

Environment

Victims of Oregon's historic wildfires face tough tradeoffs: To rebuild or leave?

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An aerial view of Debbie Fawcett's property in Santiam Canyon, Oregon, in July 2022. Some residents of the Santiam Canyon who lost their homes in the wildfires of summer 2020 are still rebuilding, but many are choosing to leave. Photo by [Kale Williams](#) for [The Oregonian/OregonLive](#).

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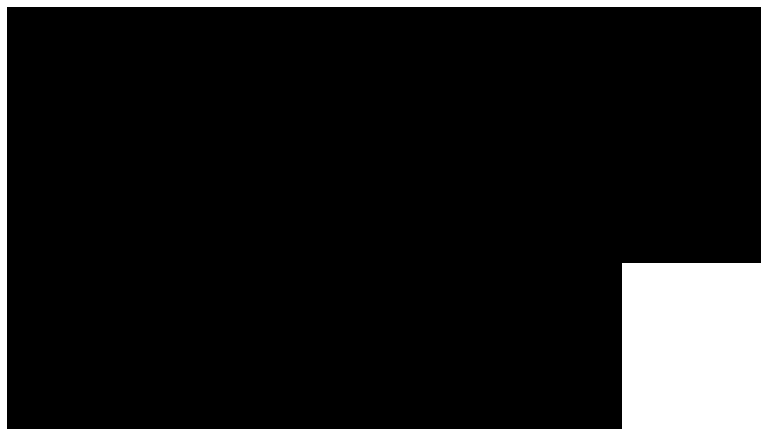
By [Kale Williams](#) | [The Oregonian/OregonLive](#)

After nearly two years of construction delays, price spikes and fights with her insurance company, [Debbie Fawcett](#) finally has a home again, one with a foundation instead of wheels.

The 58-year-old school counselor had been living in an RV on her property just outside Gates since the Beachie Creek fire tore through the tiny Santiam River Canyon community over Labor Day weekend in 2020.

The wildfire – one of several mega-fires across the state fueled by a heat wave and a rare wind event – destroyed her family’s five-bedroom home.

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Fawcett, her husband and 18-year-old daughter moved a few months ago into what they call their new “barn-dominium,” a two-story building with a garage and workshop on the ground floor and living space above.



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It’s as close to fire-proof as they could make it. The windows and siding are fire-resistant. The roof is metal. The new safe is rated for higher temperatures.

“We’ll never have composite shingles again,” Fawcett said as she looked out over the 27-acre property that’s been in her family for more than 50 years.



Debbie Fawcett walks along the driveway of her property near Gates, Oregon, on Friday, July 22, 2022. Fawcett, her husband and 18-year old daughter all lived in an RV on the property for nearly two years while their new home was under construction. Dave Killen / The Oregonian

Nearly 800 property owners lost homes to the fire in Marion and Linn counties. Fawcett is among the 400 who sought permits to rebuild. Linn County doesn't track how many of those homes have been completed, but officials with the Marion County Department of Public Works said 80 homes have been finished.

Many homeowners decided to move on, not willing to risk losing everything again.

"I can't live in an area surrounded by trees anymore," said Fred Trummell, who lost his house about five miles northwest from Fawcett. "I couldn't sleep at night."

While Fawcett and Trummell came to different decisions, they're both grappling with a future influenced by climate change and forest management that have made catastrophic wildfires much more likely in the Pacific Northwest as temperatures rise, drought persists and overgrown forests dry to kindling.

The state is pushing people who want to live in and around forests to take what many researchers say are crucial precautions.

The Beachie Creek fire burned nearly 200,000 acres in Marion and Linn counties, eventually merging with the Lionshead and P-515 fires. Together they blackened more than 400,000 acres and torched at least 1,500 structures, many of them homes in the mountain communities of Gates, Lyons and Detroit that line the Santiam Canyon. Five people, including local icon and well-known environmentalist George Atiyeh, were killed in the three fires.

Beachie Creek fire destruction along Little North ...



The 2022 fire season has been much less active so far. Late spring precipitation dampened forests and bolstered the region's snowpack while lower-than-average temperatures helped delay the start of the state's typical burning season. Some fires have now begun to spread in the state's south and west sections and the 60,000-acre McKinney fire has killed at least four people and destroyed much of the town of Klamath River near the Oregon border.

Using fire-resistant materials and clearing vegetation around homes have proven benefits, said Erica Fischer, an assistant professor of engineering at Oregon State University who studies the impacts of wildfires on buildings and communities.

A study of California homes found that residences built after 2008, when the state enacted strict building codes to prevent wildfire destruction including mandates for fire-resistant materials and defensible space, were about 40% less likely to be destroyed than those built before 1990.

"We have these landscapes that naturally burn and people live in the middle of them," Fischer said.

"We are never going to stop the fires from occurring; it's like asking someone to stop a hurricane.

What we can do, we can create communities that are less combustible so we can live with the hazard."

In Detroit, the lakeside town and popular recreation spot up the canyon from Gates, the Lionshead fire consumed roughly 80% of the town's buildings.



A house under construction in Detroit, Oregon, on Friday, July 22, 2022. Many of the structures in Detroit were lost to the Beachie Creek fire in the summer of 2020. Some residents of the Santiam Canyon who lost their homes in the fires of 2020 are still going through the rebuilding process two years later. Dave Killen / The Oregonian

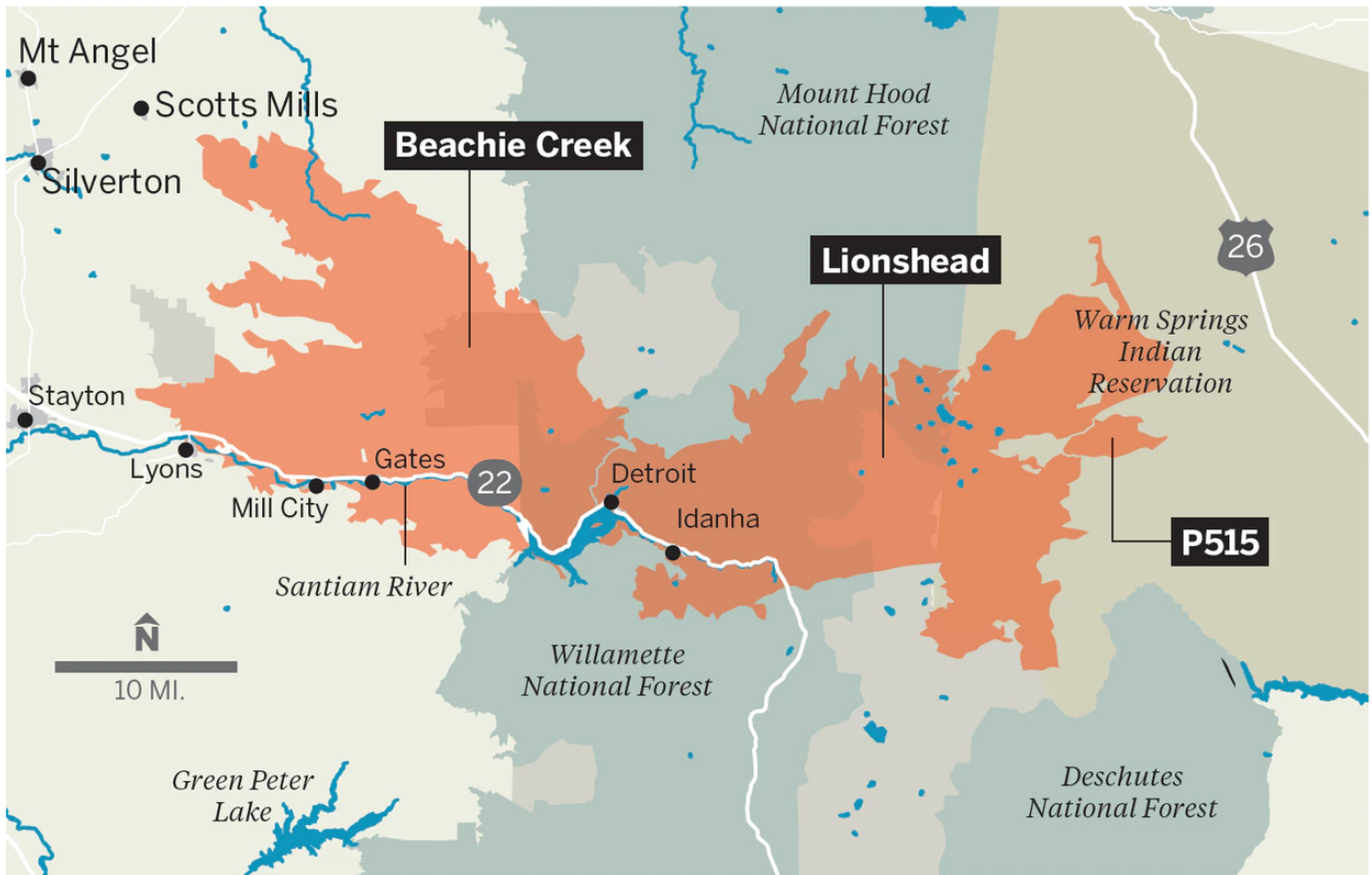
Hillsides surrounding the city center are dotted with homes in various stages of construction – with many more metal roofs than before, said Mayor Jim Trett.

Many of the residents he's talked to have made peace that some level of fire danger will always exist, Trett said, no matter how big the buffer or how extensive the fire-proofing.

“For a lot of us in the canyon,” he said, “this is the risk we assume to live here.”

Santiam Canyon fires

The Beachie Creek fire merged with the Lionshead and P-515 fires after they blew up on Labor Day in 2020. Together they blackened more than 400,000 acres and torched at least 1,500 structures, many of them homes in the mountain communities of Gates, Lyons and Detroit that line the Santiam Canyon. Five people were killed in the three fires.



Mark Graves/Oregonian

Santiam Canyon

A FOREST PRIMED TO BURN

Fire has always played a role in the natural cycle of forests, with low-intensity wildfires churning through woodlands at regular intervals.

That all began to change in the early 1900s after a summer of massive burns. The federal government responded by adopting a zero-tolerance policy for wildfires.

What would come to be known as the “10 a.m. rule” — stating fires should be contained by 10 a.m. the day after the initial report — resulted in decades of aggressive fire suppression, leaving forests without the naturally occurring burns that cleared out dry smaller trees, fine grasses and underbrush.

Many forests across the western United States now look as they never have before, brimming with fuel that has accumulated, in some spots, for more than 100 years.

Climate change has helped warm most of Oregon by an average of about 2 degrees Fahrenheit over the last century and has led to increased drought, diminished snowpack and decreased humidity, all of which can increase the frequency and severity of wildfires.

It was against that backdrop that a lightning strike sparked the Beachie Creek fire in mid-August 2020 near an old mining outpost known as Jawbone Flats. Located in the Opal Creek Wilderness, it's an isolated area known for old-growth trees, waterfalls and swimming holes north of the Santiam Canyon.

The fire was burning in remote and rugged terrain so firefighters were forced to battle it mostly from the air while ground crews scouted for access.

The fire remained small, roughly 15 acres for about a week, and firefighters got help from cool, wet weather. Typical summer weather returned, however, and the fire grew, reaching nearly 800 acres by Monday, Sept. 7.

On that final day of the Labor Day weekend, an extraordinary windstorm brought gusts of up to 50 mph to much of Oregon, fanning existing fires and sparking new ones all over the state as trees toppled and powerlines came crashing down.



A structure burns at Breitenbush Hot Springs during the Beachie Creek fire in September 2020. Courtesy of Erik Wennstrom

The Beachie Creek fire quickly spread into the Santiam Canyon. Driving east from Salem on Oregon 22 two years after the fire, charred trees and stumps still line the highway as it winds into the foothills through Mill City, Gates and Detroit.

Other fires exploded across western Oregon — from Jackson County in the south to Clackamas County in the north — and would go on to consume roughly 1 million acres. More than 2,500 homes were destroyed by the Almeda fire in the towns of Phoenix, Talent and Ashland. The Riverside fire, which forced evacuations for nearly all of Clackamas County, destroyed at least 139 structures. At least 11 people died across the state and vast areas suffered under a pall of thick, unhealthy smoke for weeks.

The historic fires spurred state lawmakers last year to pass Senate Bill 762, which included a raft of new initiatives around wildfire. The bill included grant funding for victims of the 2020 wildfires to seek reimbursement for fire-resistant materials.

The legislation was also the impetus for a new wildfire risk map, released by the state last month. Residents could input their address and see whether their property was designated no risk, low, moderate, high or extreme.

Those in the two riskiest categories likely would have faced new building code regulations and requirements to clear space around their homes, notions that were met with pushback from homeowners who feared the map could cause a spike in insurance premiums. On Thursday, the Oregon Department of Forestry pulled the map, saying it failed to do adequate outreach to affected communities. The agency plans to revise the map and present a new version to the public before finalizing it.



An aerial view of Debbie Fawcett's property near Gates, Oregon, on Friday, July 22, 2022. Fawcett said keeping a wide area clear of plants and trees around her home was a priority as she rebuilt. Dave Killen / The Oregonian

Fischer, the OSU engineering professor, said the law was an important first step in mitigating some of the risk for a state that is only going to see wildfires increase.

“There are some tough tradeoffs that have to be made when rebuilding,” Fischer said, noting that the state should be looking for more ways to lessen the burden on individual homeowners. “The first step is being aware, the second is incentivizing mitigation. What can we do to make this decision that much easier for Oregonians?”

SOME CHOSE TO LEAVE

Trummell, a 60-year-old electrician, originally planned to rebuild near Lyons. He even signed up for a free service offering to clear his land of debris.

Somehow his name didn't make it onto the list and, discouraged, he began trying to clear the five-acre plot himself as he watched others helping his neighbors.

After a long day of cutting back weeds on the land where he and his wife raised their son and daughter, both now in their late 20s, he began to have second thoughts.

“We decided as a family that it was just time to move on,” he said. “It was just too overwhelming. We thought we were going to make progress, but then we were watching everyone else make progress and we felt left behind.”



Fred Trummell's home in Lyons before the Beachie Creek fire (above) and after. Courtesy/Fred Trummell

Trummell was fortunate, though. His family had another house in Sisters and he relocated there with relative ease.

He's now planning to move again about four miles outside of Sisters, where he's building a new home. It's in an area that burned in the 1990s and is relatively clear of trees – a priority for Trummell.

“We're going to keep the land clear with no landscaping near the house,” he said. “The fact that it's so open, that we're not surrounded by fuel, that was important to us.”

He plans to use similar materials as Fawcett – fire-resistant siding, windows and roofing.

Larry Tripoli and Fran Howe spent four months in a Salem hotel with their three dogs after the Beachie Creek fire destroyed their home a few miles east of Gates. They had to run down the slope from their house into the Santiam River and stayed there as the fire burned over and around them. They were rescued after 18 hours.

The couple now have a home in West Salem, with a yard for the dogs and a neighborhood filled with children.

The trauma of the fire and the prospect of living in a trailer with their menagerie while they waited for a new home proved too overwhelming, Tripoli said.

Tripoli had built the original two-story, five-bedroom home overlooking the river with Howe and his father-in-law.



Fran Howe and Larry Tripoli realized they had to run when they saw flames bursting out of their neighbor's fence. The couple and their three dogs took refuge in the Santiam River until rescuers pulled them out 18 hours later.

“My mother-in-law lived with us for the last two years of her life in that house,” he said. “She passed away in that house. Those memories just made it hard for my wife to consider rebuilding up there.”

Tripoli, 71, a semi-retired artist and performer, and Howe, 65, who will soon be retiring from a career as a nurse practitioner, hope to eventually move to a more secluded spot, similar to the house they had outside Gates.

The couple recently took a road trip through the Northern Cascades, scoping out spots for a potential relocation once they're fully retired, but it seems unlikely they'll end up there.

“We stopped in a lot of nice little mountain towns on the way and thought to ourselves, ‘Well, these towns are probably ripe for fires like we were in Gates,’” Tripoli said.

“We want to avoid as much as possible another event like what we went through.”

‘LIKE BUILDING IN A GRAVEYARD’

Around the home that Debbie Fawcett and her husband, James, built, the only tree standing anywhere near is a tall Douglas fir, half charred, that they kept as a monument to all the others they had to cut down after they were damaged in the fire.



A Douglas fir that has survived on Debbie Fawcett's property near Gates, Oregon, on Friday, July 22, 2022. Dave Killen / The Oregonian

What was once a thickly forested patch of land is now a pasture, complete with a pen full of goats chomping on grass on a recent summer day.

The couple built their previous home together in 2009. It overlooked the Santiam River and the heavily wooded property that Debbie Fawcett's father had planted decades before. The house had a living space in the basement intended for Fawcett's daughter, Abby, who has an intellectual disability, to live in as an adult.

Fawcett never considered moving. Her emotional connection to the land was too strong to consider putting down roots elsewhere. But the rebuilding process was far from easy.

Before they could begin, they needed to remove debris left behind by the fire. It had burned so hot that stumps were charred 4 feet below ground level. Last summer, a small fire ignited on the property from roots that had smoldered for nearly a year.

"It's like building in a graveyard," Fawcett said.

She was one of many Santiam Canyon residents who was under-insured. When she got an estimate to replace the house, the price was a shocking \$1.9 million. She was insured for roughly a quarter of that.

Her insurance company, State Farm, required detailed lists of the original home's contents, leading to what Fawcett described as endless hassles to provide proof of items that burned up with the paperwork.

Fawcett recently filed a lawsuit against State Farm seeking \$500,000 for emotional distress. A spokesman for State Farm declined comment, citing the pending suit, but Fawcett's lawyer said the case would likely head to mediation soon.

Then the rebuilding of the family's new 1,250-square-foot house coincided with labor shortages, supply chain issues and price spikes in lumber and other building materials.

Fawcett was able to take advantage of the grant funding included in the wildfire legislation last year. After applying with Linn County and getting a visit from an inspector, she was reimbursed for \$4,000 in materials costs because she used fire-resistant windows and siding.

"We decided to build something smaller because I didn't want to get into a ton of debt at 58," Fawcett said, noting that the couple had their daughter's future in mind throughout the build. "We had to think about what her life is going to look like with what we have. Every decision we make, we have to think about her well-being."

Fawcett is turning to the next phase.



Logs from dead trees are piled in front of a strand of trees that survived on Debbie Fawcett's property near Gates, Oregon, on Friday, July 22, 2022. Dave Killen / The Oregonian

"In the fall we'll replant some trees, but need to take care of some of the invasive species first," she said. "For the first two years, we were just in survival mode, but now we're starting to think a little more long-term."

The looming threat of fire "is all we think about now," she said.

"They said this was a 100-year event," Fawcett said, "but I don't believe them."

-- Kale Williams

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