more people have flocked to the coast, further intensifying the issue.

"As staff has been discussing this topic, we've really been reflecting upon a role for the county that would be timely, that would be effective and then ultimately would be successful in facilitating new affordable housing stock in the county," County Manager Don Bohn said during a work session of the Board of Commissioners on Tuesday.

"Here in Clatsop County, as you know, the county does not have any affordable housing staff, we don't develop affordable housing. And if you look at the full range of 36 counties, counties do it differently. Sometimes housing authorities fall within counties and then they also have housing departments that do more discretionary public housing development with nonprofit and private partners," he said.

"You have some where the housing authority is the only housing resource. And what we have here is we have a consortium of multiple counties through NOHA (Northwest Oregon Housing Authority) who is providing

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Thompson

federal housing programs and also owning and maintaining a housing stock over those three counties."

Consultant hired

The county hired Angelo Planning Group, a Portland consulting company, in December to facilitate meetings with housing stakeholders, including cities and nonprofit housing developers.

Bohn said the purpose of the meetings was to identify a set of high-priority action items.

"So our question to stakeholders and partners was, 'What can the county do to move the needle on housing?'" he said. "And knowing that we have limited resources and, frankly, we have limited expertise in housing development."

There were five suggestions, and fundamentally, Bohn said, there was a desire for the county to act as an advocate and a convener.

Bohn laid out the suggestions to county commissioners.

One of the most vital resources the county can bring to the table is land, Bohn said. He shared options that are available for potential affordable housing development in Astoria and Warrenton.

Beyond that, he said, the county will work with cities and review codes, zoning requirements and other regulations that impact affordable housing development.

"And then it's to play this continual role as we move forward to have long-standing reciprocal relationships with these nonprofit housing providers so that we can have a steady stream of projects within the county," Bohn said. "Because this isn't a one-time challenge. This is an ongoing, sustainable challenge of building additional units overtime."

"We're also fortunate that some of our nonprofit partners, like CBH (Clatsop Behavioral Healthcare), are also going to be getting into the housing business, which is great. And their focus is really on permanent supportive housing, which fits a very important niche. But it's going to take all of us to do our small part to make a difference that the community needs."

As far as who will facilitate the work on behalf of the county, Bohn said there are several different options, including funding a position at the Northwest Oregon Housing Authority that focuses specifically on housing development in Clatsop County. The housing authority provides critical housing assistance to low-income residents in Clatsop, Columbia and Tillamook counties.

"Whether that is ultimately an idea that has legs is not fully developed yet, but that's one of the options," Bohn said. "The other option is that we hire a county staff to facilitate these kinds of partnerships or a consultant. So there's a number of options and we're still working through that."

Commissioner support

County commissioners were supportive of the framework.

Commissioner Lianne

Thompson said she would like the board to have a role in the process and serve on an advisory committee for the work.

Bohn said that while he does envision an advisory committee for ongoing collaboration, he wants to get the ball rolling.

"And again, we just need to put the shovel in the ground from my perspective and just start this process, because there is muscle memory that is important to these affordable housing projects," he said. "And we just don't have that muscle memory right now because we haven't done it together. And so I think staff is just eager to get the process started."

Commissioner Pamela Wev said she liked the idea of the county being an ambitious convener.

"I've been real disappointed after we did the housing study, which remember was half-funded — 50 grand from the county and 10 (grand) from each of the cities — and I have seen very little results coming from that, including from our standpoint," she said.

Thompson was also happy to see movement.

"County manager, assistant county manager, thank you for this work," she said. "It's inspiring. It's hopeful. We are getting in the game. As Commissioner Wev points out, we had a housing study. The board that existed then was unwilling to have a commission be involved with that. So it really kind of cut the legs off. Now you're putting the wheels back on the bus. So we're going to get on the road."

"Now where we go and how much horsepower we have — if I can continue the metaphor — we'll see. But we're in the game. We're in the game long term. We're in the game to build capacity locally, regionally, across the state. We're well begun."

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