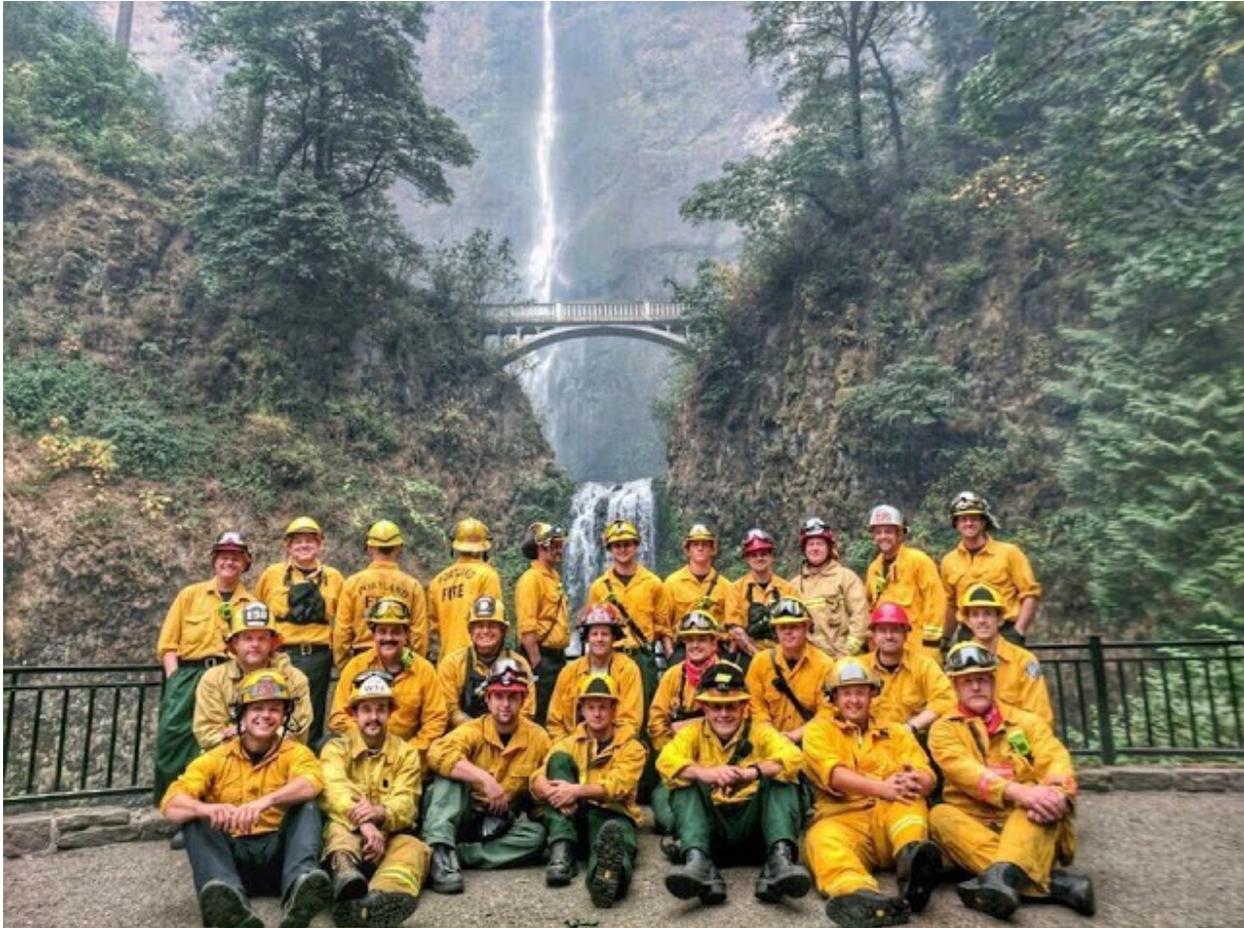


EAGLE CREEK FIRE 2017
by Teresa Kasner
Corbett, Oregon



The Eagle Creek Fire, was reported on September 2nd at approximately 4 pm in the Columbia River Gorge National Scenic Area. The fire was reportedly started by a 15 year old boy throwing fireworks into the canyon. A woman saw this and chastised the boy and his friends and hiked back to the trailhead to report the fire and point out the boy and his friends just before they pulled out of the parking lot, where they were apprehended by the police.

The fire trapped 153 hikers and forced them to stay overnight six miles up the trail. Mountain Wave Search and rescue dropped supplies from a helicopter to the hikers to sustain them throughout the night. The next morning, Pacific Northwest Search and Rescue, along with Mountain Wave Search and Rescue, escorted the hikers to Wahtum Lake and bussed them back to the Eagle Creek Trailhead.

The fire grew to 3,000 acres the first night. During the night of September 4th and 5th, east winds combined with excessive heat caused the fire to speedily grow in size pushing westward. As of the morning of September 5th, the fire had grown to over 20,000 acres and had jumped across the Columbia River into Washington near Archer Mountain.

The community of Cascade Locks Oregon was the first to experience mandatory evacuations, with 283 structures, including 15 businesses, being threatened by the fire. Salmon hatcheries at Cascade Locks were forced to release 600,000 fish six months earlier than expected. The fire also threatened historic structures in the Eagle Creek Day Use Area, including those built by the Civilian Conservation Corps in the 1930s.

Firefighters worked hard on Monday night and Tuesday morning to keep the nearly 100 year old lodge at Multnomah Falls safe. On Wednesday the Benson Bridge along the trail, and most of the surrounding trees and plants appeared to be intact despite flames that came dangerously close to burning the lodge and trails.

With winds blowing westward through September 5, up to one inch of ash fell on the Portland metro area during September 4 and 5. Air quality was officially reduced to an "unhealthy" ratings due to smoke and falling ash, forcing many schools to close or cancel outdoor activities.

Shifting wind conditions and rain on Sunday, September 17 cleared skies and aided in fire containment. Thankfully a welcome rainfall helped slow fire growth over the next several days. As of September 27th, the fire had burned 48,665 acres.

A total of 400 residences were under evacuation notices. Level 1 (Get Ready), Level 2 (Be Set), Level 3 (Go!) Cascade Locks was the first area of evacuation. In Multnomah County, evacuation orders were in place for Larch Mountain, Latourell, Bridal Veil, Dodson, Warrendale and East Corbett. Level 2 evacuations were in place for Corbett and Springdale.

An evacuation shelter was established at Mt. Hood Community College where several community locals and their pets found refuge.

I-84 was closed between Hood River and Troutdale on September 2 for rock and tree removal and slide activity. On September 14 it opened for westbound traffic, but eastbound lanes remained closed until the 23rd. During the closures, ODOT removed about 2,000 trees that were in danger of falling on the highway and there are over a thousand more that are potential dangers that may be removed. The danger from falling rocks continues, with the greatest potential near the Toothrock Tunnel. During the closures, ODOT worked to keep the road available for firefighters. Seventy bridges and culverts were inspected and only minimal damage was found.

My personal story is my husband and I live between Corbett and Springdale and were on evacuation notice Level 2 for a few weeks. The fire traveled so fast towards us the first night it was frightening and we listened to the news avidly to see how close it was getting. We started to think that our farmhouse would actually burn. We made lists of things we wanted to save and packing began. We moved some of our cars and our boat to a friend's property in Boring. We loaded clothes in our trailer and took it to a mall parking lot near the Dairy Queen on Stark in case we had to leave fast. And then we returned home to uneasily watch the fire advance. We didn't know what to do about our flock of chickens. The air was thick with smoke and it

was hard to breathe. The moon was red in the sky at night. We all sighed with relief when the rain finally came.

So many people have been affected by this fire - 3 homes were burned, businesses have lost income and have had to lay off their employees. The volunteers who staff Multnomah Falls Lodge don't know when they'll be able to help out at the lodge again. But we do have hope that the land will heal and grow again next Spring and the Columbia River Gorge will be a place of wonder and joy once again. Much work to fix the trails and plant new trees are ahead of us but I have faith that those who love it here will help in any way they can.

This piece first appeared in the newsletter Friends of Multnomah Falls.

