

New Details: ODF reports 'significant increase' in human-caused wildfires

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The Oregon Department of Forestry (ODF) reports a "specific increase in human caused fires" across the state this summer.

"The human-caused blazes range from campfires, escaped debris burning, industrial operations, folks working in the forest, and we are also concerned about vehicles, such as RVs and trailers, dragging chains that can spark a fire," ODF Public Affairs Officer Derek Gasperini said.

ODF is also anticipating lightning strikes that could result in wildfire starts.

One of the state's largest wildfires this summer burned has over 15,000 near Agnes in southwest Oregon as of late last week. The cause of that fire was under investigation and human activity had not been ruled out. Hundreds of fire crews were battling the blaze on the ground and from the air. Public safety restrictions were in place surrounding the fire.

Be prepared

Fire agency officials said the wildfires can move rapidly and can be dangerous, so visitors and residents need to be aware and pay attention when the fires are close to communities.

“Be aware,” Gasperini said. “Pay attention to local news outlets. The wildfires are a concern throughout the summer,”

ODF recommends that you have a go-bag with essential supplies for your safety if you are forced to relocated due to a wildfire. If evacuations are possible, Gasperini said it’s important that the public pay attention to law enforcement agencies who will coordinate efforts to get people to safety.

“Know the evacuation routes and the backup routes,” he said.

Emergency Management agencies have listed the following evacuation classifications:

Level 1: Means “BE READY“ for potential evacuation. Residents should be aware of the danger that exists in their area, monitor emergency services websites and local media outlets for information. This is the time for preparation and precautionary movements of persons with special needs, mobile property and (under certain circumstances) pets and livestock. If conditions worsen, emergency services personnel may contact you via an emergency notification system.

Level 2: Means “BE SET” to evacuate. You must prepare to leave at a moment’s notice. This level indicates there is significant danger to your area, and residents should either voluntarily relocate to a shelter or with family and friends outside of the affected area, or if choosing to remain, to be ready to evacuate at a moment’s notice. Residents MAY have time to gather necessary items, but doing so is at their own risk. This may be the only notice you receive. Emergency services cannot guarantee that they will be able to notify you if conditions rapidly deteriorate. Area media services will be asked to broadcast periodic updates.

Level 3: Means “GO” evacuate now. Leave immediately! Danger to your area is current or imminent, and you should evacuate immediately. If you choose to ignore this advisement, you must understand that emergency services may not be available to assist you further. DO NOT delay leaving to gather any belongings or make efforts to protect your home. This will be the last notice you receive.

The News Guard reached out to U.S. Forest Service Public Information Specialist Virginia Gibbons for insight into Oregon's 2023 summer and fall wildfire season.

The News Guard: Through the rest of the summer and into fall, what are wildfire concerns your agency has and why those concerns?

Virginia Gibbons: It is important for the public to understand that they need to be part of the solution regarding wildfire concern by 1) keeping human starts down and 2) being better prepared to “live with fire” this fire year and beyond. This is an area of great concern for the Forest Service as we continue to address the wildfire crisis.

Given the significant fire potential outlook for the Pacific Northwest Region from now through October (available at [MonthlySeasonal.pdf](#) ([nifc.gov](#)), one of the ways that local residents and visitors can help firefighters most is by preventing human-caused fires. This includes following all fire restrictions that local wildland fire agencies have put in place. Current fire restrictions are available on agency websites and social media accounts.

Nationally, human-caused wildfires account for about 97% of wildfires that threaten homes. Forest Service firefighters suppress wildfires that threaten lives, property and natural resources.

Our goal is to minimize the number of devastating, destructive large wildland fires. Local resources, federal and non-federal, work together to contain fires safely and effectively. Because of these efforts, nationally 98% of wildland fires are contained within 24-hours of initial response. Safe response for firefighters on the remaining 2% that become larger fires is often problematic because of steep terrain that is difficult to access by ground resources, areas with heavy hazardous fuel buildup and hazard trees, and other risks.

Air resources are utilized to slow fires and protect homes from quickly advancing fires, but they do not put fires out. It's the firefighters on the ground who do that and if there are no roads to access the fire and/or it's in steep terrain, this makes fighting the fire particularly difficult. This is the type of landscape that we're fighting wildland fire in southwest Oregon.

Firefighter and public safety is always our top priority. Longer and more extreme fire seasons like we've experienced in recent years take a toll on the mental health and well-being of our firefighters. Expanding services and programs across the federal firefighting workforce to sustain the overall health and well-being of this critical workforce is paramount as we head into the rest of the 2023 Fire Year. Learn more at Guest column: [New Joint Federal Wildland Firefighter Health and Wellbeing Program | US Forest Service](#) ([usda.gov](#))

The News Guard: From your vantage point, what is the forecast for the rest of the summer and into fall that is of most concern?

Gibbons: Official outlooks from NOAA continue to suggest that the Pacific Northwest is most likely to experience warmer and drier than typical conditions during the period August through October of 2023. This means late summer and early autumn fire danger is likely to be greater than usual. Our forests and rangelands are likely to be more receptive than usual to fire ignitions and potential growth into large, costly wildfires.

For wildfire information in Oregon, see this site for the NW Interagency Coordination Center <https://gacc.nifc.gov/nwcc/>

The News Guard: What is your recommendation for tourists and residents in rural areas, especially along the Oregon Coast, about being prepared for these fast moving and dangerous wildfires?

Gibbons: One of the best ways to be prepared is to take all possible steps to reduce your home and community's wildfire risk. This includes using wildfire utilizing resistant building and landscape materials, having a family evacuation plan, including a go-kit that includes important personal items such as

medications, pet supplies, water and high energy snacks, important papers and any small irreplaceable items such as family photos, N95 masks if smoke is an issue, and being prepared for health impacts from wildfire smoke and much more.

Helpful tools for understanding and reducing wildfire risk are available at Homepage - Wildfire Risk to Communities. The family evac plan should not only include how your family will evac from your residence and meet up if separated, but also to identify ahead of time the best routes to take. If possible, have several options in mind based on the different directions a wildfire might approach your home.

To keep updated on current wildland fire information, we recommend people look to the following online resources: Inciweb (Inciweb is an official national clearinghouse of information for all large fires across the country); Facebook (type in the fire name and look for the official fire information logo) and Twitter. In SW Oregon, we post fire information for local fires to our Rogue River-Siskiyou National Forest website at <https://www.fs.usda.gov/rogue-siskiyou>, our Forest FB page @RRSNF and our Twitter account @RRSNF.

The News Guard: Highway 101 along much of the Oregon Coast is lined with forests, since that is one of the main north south routes, if a wildfire breaks out, what about community evacuations? What's your advice?

Gibbons: Community evacuations are coordinated by the local Sheriff's Office in cooperation with Incident Management Teams (those who come into help with large wildfires). In Oregon, we utilize a Ready, Set, Go! Or a 1-2-3 system. Deputies will come to knock on your door to recommend you leave if an area is in a Level 3 evacuation status. To monitor evacuation status for your area, check with 1) the local sheriff's office and/or office of emergency management-checking websites/agency social media sites is generally best to minimize calls 2) or the fire's Facebook page, Inciweb or Twitter accounts often have current information for evacuation status. See answer to question above for additional information on evacuating.

Be vigilant

Fire agencies across the state are urging the public to stay vigilant this fire season. With dry fuels, higher temperatures, and low humidity, now is the time for Oregonians to actively practice wildfire prevention, according to ODF Fire Protection Chief Mike Shaw.

"We all need to do our part to prevent wildfires from starting throughout the year, but right now everyone needs to be extremely careful," Shaw said. "With the current conditions, just one spark, cigarette, or open flame could result in Oregon's next wildfire. Preventing fires from starting helps protect our firefighters and communities from the health, safety, and economic impacts of wildfires and smoke."

Actively practice wildfire prevention

- Check your local fire regulations. Public use and industry restrictions are put in place to help prevent wildfires. By following these regulations, you can help reduce the risk of a human-caused wildfires.

- Recreate responsibly. If allowed, only build campfires in approved campgrounds, and make sure your campfire is OUT COLD before leaving. If campfires are banned, consider using a camp stove.
- Check your vehicle. Servicing your car regularly helps reduce the risk of a faulty part throwing sparks into dry grass while you're driving. Also, make sure to not park or idle over dry grass if you pullover. The heat from your undercarriage or exhaust could ignite the grass below.
- Keep a fire extinguisher on hand. We recommend keeping one in your car just in case you need it while travelling.
- Don't burn debris. Debris burning is prohibited across Oregon during fire season.

Public and industry fire restrictions are placed for a reason.

Fires in the outdoors start for several reasons (vehicles, campfires, smoking, cutting, grinding, and welding metal, power saw use, fireworks, electric fences, mowing dry grass, etc). Years of research has found that these activities are prone to start fires when vegetation dries out, humidity drops, and temperatures rise, ODF said in a release.

Based on these studies, fire professionals impose fire restrictions to alert the public and forest workers of these dangers. Check with your local wildland fire protection agency or rural fire district for restrictions specific to your area.

Currently, the state remains between moderate and extreme fire danger, depending on where you are.

“Remember, human-caused wildfires can be prevented. It only takes a minute to curb your actions before disaster strikes,” ODF states in its release.

Visit [Oregon.gov/odf](https://oregon.gov/odf) to find local fire restrictions and keeporegongreen.org for more wildfire prevention tips.