

How We Experienced the Almeda Fire

On Friday, September 4th, 2020 the Creek Fire erupted in the mountains of the central Sierra Nevada near the community of Big Creek, California. By September 7th, constant winds had blown it across thousands of acres of forest that had recently been devastated by the drought and bark beetle. In that path was my brother's home, the one he built himself, milling logs from his 20-acre property, and where he raised his family. When he was able to return, he saw his house and those of his neighbors had been incinerated, leaving rivulets of molten metal from car engine blocks, debris blown yards away in what was reported to be flaming whirlwinds and a moonlike landscape where once-vigorous stands of mixed conifer and oak stood. Things burned so hot that a book, in what appeared to be perfect condition, turned to dust as my brother reached for it in wonder.

We live outside Talent, Oregon, off of Wagner Creek Road, also on 20 forested acres, and because of the Creek Fire my husband and I had been on alert for days before the Almeda Fire. In fact, as my brother's house was burning in another state, Jim was packing up what we needed to evacuate. We knew the winds were headed our way and knew what they were capable of becoming.

The next day, Tuesday, September 8th the winds began in earnest. By 11:00 a.m. I had learned—probably through a Talent Facebook group—that a fire had started in north Ashland. I told Jim, and a friend called who knew about it but assured me everything would be okay. I wasn't as optimistic.

I had a work schedule that day, and Jim kept preparing for evacuation, which now included checking around the house, watering the area in front of the house as much as possible, getting the decks and things close to the house wet too, and at some point in early afternoon we became aware that the fire had reached the edges of Talent.

I quickly finished my work and around two p.m. uploaded it to my work server. Shortly after, we got a call from the sheriff's department, a recorded message telling us to stay home and off the roads. That was the last time we heard any instruction from anyone. We then lost power, somewhere around three to four p.m. The winds had gotten even fiercer with intense gusts, and our hopes things were under control faded away; we knew we were in for it.

In the ensuing hours, we waited and continued to wander the house, wondering what to take and what to leave. The wind sounded like a freight train as it does sometimes whipping over the ridges behind us. But there were also sounds of explosions now, off to the east in the direction of town. Our house is situated at the back end of a small canyon facing due east and Talent is out of our sightline. So was the wildfire smoke, but we could tell something horrific was happening by the sounds we were hearing.

By this time we were relying on friends and family in Medford to keep us informed but there was very little news about our specific situation. Had the fire spread west of Talent and was it heading our way? Why were we not getting any kind of text alerts? We get Amber Alerts so why not something similar? That we might need to head into the forest on forest service roads to evacuate was too counterintuitive but to drive towards town to try to find out seemed wrong and could prove to be fatal.

It's fortunate our nearest neighbors are calm and collected. Perhaps it's their professions in the field of medicine that make them so. Each had been at work that day, performing long shifts. We had been in contact by text and they were able to give us some idea of what was happening. At some point in the evening (the exact time escapes me) our neighbor texted that she was home and packing her car, and that friends were texting her telling her to leave. Her partner wasn't off work until close to midnight so she was going to be ready to throw things in his car as soon as he got home and they'd leave. I told her we'd stay until her partner got home and leave when they did if that was still the plan.

By 11:00 it was decided we should go so we waited at our neighbors' house, breathing a sigh of relief when we saw her partner coming up the gravel road we share. He told us he got home by going the back roads west of Phoenix, which was now also on fire, and that at times there was fire on both sides of the roads coming into Talent. He didn't think we'd have success getting back out that way, and going through Talent was impossible so it was decided we would take the forest service roads to the parking lot of the Mt. Ashland ski area. An hour and a half later, after a long windy and dusty drive, we arrived, found an embankment to shelter from the wind, and tried to sleep.

After a fitful night I woke early, threw on a coat to protect me from the cold wind, which was still gustily blowing, and walked to the edge of the ridge near the ski lodge where I could look down into the Rogue Valley. The sight was shocking: a path of smoke and destruction, as if the valley had been strafed by a jet bomber, enormous smoke clouds billowing to the north.

From here we could text family and friends in Medford and Jacksonville who could give us an update. We were anxious to get back home. From Mt. Ashland it was obvious the fire's path went straight up I-5 and that our house in the Wagner Valley was spared. Getting home, however, took hours as traffic on the freeway was congested and Highway 99 closed, structures still burning on either side. Roadblocks were set up and congestion was everywhere. It was obvious police and emergency services were overwhelmed and fuses were short, making the situation even more chaotic. One police officer at a roadblock between Phoenix and Talent became enraged at my husband when he answered "Home" to the question "Where do you think you're going?" While I can understand his anger and frustration, he should save it for his superiors.

We've never had to contemplate evacuating our home of over 20 years but we've always been mindful of the possibilities. Shortly after purchasing this property we participated in a cost-share program to have 15 of the twenty acres treated by thinning, piling and burning. Throughout the years we've maintained the acreage around the house and have made good buffers by selectively logging trees that were then milled on site and used to build several barns. We're now about to embark on another round. A look at the surrounding forests shows we are in another cycle of die-off from drought and bark beetles. While we are heartened by the recent control burns near Talent and Ashland there is so much more to be done to help mitigate catastrophic wildfires.

The loss and grief brought by the Almeda Fire is hard to wrap our heads around sometimes, though driving through town brings it into stark focus. The outpouring of help has been exceptional but it will take years for our communities to heal. The devastating wildfire events of the past several years up and down the west coast have demonstrated we live in a time of climate change that we're unprepared to handle. Not only do taxpaying citizens deserve effective emergency services, we need a plan to tackle the changes in our ecosystems that allow catastrophic events like the wildfires of the past several years to happen. We need science-based action on state and federal levels, not a slap-in-the-face suggestion by a former federal official to get out the rake.

Sincerely,

Laura Wenzel
James Curtis