

**From:** [Kevin Vergin](#)  
**To:** [HWREC Exhibits](#)  
**Subject:** Testimony from the Almeda fire  
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To the Oregon Legislature's House Special Committee on Wildfire Recovery:

My wife and I lost our home in the Barnum subdivision in Phoenix, Oregon during the Almeda fire on September 8, 2020. We have numerous experiences with government responses that we would like to share.

First was during the fire event. We were dismayed that there was no information issued over major media. We specifically tuned in to Jefferson Public Radio to get the latest information during the entire afternoon and the fire progress and need for evacuations were essentially ignored, leading us to believe that it was under control. We figured we would need to evacuate at some point and decided to leave when the power went out at about 4:30 PM. While we were getting in our van, a single car passed by informing us by loudspeaker that we should evacuate. I am not convinced that we would have heard the loudspeaker in the house. Our strategy was to evacuate to Jacksonville in our camper van. Leaving town via back roads, we were surprised to find them backed up and clogged. We later surmised that traffic from I-5 and highway 99, which were closed, were attempting to circumvent the closed highways and trying to find any way around the closed highways, instead of turning around and leaving the area. Much of the traffic was 18-wheelers and large RV's that should never have been allowed on these narrow roads. It ended up taking us 90 minutes to drive the 5 miles to Jacksonville. This congested traffic with no official traffic control could have been a much larger disaster.

The next day, we found out that Phoenix was still largely closed and evacuated so we relocated to a hotel in Ashland. As we drove down I-5, we noticed that people were walking into Phoenix from the closed exit. We decided to also walk in and check on our house ourselves since information was lacking. The police discouraged us from entering the area but we were able to walk to our property uninhibited where we discovered that the entire neighborhood was obliterated. We never received any direct communication that our house was destroyed and no one ever called to check on our status. We were able to start the insurance claim process because we took a few pictures and saw for ourselves that the house was destroyed. If we had waited until the evacuation was lifted, we would have been behind in that process by at least a week and a half. We were lucky to have a superb insurance agent (USAA) and had most of our claims settled before the evacuation was lifted.

Second, we feel strongly that Jackson County was misleading by advising people to wait for FEMA help with cleanup. In our opinion, the best path forward would be providing testing services to determine what hazards might exist on the property that might affect the cleanup process. We learned from our neighbors that our neighborhood was largely free of asbestos and other hazardous materials so cleanup was a little more expensive than was allotted in our insurance but nowhere near the scary figures (\$70,000) reported by the

county and the newspaper. Thus, we are now in the process of rebuilding our house (along with many of our neighbors) while some properties are untouched and may remain untouched for over a year before FEMA can attend to them. Because of the limited choices of FEMA right of entry concerning hazardous material cleanup versus full cleanup, we were a day or two late requesting hazardous material cleanup. FEMA never cleared our property. Clearly, there was some kind of disconnect between the county and FEMA and no accounting to make sure that all properties that submitted right of access forms were indeed serviced by FEMA. In any case, the first step in the cleanup process is testing for hazardous materials; why couldn't FEMA (or county and state) provide these services up front immediately so that cleanup decisions could be made with the appropriate information at hand? We feel lucky that we proceeded with testing and cleanup before rainy weather started and before the landfills were filled with massive amounts of debris resulting from this wildfire.

Third, we would like to highly praise the Phoenix planning department and city offices. We have experienced prompt response to calls and emails for information and help. Our contractor was quite surprised to see that permit fees were greatly reduced to help homeowners rebuild. We are very appreciative of this support from our city government.

It would be easy to blame the County, State, and Federal government for lapses in their response to these fires. However, we should acknowledge that throughout most of the last thirty years in the US and Oregon, there has been a constant effort to reduce taxes. These cuts have resulted in lean government staffing and agencies that are capable of doing their normal jobs but are clearly unable to respond to crises, such as the COVID-19 situation and these unprecedented wildfires. In the end, we have gotten the government that we paid for. It is unfortunate and I wish they could be more responsive but I think we are expecting too much considering what we, as a society, are apparently willing to pay for these services.

Sincerely,  
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