

2020 Labor Day wildfires, Wednesday 16 Sept 2020

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Part 1: Prelude to disaster.

Sunday September 6th, the National Weather Service predicted red-flag conditions for Labor Day week with high temperatures, low humidity and strong east winds from the Pacific Crest thru the Willamette Valley. Dry east winds are normal in winter, but those are cold winds. Not hot, dry east winds in September after a dry summer. The forecast discussion stated a “once in a century” event.

Monday morning, Labor Day, I watched fires starting up all over Eastern Washington on the satellite map, driven by weather that was soon to make those predicted winds. The farm was calm, but that was about to change.

As 2020 would have it, one of our water pumps stopped working. I was not going into a red-flag week with a water pump out. Lauren and I went into Salem to pick up supplies and a new pump. Smoke from the Eastern Washington fires was pouring out of the foothills on our way back late that afternoon. We were in smoky haze when we got home. Moreover, the east wind started to pick up.

I didn't know at the time, but that hot, dry wind was roaring down the North Santiam River. The Beachie Creek fire in the Opal Creek Wilderness and the Lionshead fire in the Mt. Jefferson Wilderness were now racing down the river canyon towards the Willamette Valley and into the western foothills of the Cascades, consuming hundreds-- thousands-- of acres every minute. This September 13 situation briefing is an instructive—and terrifying-- summary of what happened that day on the North Santiam:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5f9mwblRWjk>

I worked on the pump while the wind blew my tools and equipment around. I checked the satellite map after replacing the pump and saw that the fires on the Santiam were about 30 miles to the southeast and heading our way. To the northeast, another fire had started on the Clackamas River and was growing. Lauren prepped the trailers, getting them hitched and loaded with supplies. I started moving anything flammable away from the house and barns. We both packed "go" bags.

Since we didn't have capacity to haul every heartbeat, Lauren wrote up the "God" list. The list that determines which hearts go, and which hearts stay.

Lauren woke me up late Monday night and we could see spots of orange glowing on the horizon. I thought it was the Beachie Creek Fire in the distance, but we could see quick, bright flares suggesting tree torching nearby. The satellite map showed a new hot spot in the foothills, and close. We didn't get much sleep that night.

Part 2: The dreadful day.

A smoke cloud filling the southern horizon ominously greeted us on a sunny, breezy, warm and dry Tuesday morning.



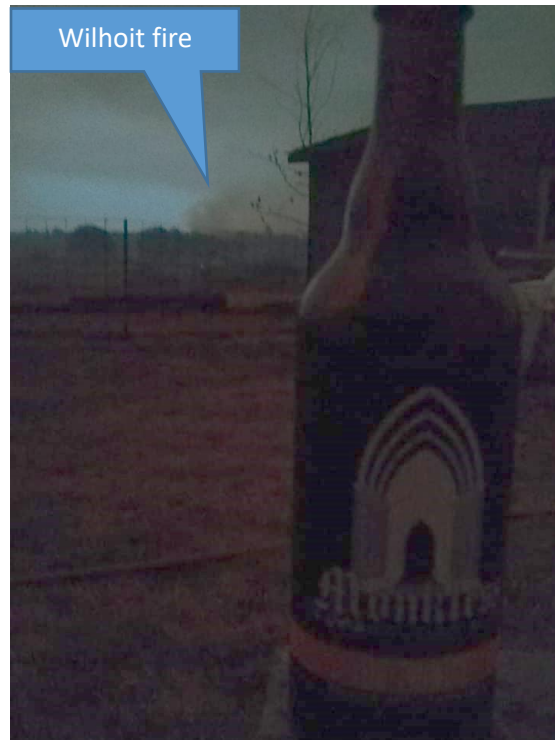
Smoke was drifting up from the Wilhoit fire we had seen overnight, less than five miles from the farm. On the satellite map, there was a new fire at the RSG lumber mill west of Molalla, another on Unger Road east of Molalla, and many other starts throughout the region. The Beachie Creek and Lionhead fires had joined, and the Riverside fire on the Clackamas was moving toward the Molalla River drainage. The smoke cloud was getting bigger and closer.

Lauren and Jewel Hintz (one of the folks who helps on the farm) hurried up chores and I finished packing the rigs and removing flammables. Jewel called in other friends to help. I called Canby fairgrounds for evacuation space.

Power went out during chores and the generator kicked in. The smoke cloud boiled up and over us. We could feel heat in the smoke. Reverse 911 evacuation orders came over the cell phones. I pulled the rigs forward. Lauren brought out the "God" list.

Now the day before, Lauren had talked to some folks from California who had purchased a goat from us and were coming to pick it up. She told them about the fires, but they said they would come anyway. At least it would be one less goat to worry about. Just as we were starting to load up, they pulled up our driveway with a big stock trailer. They immediately offered their rig to help us get to Canby. Between our two rigs and theirs, and with the help of a small army of friends, we crammed everyone, literally with no room to spare-- goats, dogs, cats and humans-- into the rigs and left the farm. The "God" list went unused. For the first time in 25 years, there were no domestic hearts on the farm.

We drove in convoy to the fairgrounds and got everybody into pens. Once all were settled, I got a ride back to the farm to firewatch and pick up my car that had been left behind. It was all of my courage to go back under that curtain of smoke. And even harder to be alone on the farm, keeping a dull, dreadful, terrifying watch. The Beachie Creek fire had engulfed the region in dark smoke and I needed a flashlight to move about. But there was a break in the sky to the east, and I could see the Wilhoit fire hadn't advanced much from that morning.



I found out later that many of my neighbors in the foothills, knowing that firefighters were overwhelmed, pulled together dozers, water tenders, and whatever other equipment they could muster. They took a stand against the Wilhoit fire and got it checked. The same thing was happening with determined people all over the county:

<https://canbyfirst.com/all-volunteer-redneck-crew-credited-with-saving-molalla-neighborhood/>

I finished securing all I could at the farm, and drove back to the fairgrounds. We waited out the smoky, ashy, unsettled night.

Part 3: Flight and refuge.

Wednesday morning, we awoke to a dark dawn with an eerie orange glow on the northern horizon. Both Riverside and Beachie Creek fires were advancing and more evacuation orders were being issued. We couldn't stay, and we needed more help even if we had to disperse the herd. Lauren started calling.

We immediately got response from friends as far away as Moses Lake and LaGrande. The folks from California, who had stayed overnight at the fairgrounds with us because I5 was closed at Medford, loaded up their rig with some of the kids and breeding bucks and they headed south. Lauren's brother in Vancouver came down and picked up the mature bucks. Our friends from Moses Lake arrived with two big rigs, and we and another herd from Molalla loaded all our rigs and headed east. The other Molalla herd headed to Moses Lake. We headed to LaGrande with all the milkers, most of the drys, and all the cats and dogs.

We arrived at Rovey's Grande Ronde Dairy late Wednesday night. We were exhausted, but it was so wonderful to be out from under the dreadful smoke. Unfortunately, it caught up with us in a few days. Even though we're safe, it's unsettling to be surrounded by the aerial wreckage of so many burned things.



We're back to something resembling normal after a few days of rest and recovery. The Roveys are keeping us safe and fed. The goats have their own pens and are chowing down fine Eastern Oregon hay. Our 45 milkers are a drop in the bucket to our host's 1000, but the girls are contributing to a bulk tank.

I'm remote working again. Lauren was interviewed by the Capital Press:

https://www.capitalpress.com/ag_sectors/livestock/goat-herd-moved-300-miles-to-escape-fires/article_a1363f04-f6de-11ea-bf41-a7a93c38d41d.html

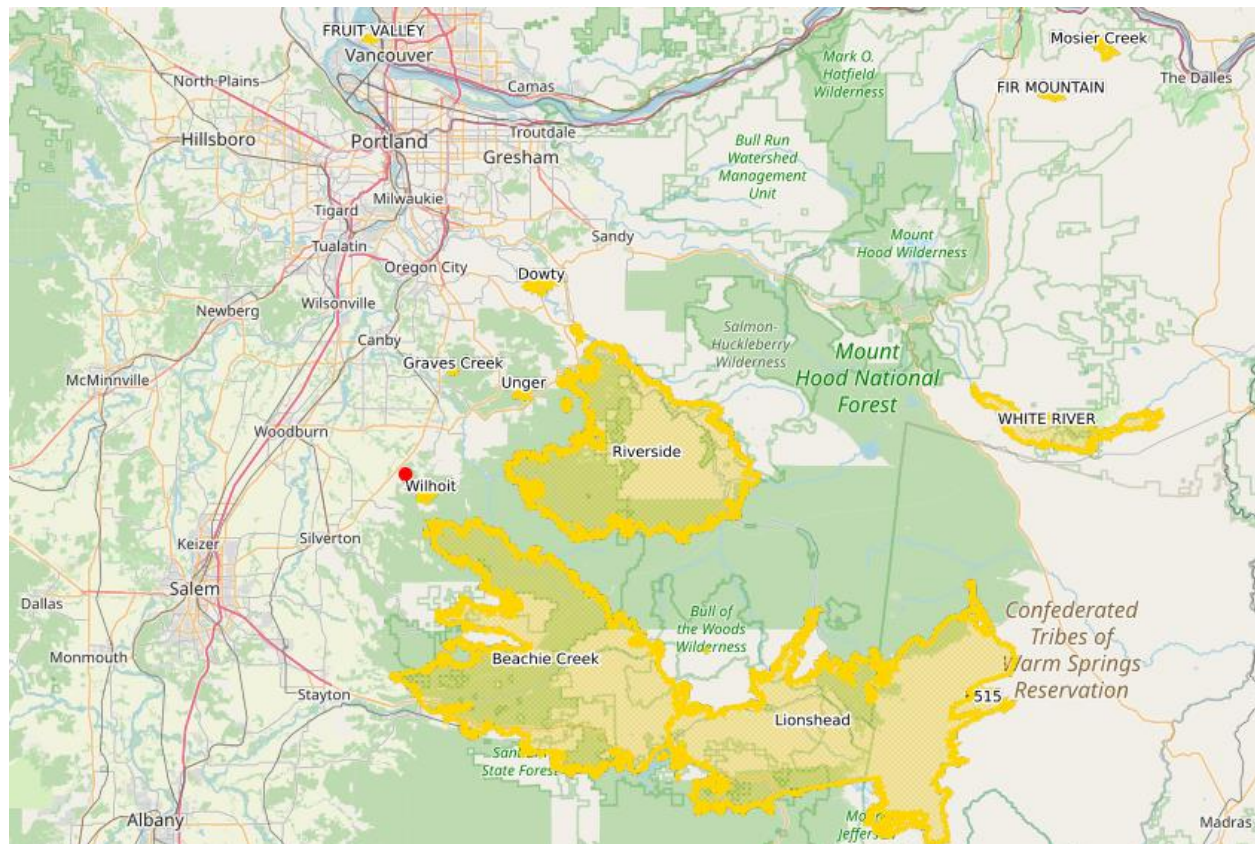
Had we waited even a day, it might have been a frantic struggle to get out as the town of Molalla was ordered to evacuate Thursday, and Canby was nearly ordered to evacuate as the fires raged closer. Fortunately, the winds died down; the weather cooled and became more humid over the weekend. Firefighters were able to start containing the fires. The Molalla evacuation order was lifted.

Power was restored yesterday, and neighbors have been looking out for the farm. Other than smoke and ash and expected disasters in the freezers, refrigerators and bulk tank, the farm is undamaged and intact. Evacuation orders are still up and the air quality is terrible. But Wilhoit is fully contained, Beachie Creek and Riverside are getting contained. I'm hopeful evacuation orders will be reduced and air quality will be better in a few days. Then we'll return home.

So many people helped us to safety, battled fires that surely would have overwhelmed us, made a place of refuge for us, watched over our farm, and made it ready for us to return. They willingly spent their time, their treasure, even putting their lives at risk for our sake. We are fortunate, and grateful beyond measure.

We are among the lucky ones. Others were not nearly so fortunate. The destruction is mind numbing. So many lives, so much property and timber -- gone. So many special places -- gone.

All we can do is go home, and continue.



Saturday, September 19.

Part 4: Return.

Home. I drove up and onto our hill late Friday afternoon into rain-washed sky, breathing in sweet, clean air, our farm intact. Never has home been more beautiful and welcoming.



I put the goats, dogs and cats away, and sat down on the porch with a pint from the growler my neighbor rescued from the refrigerator disaster. I looked over to where the Wilhoit had been burning a week ago, saw only clouds, and wept.



As hoped, the weather change gave fire crews opportunity to strengthen fire lines, and the evacuation order for the farm was lowered late Wednesday, though the air quality was still horrid. But the weather service predicted rain and lightning for Thursday night. Thunderstorms started popping up in the south, first travelling north over the west valley. Then with growing intensity, the whole valley and cascade foothills soon filled with torrential rain, hail and nearly continuous lightning. I watched yet another “unprecedented” weather event from afar on the satellite map as our place got pummeled and drenched, and the hot spots on the fire map winked out.

The next day we loaded up the small trailer with 12 dry does, all the cats and the three guardian dogs, and I headed for home. The plan was I’d check everything out when I got there and get the place ready for Lauren to come home with the milkers, hopefully by Sunday. Fortunately, things are in great shape, if smoky and dirty. Our friends and farmworkers had started cleaning things up and putting things back together. That (and I think the picture of clear sky and clean air) gave Lauren the green light to bring the girls home on Saturday, 10 days after arriving at our Grande Ronde refuge.

We still have more kids to bring back from LaGrande, bucks from Vancouver, and all the ones in California. But milk is going back into our bulk tank, ready for Portland Creamery to clean up and start making the finest chevre in the Northwest again.

And even though they are being contained, the fires still burn. They won’t be out until winter rains cool them, and snow finally smothers them.

Life continues.



Postscript: Wildfire in the Pacific Northwest

Wildfires are part of the Pacific Northwest, and have been for thousands of years. But wildfires of this severity and magnitude? What could have caused over a million acres to go up in smoke in less than a week?

Global warming? Nope. Though the evidence over the last few decades is clear. Not only are the Pacific Northwest forests warming up, the Pacific Northwest forests are drying out. And there's good consensus that these two factors have increased wildfire frequency and severity over the decades. But there's ample evidence of megafires before anthropogenic global warming. Yacolt, Tillamook, Bandon, and even larger ones from prehistoric evidence since the end of the last ice age.

Mismanaged forests? Nope. Though there's also ample evidence that decades of fire suppression, disease and poor timber harvest practices have made our forests much more susceptible to large wildfires. Just like global warming, we're paying the piper for decades of mismanagement with increased wildfire frequency and severity. But the Labor Day fires ripped merrily thru old growth, overgrowth, thinned, clearcut, 2nd cut, Nth cut, national forest, state forest, BLM, DNR, timber company, and private land alike.

Human/Forest interface? Nope. Though this has increased, and with it the number of human-caused fire starts of all kinds, including arson, abandoned campfires, fireworks, out of control burns and structure fires, sparks from equipment, live power lines and so on. It was a significant—a very significant contributor, but not the cause.

Kate Brown? Please. You might as well blame the Republican legislators who walked out before voting on a bill to improve forest management and firefighting resources. Disagree or despise her, but blaming her for this is wrong in so many ways.

Republican legislators? Please. You might as well blame Kate Brown who pushed a climate change bill that was unworkable for rural Oregon. Disagree or despise them, but blaming them for this is wrong in so many ways.

Arson? Nope. Yes, there were arson starts—most notably the tragic Alameda Drive fire that burned out the towns of Phoenix and Talent. And there have been other arrests of people setting spot fires thruout. But fire brings out pyromania. There's ample examples of this happening when wildfires rage. And it terrorizes an already terrifying situation. But most arson in this case were a result of the fires. Not the cause.

Antifa? Please. Every single county sheriff from Multnomah to Jackson has been pleading for people to stop spreading these toxic rumors. Yes, every fire start is being investigated and even the FBI is in on it. So far there is zero credible evidence. Disagree or despise them, but blaming them for this is wrong in so many ways.

Proud Boys? Please. Stop.

So what was the cause? What was the one thing, that if it had not happened, this disaster would not have occurred?

It was the wind.

The hot, dry powerful east wind roaring over the cascade crest and downslope into the foothill river canyons. The wind desiccated fuels that were already brittle from a long, dry summer. The wind caused existing fires to jump out of their traces, consuming everything ahead of them. The wind downed live power lines, sparking new fires. The wind whipped slumbering lightning starts and abandoned campfires into conflagrations. The wind blew burning embers miles and miles ahead of the flame front, leapfrogging the fires into catastrophe.

PGE shut off power up the Sandy/Zigzag/Salmon canyons up to and including Government Camp. The wind was just as intense there as in the Santiam, but there were no existing fires, and powerlines that were knocked down didn't start any new ones. There were no major fires up the Sandy/Zigzag/Salmon.

And many of the small starts; Wilhoit, Unger, RSG lumber, the incident command post at Gates, and many, many others were certainly or probably either flying embers or downed live powerlines caused by the high winds.

Hot, dry, state-wide downsloping east winds at the end of the dry season are very rare in Oregon. You have to go back to the 1970's to find something that's even close. But they do happen. The Oregonian published an excellent article about this. And even though they're rare, these wind-driven megafires have happened in the past, and they will happen in the future:

<https://www.oregonlive.com/news/2020/09/oregons-historic-wildfires-the-unprecedented-was-predictable.html>

We live in a place with existential dangers. These dangers have been here for centuries. Wind-driven megafire is only one of them. With absolute certainty, there will be another Cascadia megaquake. It will make the destruction of these wildfires pale by comparison.

I wish I could wave a magic wand and fix the toxic politics that's preventing us from dealing with the complexity and reality of wildfires. Or megaquakes. Or Covid-19. Or [insert crisis here]. I'm dismayed that this tragedy has only hardened stances from both "liberal" (wakeup to global warming!) and "conservative" (log or burn!) positions, when in fact the cause was neither.

That's really our problem. Not megafires or megaquakes or pandemics, but our inability to understand and deal with them. We will need to deal with global warming, mismanaged forests, human/forest interface—or they will deal with us. But we so want to be in control. We so want to preserve what we have. Or have it changed back to the way it was. Or have it changed into the way we want it to be. We so want to be right and the other wrong. We hang on so tightly.

The wind doesn't care. The wind cannot be stopped.

The wind will come again. And the land will burn.

For now, I put all that aside. After going thru the wringer of this tragedy, I mostly feel tired. Realizing we escaped what could have been far worse, and recognizing many others did not.

I look out over the field and watch goats eating hay out of the manger, the old guard dog relaxing beside them, the leaves on the trees starting to show their autumn colors. It was so different a week ago. Therefore, I soak up this moment, and feel its healing surround this wounded heart.

Life continues.

