



Oregon Forest
Resources Institute

IMPACTS of Oregon's 2017 WILDFIRE SEASON

In the summer of 2017, Oregonians woke up and smelled the smoke.

Wildfires encroached on the daily lives of our state's 4 million people, as hazardous smoke drifted into small communities and major metropolitan areas alike. Breathing became difficult and caused many school sporting events, as well as outdoor concerts and performances, to be canceled. Restaurants, retailers and other businesses lost revenue. Highways closed. Workers took long detours to get to their jobs, or stayed home. More than 7,600 people were evacuated from their homes due to fire danger.

Air quality and health

Wildfire smoke, a mix of particulate matter and gases, can irritate the eyes, nose, throat and respiratory system, and can be inhaled into the deepest part of the lungs, according to the Oregon Health Authority.

At high levels, it's dangerous even for healthy people, but it is especially dangerous for those with chronic health conditions, people older than 65, infants, children and pregnant women.

During the 2017 fire season, most of Oregon experienced hazardous levels of smoke, including **160 days that were considered Unhealthy for Sensitive Groups** (USG), compared to none of those days in 2016 and fewer than half that many at the USG level in 2015. (See graph, far right)

This led to a variety of impacts, including:

Increased emergency room visits – 86 percent higher than expected in the first week of September, according to the Oregon Health Authority.

Cancellations of high school sporting events. Oregon high schools canceled dozens of football and soccer contests from August through October – more than four times as many as were canceled in 2016 and 2015.



Travel, tourism and employment

According to the most recent figures, Oregon's tourism industry employs about 110,000 people and generates \$11.3 billion in economic impact for the state. In 2017, wildfires hit the industry with blazing force. Heavy smoke kept away tourists and the money they would spend in Oregon. According to the Oregon Employment Department, hundreds of tourism workers received early layoff notices.

Among the high-profile impacts due to smoke were:



Photo: Inciweb

The Oregon Shakespeare Festival in Ashland canceled nine performances in 2017, a direct loss of \$373,000. About 85 percent of its audience is composed of tourists. In an average year, the festival adds about \$130 million to the local economy. After the fires, it announced that it will trim 12 positions from its 2018 budget.

The Sisters Folk Festival was canceled. This annual community festival attracts 5,000 visitors and generates \$1.2 million. Proceeds would have benefited local arts education programs.

Cycle Oregon canceled its annual ride, a premier cycling event for the state. The ride travels through different parts of rural Oregon each year, amounting to \$450,000 spent in local communities.

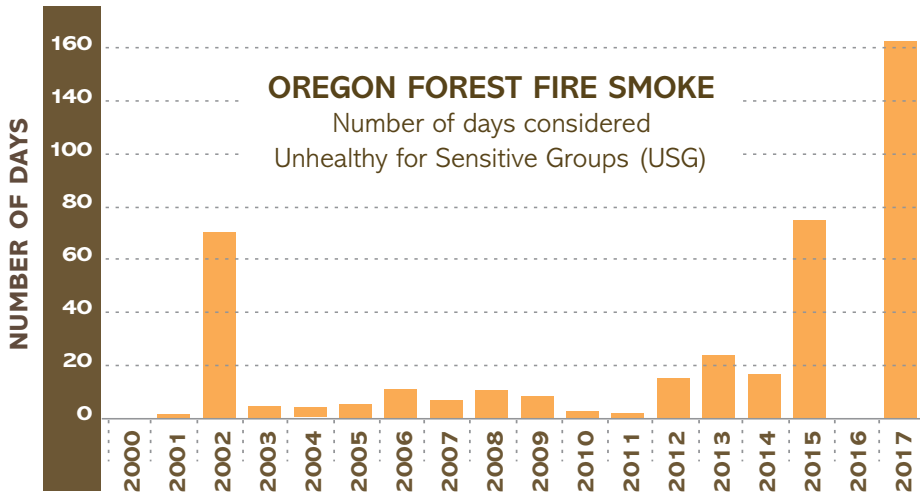


Photo: Multnomah County Communications

Transportation

For nearly three weeks, all **drivers were detoured off their usual route** across Interstate 84 when the highway was closed from Hood River to Troutdale because of fire danger. This translated to long detours for commuters and trucking companies, causing a clear economic hit.

About 20 percent of the 28,000 vehicles that travel the highway each day are freight trucks delivering goods, according to the Oregon Department of Transportation. Longer travel distances meant extra time and cost.

In central Oregon, U.S. Highway 20 experienced traffic congestion. In the Brookings area, Highway 101 was closed off and on during the fire season, affecting 18,000 vehicles a day.

Statistics gathered by the Oregon State Fire Marshal's office through mid-September:

- 19,978 structures threatened**
- 10 residences lost**
- 20 structures lost**
- 7,641 people evacuated due to these major fires:**
 - Milli and Nena Springs (central Oregon)
 - Chetco Bar (southwestern Oregon)
 - Eagle Creek (Columbia River Gorge)

Rural and social impacts

The fires also impacted other areas of community life, including:

Oregon's timber industry and its workers faced **temporary mill shutdowns**, reduced log supply, restrictions on logging because of dry conditions, and losses of heavy equipment and timber due to fire.

Limits on recreational opportunities, with popular outdoor attractions and wilderness areas remaining closed because of fire damage.

A drain on the resources of nonprofit organizations that provided support for Oregonians displaced from their homes by fires.

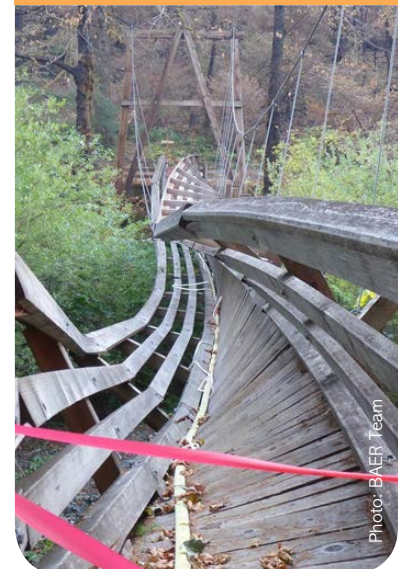


Photo: BAER Team



Photo: Inciweb



Photo: Andy Lyon

How do we move forward?

Wildfires caused by lightning and people ravaged Oregon's forests and rangelands in 2017, and the impact on Oregon life was far-reaching.

It's clear that, with **665,000 acres burned in 2017**, the state lost timber that supports the wood products industry, as well as other forest benefits such as outdoor recreation, beautiful scenery, wildlife habitat and healthy watersheds.

It's also obvious that fires are costly in terms of suppression efforts. During the peak of the 2017 fire season in Oregon, some 8,000 firefighters were working to put out wildfires across the state. In total, it cost \$454 million to fight all those fires.

Yet the costs of fire don't stop there. The blazes and the smoky air they produced also took a toll on people's health, and on their ability to safely spend time outside. Event cancellations, highway closures and residential evacuations affected the economy, including significant losses to tourism, trucking and recipients of goods, among other industries.

These losses reverberate with nonprofits, education and other important threads in the fabric of our communities. Tourism industry officials wonder how wildfires will affect travelers not just this year, but in the long term if tourists opt to go somewhere else.

Oregon is not alone in suffering worsening fire seasons. In the western United States, the length of the average fire season has grown by 78 days since 1970, from five months to more than seven months. The questions loom: Is this the new normal? What economic and human effects did Oregon experience in 2017, and what similar impacts will wildfires have going forward?

This all begs one more important question: Where do we go from here?



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