

From: [Vanessa Houk](#)
To: [HWREC Exhibits](#)
Subject: Alameda fire report
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Dear Oregon legislators,

On September 8, 2020, an entire parade of my greatest fears became realized when our home and neighborhood burned down in the Alameda fire. I've been fire phobic since I was a child, to the point where I can't even light a match. I've spent the majority of my adult life working and volunteering around the issue of homelessness. On the morning of September 8th, my children and I fled for our lives, on foot, with no transportation, while my husband Jason was stuck in traffic, unable to reach us. Our home was in the Bear creek mobile home park, the first park to burn down in Jackson county on that fateful day.

We were eventually evacuated by law enforcement officers, but lost everything including several beloved pets. We lost every single tangible memento of our son who died in 1998, including photos and the tiny lock of curls. We lost the little blanket he was once wrapped in, the one thing that still faintly held his scent. These things felt like my own personal gravity, my balance and now I have to figure out how to exist without them.

As we were fleeing the park, homes were burning around us. We stood in a field that was smoldering, staring at a propane tank while fires burned in every direction. I revisit that in my nightmares regularly. My husband was on the other side of the street, watching the fire roar towards us. We were on speakerphone and he thought he might have to listen to us burn. We were lucky to survive. Our hearts hurt for the folks who died that day. If only the emergency alert system had been activated after our park was burning, perhaps those deaths could have been prevented.

We lost our sense of trust in the emergency system, the system that didn't send any warning telling us we were in danger. We lost our sense of trust in the fire department, especially after watching the video they released after the fire that shows them standing in the entrance of our park saying that they decided there was nothing that could be done. There was no effort to stop the fire in our park. That is extremely hard to live with.

We've lost trust in the county. There's been very little transparency in how decisions have been made and continue to be made. While Jackson county is patting themselves on the back for beginning to clean up Bear Lake park in Phoenix, there are no answers for us, our park may take another 17 months before clean up happens. The mayors of Talent and Phoenix were present when those decisions were made and they spoke on behalf of their residents. We feel like nobody was representing us. The city of Ashland doesn't consider us Ashland residents, we're county. The county doesn't seem to care at all.

Like many of our neighbors, our current housing situation is temporary and once OSF reopens in the fall, my family will be facing homelessness. We are lucky to have housing right now. Our current rent is nearly triple what we paid living in Bear creek mobile home park.

My daughters are 21 and 15. The 15 year old was starting her first day of 9th grade the morning of the fire. I interrupted the zoom class and told her we were fleeing. Before the fire she was an honors student. Now she is flunking several classes.

Two of our cats survived the fire. One was rescued by a good samaritan on Sept 9th and he was taken to a local vet where he was treated for third degree burns. His vet bill was more than \$2,500. Our 15 year old cat was found in the rubble, 5 days after the fire. Our cat Max is still missing and probably died that day. Our 2 ferrets died. We found their remains in rubble of our home. I live with the pain of knowing that I faced an impossible choice that morning when we ran out the door and left them behind. I see that in my nightmares as often as I see the propane tank.

Some of our neighbors are divorcing. One neighbor had a heart attack and died since the fire, leaving behind a 20 year old son. Many of our neighbors have already moved out of Jackson county, several out of state. They can't afford to live here. Many of the seniors who lived in our park will not be able to afford to return.

Our elderly next door neighbor wasn't evacuated. He spent 3 hours submerged in Bear creek while the park burned around him. He is blind. He was hospitalized, treated for injuries and is now living in Texas.

We've lived in Ashland for most of the last 32 years (with the exception of 4 years in Sunriver/Bend). Ashland is our home. We are looking at a nearly impossible struggle to find housing again. We hope to stay here, but we're looking everywhere. We've even (sadly) expanded our search to include out of state. In 2018 the city of Ashland recognized us with the volunteer spirit Ragland award for community service. Losing our community is unimaginable, much like the fire.

Everything I ever thought I knew for sure, has been tested since September. I don't know much of anything, but I know that we didn't see this coming and now we have to do our best to pick ourselves up again and keep going.

Please listen to our collective grief. Please know that we have to do everything we can to prevent this from happening again and we have to take better care of each other in the process.

Thank you for listening.

Vanessa Houk

Former homeowner and resident of Bear Creek mobile home park in Ashland from September 2016 to September 2020, almost exactly 4 years from the day we bought our home to the day it burned down.