

## Testimony to the House Special Committee on Wildfire Recovery

From Nancy Tague, resident, Idleyld Park, Douglas County

Nobody from Douglas County spoke at the Feb 22 hearing, although some had been queued up but then had technical difficulties. I hope the committee members pay attention to the written testimony from Archie Creek Fire survivors, because we do have concerns and issues.

### MY STORY

My story is similar to so many others, but for each survivor, our grief and loss is unique, personal, raw, and immense. For 24 years, my friend Dianne and I lived on 20 acres, 10 miles upriver from Glide in the Susan Creek area. We lived in a paradise, a beautiful mixed-species forest with a dozen different kinds of trees, more than 130 species of native plants, dozens of wild birds and animals. We were both retired, but we worked hard on our land: gardening, bringing in firewood, improving the forest health, following every recommendation for creating defensible space around our home.

On September 8, we lost everything: our home, possessions, and land. Nothing survived the fire. Our two-story house, that we built with our own hands, collapsed lower than the foundation blocks. Every tree on our property was killed and has been salvage logged. We probably have also lost our unique and peaceful way of life, our neighbors, and friends who have moved away.

### NOTIFICATION

There was no notification to the homes on Susan Creek Road and Star Mountain Lane. This may not have been any fault of the county or of the emergency warning system. The fire happened so fast. One of the three fires which later merged into Archie Creek – the Star Mountain Fire – started right at the foot of our hill. We learned about the fire from a neighbor and evacuated about 8:45 a.m., before any notification was sent out. We drove through the fire to get off our hill. (I do not know when the fire was reported or whether there was a lag between that report and any emergency notification.)

We evacuated to Glide, and that night, we evacuated again to Roseburg. When we left Glide just before 10 p.m., no official notification had yet been received at the home where we were staying. Watching the fire, word of mouth, and social media, including information from local firefighters, made it clear that we needed to get out.

**Please do not think that you can put in place a perfect notification system which will always work.** Locally, I wish our commissioners would please stop saying the county's warning system worked so well. **Such words and thinking create a false sense of security.** What prevented loss of life on Susan Creek Road and Star Mountain Lane was neighbors warning neighbors, neighbors chainsawing trees out of the road, neighbors clearing the road of limbs from the windstorm. In Douglas County, neighbors do look out for neighbors, and that was the essential lifeline. **A well-functioning emergency warning system is imperative, but it will never replace neighbors being aware, caring, and helping one another. For government leaders, fostering that sense of neighborliness is as critical as establishing an emergency warning system.**

### HOUSING

Many Archie Creek Fire survivors aren't going to rebuild on site. There's a reason we lived where we did – the natural beauty – and it is gone. Dianne and I cannot live in that wasteland. But we want to stay in the area because this community is our community. We have been active volunteers in many community organizations and causes. We lost our home, our possessions, and our land, and we do not want to lose

our friends and our activities. But finding a place to be our new home, or even a temporary home, is proving to be very difficult. **There is almost no inventory of available housing. I don't know any way the legislature can fix that, but you should be aware of the situation.**

You should also be aware that communities become weaker when they lose residents who have been actively involved. Especially in unincorporated places like Glide and Idlewild Park, volunteer organizations and non-profits are what make it a community. **When people leave because there is no housing, these organizations lose leaders, volunteers, and donations, and the community will suffer.**

## **COMMUNICATION**

**Communication is very poor.** Archie Creek Fire survivors mostly get information from each other: word of mouth, social media, email chains. Rumors and misinformation abound. That generates frustration, anger, and cynicism.

We all have given our names and contact information multiple times – at the 9/13 meeting at Glide High School when we learned the fate of our properties, at Glide Revitalization, to FEMA. **The government by now should have a complete list of who was affected and be able to contact each one.** It's not a secret who we are!

Who knew about the legislative hearing? How were we supposed to have heard about it? I learned about it from a fellow survivor – no idea how she knew. I wish the committee could have heard from Glide Revitalization, the 501c3 trying to help Douglas County's fire survivors. I don't know whether or not they knew about the hearing.

I read in the local newspaper back in September that there was a position created within Douglas County government to coordinate fire recovery. I have never heard from that person. I have never seen anything in the newspaper about what that person is doing. It's a great idea and much needed, but that person should be in contact with every single fire survivor to find out what they need and let them know what resources are available. Survivors should not be expected to make that connection.

The communication is also poor coming from Glide Revitalization, the aid group that is supposed to be helping us. Although they have our contact information, they have not sent out any information. One example: We heard through a friend who knows a board member that group counseling was being arranged. We thought it would be very helpful to be able to share our experiences with other survivors, with the facilitation of someone trained to work with trauma and PTSD victims, so we signed up. It *was* useful – but it died after about a month from lack of participants. I don't think most of the fire survivors knew it was available.

**More thought needs to be given to ways to get important information to the survivors.** We don't have the time or energy to continually monitor websites and social media on the off chance there might be new information for us.

## **CLEANUP AND ASBESTOS TESTING**

Cleanup is a big issue right now for many people. I do appreciate that the state in conjunction with the EPA are going to be handling it. But communication around the process is very poor, and the way it is planned is causing problems. I appreciate that ODOT has a website devoted to cleanup, but not enough information is provided there. It is not clear what the process will be. All we really know is rumors and trying to read between the lines of the ODOT website and information sheets. We survivors need real information straight from those who know.

We and our neighbors thought that when Phase 1 (removing hazardous materials) was over, the next phase would be actually removing debris. Now we're hearing that asbestos testing is the first part of Phase 2. So Phase 1 didn't really completely deal with hazardous materials. And asbestos testing and waiting for results will be a slow process. People want to move forward and rebuild, but now they have to wait for asbestos.

Some people were not going to opt into Phase 2, wanting to get debris removed faster than waiting for ODOT, or not wanting to deal with the government red tape. But the asbestos issue is creating a problem with that. People do not want to have to deal with asbestos on their own. And that is as it should be. The government should make it as easy as possible for people to get asbestos dealt with, instead of creating incentives for people to ignore a potential asbestos problem.

Here's a solution: **The asbestos testing should be separated from the rest of Phase 2.** Call it Phase 1-1/2. Or call it Phase 2 and actual debris removal becomes Phase 3. That way, people can opt in to the asbestos testing, find out if they have an asbestos issue, and then decide whether they want to be part of Phase 3 or move forward on their own.

Suggestion 2: **Cleanup absolutely needs to be prioritized for those who intend to rebuild on site.** People like me who do not intend to rebuild on site are willing to wait for cleanup and let our neighbors move forward with rebuilding. We have not heard that such prioritization is happening. Does ODOT even know who is ready to rebuild and who isn't?

Latest rumor we have heard: To get Phase 2 cleanup, we have to take the Phase 1 all-clear sign posted at our property to Glide Revitalization. Even if we have already signed up for Phase 2 and completed the second right-of-entry permit. This news, of course, was heard via the grapevine. Is it true? Why is Glide Revitalization even getting involved? Why is this not on the ODOT website? Or are there different requirements here in Douglas County than elsewhere in Oregon? Why is this not being communicated directly to property owners? What if we're not living near our property now? Why do we have to traverse bad roads in winter to retrieve a sign and bring it to someone who should be able to access an online list and see which properties have been cleared? Why is this being made so complicated? **Can somebody use some common sense, cut through the red tape, and simplify this process?**

## **BUILDING MATERIALS COSTS**

The price of building materials has gone sky-high in the last few months. We have heard from several sources, including a contractor, that prices of key wood products have doubled or tripled nationwide. This is going to be a serious obstacle to rebuilding. This is going to make insurance payments inadequate to replace people's homes. Or it will slow down the process, as people wait for the prices to adjust.

Truckloads of logs are rolling out of the places that need to rebuild. Driving from Roseburg to Glide, we can count 30 log trucks in 20 minutes. But that doesn't mean that wood products are readily available or less expensive. What I have heard is that the distribution chain for building materials sends products from the mills up to Portland or Seattle, through distribution centers, then finally back to stores in Roseburg, by which time the price has increased dramatically. **Can the legislature do anything to create or encourage new supply chains for the wood products Oregon will need to rebuild, so that the products go directly from the mills to the communities that need them?**

## **INSURANCE DEADLINES**

In December, the Oregon Division of Financial Regulation announced an agreement with 25 insurance companies to extend timelines to at least two years from the date of loss for wildfire victims to rebuild

homes and replace damaged personal property. I worry that two years isn't long enough, given the delays with cleanup, difficulty in finding land for those who will not rebuild on site, shortage of contractors, shortage and high price of building materials, and probably other obstacles I haven't thought of. And what about those victims whose insurance companies are not among the 25? Mine is not. I know that in this presidentially declared disaster, the IRS allows 4 years to reinvest proceeds from insurance claims into a new home. **All insurance companies should be required to extend their timelines at least as long as the IRS.**

### **EMOTIONAL STATE OF SURVIVORS**

As many people said during the hearing, **all survivors are still struggling**, whether they admit it or not. We are tired, overwhelmed, emotionally drained. We get angry easily, cry easily. (I have often said we should have t-shirts that read: "I'm an Archie Creek Fire survivor. Look out!" Except after listening to Monday night's testimony, I realize it should read "Oregon Wildfire survivor" and it could be worn by survivors all over the state.) We have trouble remembering. We get frustrated. Our resilience is depleted. Every day we start to reach for something and stop short because we don't have it anymore. Aggravating situations that happen to everyone – lost mail, defective product, car problems – become insurmountable mountains instead of molehills. So just imagine being in that fragile emotional and mental state and trying to navigate unfamiliar insurance procedures and conflicts, right-of-entry forms, FEMA paperwork, salvage logging, lawsuit paperwork, timber taxes, the tax consequences of casualty losses, finding housing in an impossibly tight housing market, shopping for everything you once owned. **Any of that would be a challenging learning curve under the best of circumstances, and we're having to do all of it simultaneously at the worst time in our lives.**

We feel miserably alone. Only fellow survivors truly understand what we are going through. A really good day is when a friend or relative reaches out and says, "How are you doing? I was thinking about you." What a novel concept if someone from county or state government ever did that. That circles back to my comments about communication. Reaching out goes a long way. Over-communication will never be a problem.

You saw yourselves during the testimony how raw the emotions still are among fire survivors, even almost six months later. The pain and grief from the loss and the trauma is still intense. And yet we continually encounter and have to deal with people in government and even aid groups who do not seem to have any compassion, who put obstacles and red tape in our way, who make things more difficult instead of easier. **Everybody working with us should be asking themselves, "How can I make things easier?"** What am I doing that is just a regular part of my job but will be confusing and challenging to a fire survivor? How can I eliminate obstacles, hoops, red tape? How can I remove one worry or difficulty from a survivor's life today?"

### **THE KIND OF OBSTACLES GOVERNMENT SHOULDN'T BE CREATING FOR US**

– or –

#### **AN EXAMPLE OF HOW GOVERNMENT COULD HAVE DONE SOMETHING GOOD FOR THE FIRE SURVIVORS BUT MISSED THE OPPORTUNITY**

Property tax notices came out in October. We understood that there wasn't time to reassess all the properties yet, so when our tax bill was as big as if our home still existed, we paid the minimum amount. Here comes February, and a second tax bill shows up. Not a word from the county. I called the assessor's office: they were done reassessing and had sent the information to the tax office. I called the tax office: they were waiting for the assessor's office. No you aren't, I just talked to them. Oh, wait, yes, we're working on it but we're not done yet. Call us closer to the due date. I wrote to one of the county commissioners, the one who was just quoted in the paper as really caring about customer service and

always wanting to say “Yes, we can do that.” I suggested that the county should tell all fire survivors that they don’t owe any more taxes until the tax office gets the accounts revised. I got no response. A couple days before the due date, I called the tax office again. Our account wasn’t changed yet. She couldn’t tell me if there would be a penalty if we didn’t pay. So we paid. We’re still waiting to hear that the taxes have been adjusted. How long till we get refunds? There were 109 properties affected in this county, and there were 107 work days between the fire and the due date of that second payment. If they did only one a day, they could have been almost done. If somebody thought about what fire survivors are going through, they would have waived payments until the adjustments were completed.

### **PLEASE PAY ATTENTION TO DOUGLAS COUNTY**

I don’t think any elected official in Salem or Washington D.C. has shown any concern about Douglas County and the devastation that happened here. At least, it hasn’t made the local news. I feel like we are poor step-children. It’s true that fewer people were affected in the Archie Creek Fire. But as Commissioner Freeman said so well, every individual who lost everything is equal. People were affected, not numbers. When your whole life has been destroyed, that eclipses everything.

Also, the devastation to the North Umpqua River corridor was tremendous. Fire intensity maps show a larger area of extreme and high intensity in the Archie Creek fire than in any of the other Oregon fires. The devastation to the scenic river corridor affects everyone who lives here, not just the people who lost their homes.

**We in Douglas County would like to think that our elected representatives care about us, but it’s not showing.**

### **TECHNICAL ISSUES WITH LISTENING TO THE HEARING**

I was tuned into the legislative hearing from beginning to end, but listening was very difficult. 1/3 to 1/2 of the time my internet connection was buffering, so I missed a lot of it. I don’t know how unique my situation is, but it can’t be that unusual in rural parts of the state. (I am currently staying in Roseburg, in a home with supposedly good internet service.) **The legislature’s IT support should think about how to minimize bandwidth for these situations.** For example, does it increase bandwidth to have so many legislators with their video on? What if only the current speaker was on video? I will be talking to my internet provider, but some work needs to be done on the legislature’s side as well.

### **THANK YOU**

Thank you for soliciting and listening to the stories and concerns of Oregon’s fire survivors. Nothing anyone can do will ever replace our loss or remove our grief, but it’s possible to smooth the road ahead of us and remove some obstacles. **We look forward to hearing that you have used your knowledge, connections, and influence to make a difference for us.**

Nancy Tague