

Hello,

First and foremost, I would like to thank the State Legislature for holding a Wildfire Recovery meeting on February 15th, where survivors of fires could express their concerns and frustrations and offer suggestions for improvement. I hope the state will continue to hold these meetings and take feedback given to heart.

I am writing to help provide further feedback specific to survivors of the Beachie Creek fires and those living in the Santiam Canyon area, particularly the Gates and North Fork roads. My late grandfather lived on the North Fork road and was a victim of said fire in 2020, losing his home. I have three areas of concern I would like to bring to the state's attention:

1) Poor cellular and internet coverage in the Gates and North Fork area is hampering the recovery process. Even before the fires, cellular and internet coverage in the area was spotty at best. How are people supposed to navigate online resources without coverage? How are people supposed to keep in contact with neighbors, contractors, or county officials without decent coverage? How could they even attend virtual meetings such as the one held on Tuesday, if they have no reliable way to get online? It completely shuts them out of the process.

2) Poor road conditions also serve as a major obstacle in rebuilding. Gates Hill Road and North Fork Road were consistently troubled roads before the fires, in part due to excessive logging, but with the fires wiping out much of the vegetation and burn scars leaving the area even more prone to landslides than before, it is imperative that the state allocate emergency disaster fund relief to counties so that roads can be rebuilt and rebuilt to last.

3) I strongly encourage the State Legislature to create a universal window of a minimum of four years for victims of fire disasters to submit residence rebuilding paperwork and permits, regardless of county or insurance. Some deadlines for getting rebuild permits approved—like the two year one given by Marion County—are simply not enough time. Firstly, cleanup of an area can take months—assuming anyone can even access their property due to damaged roads! Secondly, many people are still navigating uncooperative insurance companies to secure funding. Third, counties are overwhelmed with the amount of permits and paperwork, and may be lacking in manpower, causing delays in approval that are in no way the fault of the fire victims. Lastly, some properties, due to size and location, are easy to rebuild on. Others, like my grandfather's property, are small and located near a river, adding complications regarding water and septic permits that take extra time to work through. There are so many factors that can eat up time, giving two years to secure approved permits and paperwork is completely unreasonable, especially when you consider the impact of COVID-19, and that many of the victims being elderly or low-income. The State Legislature should move quickly to mandate more time to submit fire rebuild paperwork for ALL counties, to make rebuilding more equitable for everyone.

Thank You,
Erin Schlepner