

From: [Mike Thor](#)
To: [HWREC Exhibits](#)
Cc: PamMarsh@oregonlegislature.gov
Subject: Almeda Wild Fire
Date: Sunday, February 21, 2021 5:09:39 PM

Dear Ms Marsh:

I was living at 107 Suncrest Road in Talent the day of the conflagration. I want to relate my experience that day.

I was going about my usual day doing dishes, taking out the trash, showering, going through my Internet news feed, and then getting ready to go take care of my beautiful backyard of 9 mature rose bushes, 3 plum trees, 2 artichokes and dozens of various other vegetables before cleaning out the cutters. A little after mid-morning, while taking a break drinking some black tea, I noticed smoke overhead through a skylight in my comforting kitchen. It drew my attention because there was so much of it. And, of course, because we were in the worse part of our lengthening fire seasons. So, I went out into my wonderful front yard of 2 mature trees, six 9' ornamental junipers, many day lilies and wildflower plots. As the smoke only became more ominous and rose higher, I stood there perplexed. I walked down Suncrest toward Clearview Street. When I arrived, there were a couple of other neighbors, who also had come out of their homes, wondering what all the smoke might mean. I had heard the fire trucks headed toward Ashland many minutes earlier and assumed there must be a horrible fire there. I shared this with those neighbors in the vein of "it's happening there and can't happen here". Having been around a couple of woodland fires when I was 13 and again at 28 in California, I knew that the fire was coming our direction. As the smoke changed from brown (vegetation) to black (buildings), it blew overhead toward Phoenix. And as the wind was intensifying, I quickly went back to my lovingly cared for home of 20 years.

Not just a little fearful after reading about the fires in California that morning, and remembering the Hornbrook-Hilt fires that spread into Oregon, I turned on JPR. There was no alert being broadcast. The local TV show didn't have a banner warning running across the screen. But, I went to pull out the valise safe with important documents and threw some clothes on the bed with my laptop. I also noticed a line of vehicles going down the street toward the intersection, but only considered it odd for what usually is a low traffic street. I looked at my cell phone. My phone remained silent until I got a call from my wife moments later. She works at SOU and the head of Campus Security had texted her that Talent was being evacuated due to the fire. She called me to let me know, even though there had yet to be any warning from police or fire services in the Autumn Ridge neighborhood. Then, as I was opening the garage door while taking out the first armful of items, my neighbor came across the side yard, telling me he had heard from his wife, who works in Central Point, that there was an evacuation order. Though he had not heard anything from any of the media connections he has as a media-marketing person, he needed a ride as he didn't have a vehicle. So, I gathered up another arm load of stuff, comprising mostly my wife's clothes, and he and I left after he put his armloads of stuff in the car. But not before, he went back to find their cat as the smoke and hot wind intensified.

We drove my loaded small Honda hatchback out to the intersection of Suncrest, Colver and old 99. Where the traffic was building up going in both directions at the time. As we waited and Sheriff's directed traffic, I was taken aback by just how many tractor-trailers were spread up and down 99. Most astonishing was just how many were Prime trucks. These bulky vehicles only added to the traffic jam, which turned the intersection into a parking lot. In

between getting to 99, my neighbor received a call that his wife - after getting around several choke points - would meet him at a location off Colver. I dropped him there and then parked at the ball fields to go back to my threatened home. By this time (2 pm?), the smoke was hot, the 30 mph winds were heating up, and the traffic jam was getting worse as all vehicles were being directed west out Colver. However, I couldn't see any fire until I got up on my roof to futilely water it down and the surrounding yard. That is until I heard the first ever announcement of "Mandatory Evacuation", coming from a loudspeaker someplace in the vicinity of the Clearview development across the street. I could see some flames by then. Except they seemed to be blowing toward I-5 and may have been jumping the freeway. But, I turned the nozzle on my garden hose on spray and tied it off to a vent. And then, got my other hose up on the roof and did the same to give coverage to the top of my home from blowing cinders. By that time, the loudspeaker order had disappeared toward the Willow Springs development, but soon was returning as the vehicle entered Autumn Ridge. The wind had been gusting to about 50 mph and I was ducked down behind a roof ridge when the vehicle passed in front of my home blaring this 1st - and only - evacuation order, an hour or more after the call from my wife.

As I hauled my 74 y/o body down off the roof, I took notice of the fire burning to the East as it flared up the side of a small hill, which sits right above the Suncrest Road overpass. I grabbed as many items as I could - like sentimental photos from the past hanging from the walls and albums - throwing them into two grocery bags and left. Not knowing I would never see any of the things I couldn't carry ever again. As helicopters flew overhead, dumping water on the Willow Springs area and I-5, I reached the intersection again. This time it was definitely a parking lot, and the Prime tractor-trailer rigs dominated the congestion. As I crossed the intersection, where brave Sheriff's Deputies and Public Works people were futilely trying to keep the traffic moving, I stopped to look back toward my neighborhood of 20 years. What I saw only added to my assessment of how hopeless the situation was. The fire had changed direction again and was tearing through a lower orchard igniting trees and blackberry bushes like Roman candles. As the fire encroached onto the backside of our local Fire station, fire personnel were rushing into the surrounding parking lot to successfully fight the fire away from the station. The fast moving fire then jumped 99 north of them and was rapidly burning West. I saw the Northeast side of Autumn Ridge's cedar fences and adjoining trees and bushes ignite. I knew that without anyone there to stop it - and I had yet to see a fire truck on our street - the neighborhood would soon be ashes. Disheartened when I arrived at my car, I called my wife to let her know I was alive - no thanks to a lack of warning - and would be coming to Ashland. If I could navigate the traffic snarls. I did not share my disheartening concerns at the time. But, watched as a huge Borate Bomber jet circled to make it's run along the North end of Talent, and another couple of helicopters dropped their water. Covering none on the 25+ lost homes in Autumn Ridge!

What I want to know - without the inadequate excuses like we just didn't know that . . . (fill-in the blank) - **WHY WEREN'T THE POWERS-THAT-BE PREPARED!?!?!?**

First and foremost, why was there no use of EMS Warning systems? If the decision was entirely Sheriff Sickler's, he should resign or be fired!?! Along with anyone else at the top who was complicit in this catastrophic FUBAR!!!!

Why was there not enough fire personnel?!? The Washington Post and/or New York Times articles said, "50 trained firefighters".

Why were there not enough fire fighting planes and helicopters?!? When Jackson Co./Medford made such a big deal a few years back to keep the airport as a regional fire support base.

Why wasn't there any pre-planning for such a fire conflagration?!? When the Hornbrook-Hilt fire almost totally burned down those towns and came over the ridge burning toward the Green Springs and Baldy Creek areas. And, when a third of the Northside of Redding and all of Paradise burned in similar circumstances of unpreparedness.

Why did ODOT let all those trucks continue going north and south along our traffic congested streets?!? Obviously, a lack of coordinated communication with EMS!

Someone needs to answer - with their jobs if need be - for the destruction of more than 3000 homes and businesses, which contained not just "stuff", but irreplaceable items. And, to answer for the trauma, on-going heartache of losses, and the infuriating aftermath of having to deal with State, County, City, FEMA and Insurance Co. confusion and breakdowns. Just to recover some portion of one's losses, while being put out of our homes for a year, or more. Or, made homeless!

AND WHY? Because our leadership at all levels failed their responsibilities to have a comprehensive SAFETY NET the community can count-on!!! Even as Jackson Co. maintains a multi-million dollar slush fund?!?