

From: [Rachel Howard](#)
To: [HWREC Exhibits](#)
Subject: Southern Oregon Wildfire Recovery Testimony
Date: Wednesday, February 17, 2021 6:46:19 AM

Dear Legislators:

I am writing to provide testimony regarding the Southern Oregon Wildfires, particularly the Almeda Fire, as I experienced it September 8, 2020. I am a resident of Medford Oregon and am a single parent with a school aged child. Throughout the day on September 8, I attempted to keep track of the fires burning around my home and be cautious, but not alarmist, as I didn't want to unnecessarily concern my child. I continued to turn on the television expecting an Emergency Broadcast should it be needed. I even told my nervous child that if anything got worse we would get those alerts with the beeps via the TV. I told her not to worry, as I expected to hear those annoying sounds should things get serious. I've been told to expect those in an emergency for 45 years. In the meantime, I checked on Facebook, news channels on my phone, television news, and went outside my home where I could see the plumes of smoke all around my home. Around 4 pm, when the smoke started getting darker and darker and Facebook streams from residents in Talent/Ashland became more urgent, I then began to pack up essentials and tried to develop a plan for evacuation. I live in North Medford near Table Rock Road. I also began calling friends who live in South Medford, who were expressing serious confusion about what was happening, where they should go, where the fires were, etc. We were all trying to come up with a viable evacuation plan. Still no clear emergency alert or instruction.

At approximately 6 pm I finally found a Facebook stream that had live streamed scanners from throughout the area. Again, in contact with friends who were in South Medford, there continued to be significant confusion and lack of clarity regarding who was needing to evacuate, how much of Medford proper was under alert, etc. It was only on the scanner, nowhere on the news or via an Emergency Broadcast, that I was able to discern where the evacuation zones were. It was also then that I was alerted via the scanner on Facebook to a fire on the greenway very close to my home at I-5 and Table Rock. I continued, with increasing fear and alarm, to want to wait for a proper evacuation or Emergency Broadcast because I didn't want to add to the confusion or panic. However, at approximately 7:50 pm I went out my front door, could see the Table Rock fire flames above the treetops near my home, and observed my whole neighborhood sitting and attempting to exit onto Beall Lane. At that time, I packed up my child and pets and attempted to leave the area. The flames could be seen from my home, traffic was at a standstill and completely crazy, my daughter is crying in terror, and I am trying to figure out how to get out of what felt like a circle of fire bearing down on my home. Please be advised that again, there was NEVER an emergency broadcast alert that came through phone/tv/radio.

After what seemed like an eternity and after taking multiple back roads in a frantic effort to avoid huge lines of traffic, I was able to get to I-5 North and headed to Grants Pass. Once in Grants Pass, I took refuge with my family in the car in the Walmart parking lot. Again, in contact with residents of South Medford via phone and attempting to get up to date information as to all the fires, none was available except a random police scanner being published on Facebook by one of the news stations.

Unable to get clarity on where or how extensive the fires were or what the true situation was, I went further north and ended up staying the night, along with hundreds of other cars, in a rest area north of Merlin. I made calls to multiple hotels throughout Northern Oregon, which was also burning up, and could find no vacancies. My poor child and pets were completely terrified and there was still no clarity. I stayed up all night trying to find information as to whether or not it was safe to return home, if I even had a home, etc. Eventually, I was able to hear that I-5 South had reopened but nothing more. I then made the decision to attempt to get to Klamath Falls, where I have family. Please be aware this is now 4 am, after having been in my car since 8 pm and having no clear information about any of the fires burning throughout the Rogue Valley. I figured I would try to at least get somewhere.

We ended up being able to get to Klamath Falls approximately 6 am on September 9, exhausted, terrified, and completely confused about whether or not we were now homeless. It was not until later in

the day on September 9th that via Facebook and news channels I was able to determine the extent of the fire, the suppression of the Table Rock fire earlier in the night of September 8, and that my home was intact and not under a Level 3 evacuation order.

My child is still traumatized by this experience of seeing flames near her home, fleeing our home in the dark of night with our belongings and pets and trying to get through traffic and find a safe place to land, and frantically searching all available avenues for clear information from public authorities. She now wants to leave the Rogue Valley because of the fires and her fear that next time we won't be lucky enough to find a random Facebook stream.

To be very clear, the handling of the fires and public information on that day in September 2020 was a complete and total disgrace and should be subject to civil and/or even criminal negligence action. There were literally NO Emergency Broadcasts, which are what we have been trained for years to rely on in a public emergency. There was no coordinated information or updated information that was clear, concise, and valid and we were at the mercy of Facebook, friends, and the delayed information being put out by the Sheriff's Department and the News. When I am being told by the Sheriff's Department to stay home until ordered to evacuate, yet I can see flames over my neighbor's roof and I can see traffic blocked for miles impeding any evacuation I could do at a later time, something is very seriously wrong. This was a complete breakdown of emergency communications in Jackson County and is highly concerning for how something similar or worse would be handled by emergency management systems in the future. Whoever is/was responsible for the community notifications and the coordination of emergency services on that day/night should be fired if they haven't been already, and again, I believe at some point civil or criminal action should be considered. Many people lost more than they could/would have should they have been given clear, coordinated information from the authorities instead of word of mouth and Facebook of all places. I believe a layer of pain and trauma beyond the pain and trauma of the losses has been added by the frantic confusion and lack of trustworthy and clear information during that terrifying time. Again, the way that was handled by emergency notification services was reprehensible.

I did not lose nearly as much as others; a night of sleep and maybe my sense of trust that emergencies would be handled well in the Rogue Valley. I am very fortunate in that regard. For the people who lost so much more, I believe that Oregon and Jackson County owes it to them to hold the authorities accountable and for the authorities to acknowledge that they did wrong rather than pointing the finger at others or deflecting accountability. This was a disaster upon a disaster and was unnecessarily so.

Thank you for taking the time to consider my written testimony.

Rachel Howard, MS, QMHP-C

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