

STATE OF OREGON AFTER-ACTION REVIEW OF THE SEPTEMBER 2020 WILDLAND FIRES AND WIND EVENT

Executive Summary

This after-action review (AAR) focuses on efforts by the State of Oregon to respond to widespread wildfires during September 2020 that were ignited due to critically hot, dry, and windy conditions. Oregon's firefighters worked tirelessly to save lives, protect critical infrastructure, public and private property, and contain the wildfires. The Governor of the State of Oregon, the Oregon Department of Forestry (ODF), and the Office of the State Fire Marshal (OSFM) took action to respond to the wildfires and mitigate the loss of life and property. The Emergency Coordination Center (ECC) and the state Joint Information Center (JIC) expanded operations to support the fire response.

The extraordinary scope and destruction of the September 2020 wildfires must be underscored – within 24 hours, 12 counties were battling conflagrations. The wildfire encroachment on rural and urban communities, causing one-sixth of Oregon's population to be under evacuation notice, is unprecedented. By the end of the response phase, nine Oregonians had tragically lost their lives, and over one million acres of public and private land burned. Recovery efforts will be on-going for many years. The AAR identifies areas of success and opportunities for improvement for Oregon to take proactive action in helping the state better prepare and respond to future wildfire events.

Methodology

The information collected for this report was derived from individuals and organizations that were identified as stakeholders through OEM, OSFM, ODF, and the State Resilience Officer. Local and tribal firefighter stakeholders were excluded from this review, as this is an evaluation of systems and coordination effectiveness, not an evaluation of firefighting decisions and actions. The information was gathered through online surveys, and interviews held virtually either one-on-one or in small groups. Documentation related to the response and initial recovery operations for this event was reviewed, including situation reports, after-action reports, articles, incident action plans, executive orders, and other documentation.

Preparedness

The primary state agencies for firefighting, outlined in Emergency Support Function 4 (ESF 4) of Oregon's Emergency Operations Plan, are ODF and OSFM. ODF is charged with the protection of approximately 16 million acres, including state and county forest land, private timber land, wildland areas within organized fire protection districts. As incidents grow beyond the capacity of local and expanded mutual aid partnerships, OSFM engages resources for fire response in support of state, federal, and local wildland, rural, and urban firefighting agencies.

Preparation for the 2020 Wildland Fire season occurred concurrently with the ongoing COVID-19 response. OSFM and ODF worked on developing COVID plans for Fire Camps. The 2020 Mobilization Readiness Review Guide outlined COVID-19 safety for safely mobilizing resources during the COVID-19 pandemic. Significant effort was required to modify the standard pre-season firefighter training process to address COVID-related risks, a process that is typically very hands-on and involves substantial interpersonal interaction.

Through the enterprise-wide response to COVID, there were processes and relationships built and fine-tuned that were instrumental to the wildfire response. COVID-19 support activities were active as fire season approached, so partners were already in disaster mode, and there was no "warm-up" period needed for the wildfires. Combined with strengthened connections, clear roles, and deference to expertise, this allowed for a more effective overall response to this unprecedented event.

Response

The 2020 fire season was well underway in August 2020. On August 20, 2020, a statewide State of Emergency was declared due to the imminent threat of wildfire. Within 24 hours of the arrival of strong winds on September 7, 2020, 12 counties were battling conflagrations. ODF and OSFM leveraged state, regional, and national firefighting resources to protect life and property, and the state ECC and the state JIC activated to support coordination of the expanded response efforts across the state.

From the dozens of fires that started or were exacerbated throughout the wind event, five grew to more than 100,000 acres. Many fires threatened or crossed the wildland-urban interface, placing over 500,000 Oregonians under some level of evacuation notice. At one point, the American Red Cross almost 2,000 survivors in congregate shelters and 2,210 people housed in hotel rooms. Hundreds of people were originally reported missing, and tragically, there were nine confirmed fatalities.

A Presidentially-declared Major Disaster Declaration was granted on September 15, 2020. With the help of multiple federal government agencies, forest landowners, contractors, and many volunteer-based agencies, Oregon was able to contain the fires – after more than 1 million acres burned – and move fully into the recovery phase.

Findings

The federal National Response Framework defines 31 core capabilities that in general must be accomplished in incident response. Observations on Oregon’s wildfire response efforts can be organized into these core capabilities: Planning, Public Information and Warning, Operational Coordination, Fire Management and Suppression, Mass Search and Rescue Operations, Fatality Management Services, Infrastructure Systems, Mass Care Services, Operational Communications, and Recovery.

Areas of Success

Planning	Firefighting Response Planned for and Practiced —ODF and OSFM supported and augmented district firefighting resources using all available options. Conflagration declarations authorized engagement of expanded resource options from across state agencies as well as national and international assets.
Public Information and Warning	NWS Warning —Early identification of the wind threat, assessment of the potential amplification of fire risk, and communication to state and local partners enabled the local and state emergency management systems to lean into the response. State JIC Activation —State JIC operations began within 24 hours of incident onset using existing OEM staff. A practice of regular communication and coordination with the Governor’s Office and key stakeholders was established.
Operational Coordination	Federal Partner Integration —The Oregon FIT, FEMA Region X, DHS CISA, and other federal resources were proactive and integrated very well. The FEMA presence was critically important in assisting with declaration requests, which brought in resources and funding and facilitating the transition from response and recovery. Improved Relationships and ECC Role Knowledge —ECC operations were more coordinated and effective when compared to the COVID-19 response. Liaisons from OEM — The deployment of state liaisons to affected counties is very positively received.
Fire Management and Suppression	COVID-19 Safety —Pre-incident planning for Fire Camps embraced best practices to protect first responders from COVID-19 and resulted in zero Fire Camp outbreaks. Response Leadership —ODF and OSFM have a strong, well-coordinated team. They excel at communication and coordination between their agencies, with state agency leadership, and among teams. They prioritize strong coordination with communities by integrating local government into incident management teams.

Areas of Success

Mass Search and Rescue Operations	<p>Federal Search and Rescue Teams—The skills and capabilities brought by the US&R team provided great support to state response. In addition to search support, damage assessments and reports development were extremely valuable.</p> <p>Strong County Search and Rescue System—Oregon’s County Search and Rescue (SAR) system seamlessly engaged with FEMA’s US&R team.</p>
Fatality Management Services	<p>Mobile Morgue Deployment—This was the first deployment of the mobile morgue in a real-life incident; it has been an asset of the Medical Examiner’s Office since 2014.</p>
Infrastructure Systems	<p>Lifeline Reporting—The Lifeline Reporting format helped to identify at-risk power lines that were at risk from the fires and allowed the infrastructure specialists to work with stakeholders for load balancing in Oregon that mitigated downstream/down state power impacts.</p> <p>Integration of EMAC Resources—Critical Infrastructure/Key Resources (CIKR) resources from the State of Washington and the US Coast Guard were integrated into the Infrastructure Branch allowing the CIKR lead and the Infrastructure Branch to focus on analytical work for CIKR priorities.</p>
Mass Care Services	<p>Mass Care Partnerships—The American Red Cross, Salvation Army, and other non-governmental organizations stepped up to handle a significant part of mass care operations, including sheltering, feeding, and donations, and volunteer management. The Red Cross, in particular, carried a heavy load supporting sheltering across the state.</p>
Operational Communications	<p>Critical Infrastructure Monitoring—The Infrastructure Branch monitored a great diversity in state assets, including public safety communications towers, cellular towers, water systems, wastewater systems, and power infrastructure.</p>
Recovery	<p>Speedy Declarations—FEMA provided strong support and helped get the declarations turned around in three to five days.</p> <p>State Recovery Plan Operationalized—The Recovery Coordinator leveraged EMAC to bring in planners focused on recovery planning. Their work transitioned the recovery plan to an integrated recovery action plan.</p> <p>State Agency Support to Recovery Operations—State agencies provided high-level experts to lead recovery support functions.</p>

Areas of Improvement

Planning	<p>ICS/ESF Integration—Many people staffing ESF positions are rarely activated to support ECC operations, therefore struggle to integrate into the NIMS-ICS structure and the planning process. They may have had the training but have never really engaged in a structured planning process.</p> <p>Coordination vs. Operations—When local and tribal jurisdictions are overwhelmed by an incident, there are too many demands to articulate what help is needed. The state must be organized and trained to take on more of the burden of executing response activities. The current posture is insufficient to manage statewide incidents.</p>
Public Information and Warning	<p>Notification System Failures—Community alert and warning systems are a locally controlled service. To work, all phone and text systems rely on communication towers to be intact and powered. Some communication towers were lost to fire, rendering some systems inoperable.</p> <p>Lead Agency Incorporation into the JIC—State JIC operations were successful in sharing and amplifying accurate and timely information to communities threatened by or affected by the fires. However, ODF communications staff were not folded into the state JIC, echoing the JIC disconnect between OHA communications and the state JIC from the early COVID-19 response.</p> <p>Outreach Equity—While greatly improved, the ability for incident outreach to support the most vulnerable needs additional work.</p>
Operational Coordination	<p>Staffing Shortfalls—OEM cannot fully staff needed ICS positions in the ECC during the initial stages of activation. This leaves the response at a disadvantage in the first hours and potentially the first days of response.</p> <p>Ops Center Limitations—Many people staffing the ECC describe OPS Center as inadequate for disaster response in a statewide emergency. The system does not have an inventory of resources, which makes it very difficult and time-consuming for locals when requesting assistance. It does not have collaboration tools, which are invaluable in the COVID environment, which has maximized virtual support and engagement.</p>
Fire Management and Suppression	<p>Take Action on Wildfire Council Recommendations—Oregon has experience decades of increasing wildfire incidents and associated suppression costs. Investment is needed to help Oregon to create fire-adapted communities, restore and maintain resilient landscapes, and respond safely and effectively to wildfire.</p>

Areas of Improvement

Fatality Management Services	Family Assistance Center —There is concern about the capacity for a family assistance center to meet the equity, faith, and cultural consideration needs of disaster survivors.
Infrastructure Systems	<p>Limited Training and Maintenance on Strategic Technology Reserve—Equipment in the Strategic Technology Reserve trailers is not trained on with any regularity, especially with more rural community partners. When leveraged in this response, most of the equipment was not in a ready state, with software requiring updates before deployment.</p> <p>Public Safety Power Shut-offs—Public Safety Power Shut-offs (PSPS) are a vital part of wildfire prevention and suppression. More knowledge is needed on how to request and execute shut-offs to maintain power for critical community infrastructure systems like public safety communications systems, traffic lights, water and wastewater systems, and healthcare facilities.</p>
Mass Care Services	<p>DHS Ownership of Mass Care Function—Staffing gaps at DHS, including a vacancy in the state Mass Care Lead role, created a gap in disaster response-related institutional knowledge and challenges connecting with mass care operational partners with subject matter expertise.</p> <p>Over-reliance on Non-Governmental Organizations— There is an over-reliance on the American Red Cross and other non-governmental organizations to execute the full mass care mission.</p> <p>Linkage with ESF 12 for Eligibility Validation—During the wildfire, replacing SNAP benefits became a large part of the mass care mission. ESF 6 needed detailed, specific power outage information from ESF 12 to determine an individual's eligibility for SNAP replacement. There is not a streamlined method for gathering and providing this information.</p>
Operational Communications	<p>Unified Information Sharing with Locals— The speed and unpredictability of wildfires create operational communication challenges. Still, the horizontal and vertical coordination of communications during response could be improved. Local emergency managers learned information from their senior and elected officials rather than the ECC. Local emergency managers felt their credibility suffered when officials asked about details they were unfamiliar with.</p> <p>Trusting Local Input—Several localities shared frustrations about state-level entities not trusting local input. For example, one road closure eliminated an evacuation route on a non-fire threatened road. The 'on-the-ground' information was dismissed rather than being trusted and used to support decision-making.</p>

Areas of Improvement

Recovery	<p>Damage Assessment— There is no common tool for damage assessment across disciplines. It was also discovered that the calculation of damage did not sufficiently capture the needs of people suffering non-structure-related wildfire losses, such as timber or crops. Oregonians facing those types of losses were unable to access relief offered through federal emergency funds.</p> <p>Deliberate Planning and Training—This was the first time the State Recovery Plan was used, and there was a significant learning curve for all involved. The facilitation of the enterprise recovery operation is being managed by two people, which is not sufficient for statewide implementation.</p>
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Opportunities and Recommendations

The State of Oregon’s wildfire response revealed opportunities and recommendations for the state to pursue further. These include:

- **Coordination vs. Operations.** The state should establish a workgroup to outline what a shift from the coordination posture to an operations posture requires.
- **Outreach Equity.** JIC equity planning should continue to build on improvements realized through the COVID-19 and wildfire responses of 2020. This includes assessing outreach successes and failures, then working to fill identified gaps.
- **Notification System Failures.** There is strong support for the state having a role in local and tribal notifications; home rule authorities are raised as concerns. Exploration of state-supported systems, lower-tech options, and no-tech options should also be explored.
- **Lead Agency Incorporation into the JIC.** Examine how recent state JIC activations have not succeeded in folding in Lead Agency personnel. Identify the roadblocks to effective collaboration and support of Lead Agencies.
- **Outreach Equity.** Explore options for adding public information specialists with additional language skills or how to embed other language speakers into the JIC to be present as messaging is developed. Develop specific plans for communications with vulnerable communities.
- **Staffing Shortfalls.** OEM staffing should be expanded to provide capacity for full operational support. Expansion of the liaison concept can provide better support to local and tribal communities.
- **Ops Center Limitations.** Engage state, tribal, and local stakeholders to define requirements for an effective information management system, then compare the desired requirements against Ops Center’s capabilities.

- **Take Action on Wildfire Council Recommendations.** Proceed to implement the recommendations established by the Governor’s Council of Wildfire Response.
- **Integration of EMAC Resources.** Consider pre-scripting Critical Infrastructure/Key Resources staffing resource requests for EMAC fulfillment.
- **Lifeline Reporting Integration.** Commit to evaluating existing reporting formats used by ESF agencies (i.e., situation reports, situation status reports, lifeline reporting, etc.) during ECC operations. A decision should be made about where reports link into the daily planning cycle and how/when each should be leveraged during response operations.
- **Limited Training and Maintenance on Strategic Technology Reserve.** A training and maintenance schedule should be developed to ensure these communications tools are immediately deployable to field personnel trained in putting the equipment to use.
- **Public Safety Power Shut-offs.** Educate ECC staff and decision-makers on the nature and role that PSPSs serve.
- **Over-reliance on Non-Governmental Organizations.** The state should provide leadership and facilitate an examination of mass care capacity across Oregon. This review needs to engage local and tribal partners, local, state, and national NGO partners, as well as state agencies with mass care responsibilities.
- **Critical Infrastructure Monitoring.** Consider developing a cadre of GIS experts to scale up staffing during large incidents to support visual communication. Identify and train GIS staff from other state agencies to support ECC operations.
- **Trusting Local Input.** Identify opportunities and mechanisms for quick collaboration to validate the local reality.
- **State Recovery Plan Operationalized.** Encourage deploying staff through EMAC to assist other states in implementing recovery strategies. These experiences will broaden and deepen recovery knowledge, which will benefit Oregon’s recovery from the next large event.
- **Damage Assessment.** The state should establish a common tool for damage assessment. There are technology tools and services that facilitate the unified collection of damage assessment data at the level needed to prepare declaration requests.
- **Deliberate Recovery Planning and Training.** Capture the challenges and adjustments that have been (and will be) identified in the wildfire recovery effort and refine the plan to be more effective and efficient in future events. Share the lessons learned with communities across the state to help them establish a localized recovery framework.