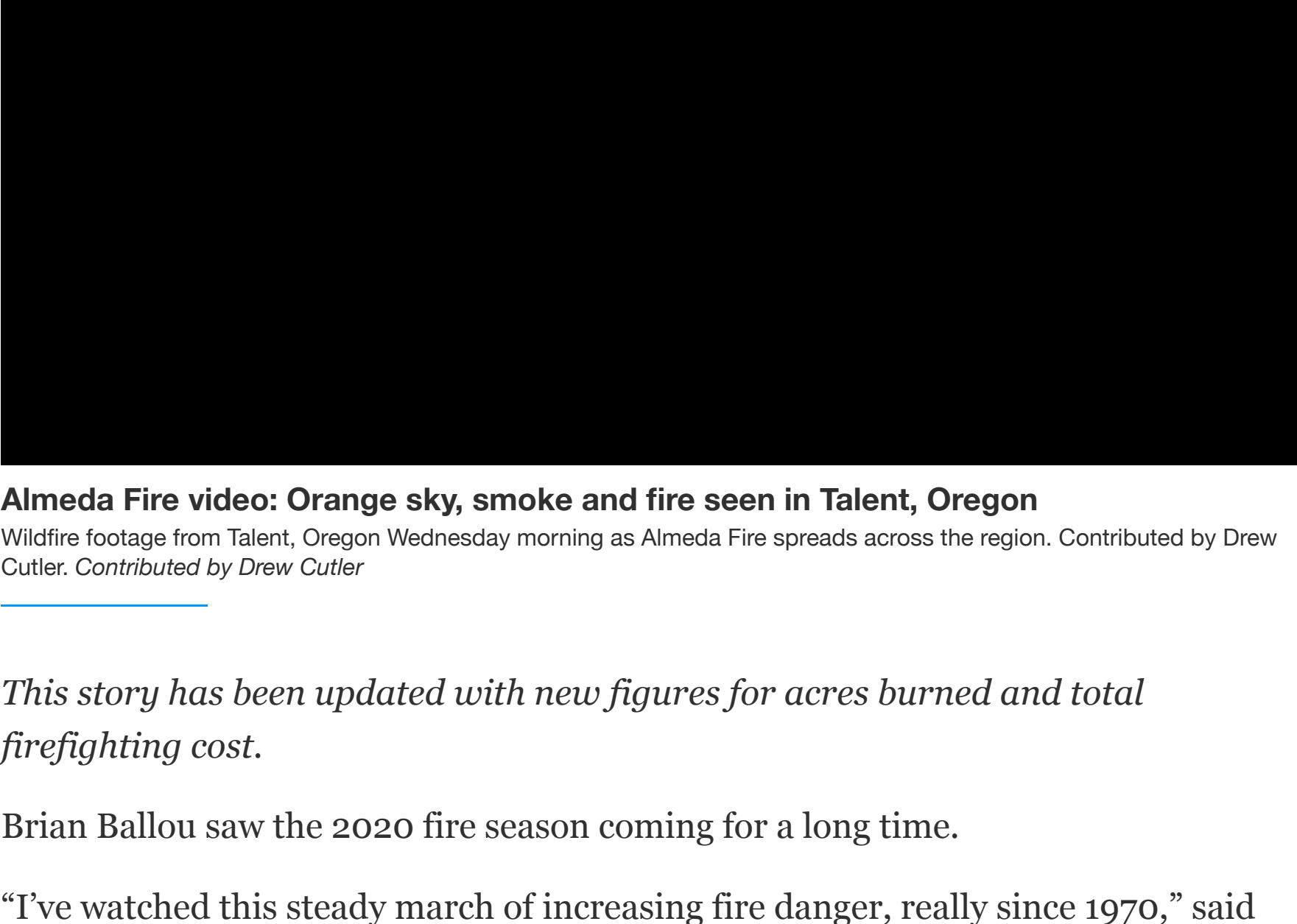
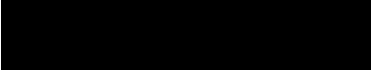


NEWS

Oregon's 2020 wildfire season brought a new level of destruction. It could be just the beginning

Zach Urness Salem Statesman Journal
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Almeda Fire video: Orange sky, smoke and fire seen in Talent, Oregon
Wildfire footage from Talent, Oregon Wednesday morning as Almeda Fire spreads across the region. Contributed by Drew Cutler. Contributed by Drew Cutler

This story has been updated with new figures for acres burned and total firefighting cost.

Brian Ballou saw the 2020 fire season coming for a long time.

“I’ve watched this steady march of increasing fire danger, really since 1970,” said Ballou, a longtime firefighter and retired information officer for the Oregon Department of Forestry. “We were keenly aware of what was happening just to the south, with towns like Paradise getting wiped off the map. We knew it was only a matter of time before it happened here.”

Labor Day 2020 was that moment. Severe drought, extreme winds and multiple ignitions fueled the most destructive wildfires in state history.

Roughly 1.07 million acres burned during the 2020 season, the second-most on record. The cost to fight the fires was also high — \$354 million.

But most striking was the number of homes lost.

From 2015 to 2019, which included some major wildfire years, Oregon lost a combined 93 homes, according to the Northwest Interagency Coordination Center.

This year, 4,009 homes burned down.

Homes destroyed by wildfire

2020: 4,009

2019: 2

2018: 14

2017: 16

2016: 1

2015: 60

Whether ignited by downed power lines or arson, or the explosive spread of active wildfires, flames ripped through a stunning number of Oregon towns from Sept. 7 to 9. From the Santiam Canyon to Southern Oregon, the Oregon Coast to the Clackamas River, the damage was widespread across the state's west side.

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In the past, Oregon's largest wildfires stayed mostly in remote forest or grassland. In 2012, for example, 1.2 million acres burned in Oregon — the most in state history. But the large number was fueled by giant grass fires in remote parts of the state where few people live.

This year, fires roared into towns or ignited nearby, whipped up on high winds and bone-dry fuels that left little time for defense.



The Archie Creek Fire throws up a major smoke column northeast of Roseburg on Sept. 11, 2020. US Forest Service

Ballou said the only apt historical analogy for this year's fires came 80 years ago. In 1936, a wildfire fueled by high east winds roared into the South Coast town of Bandon, destroying the town and killing 10 people.

“It’s not like the winds we saw on Sept. 7 and 8 were unprecedented — they’ve occurred a number of times in our history and they’re going to come again,” Ballou said.

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A 2020 or 1936 style disaster typically requires a handful of ingredients: dry fuels, extended drought, extreme winds and ignition sources. And the problem, Ballou said, is that the ingredients for that perfect storm are happening more often.

“Unfortunately, we’re probably looking at the future,” he said. “Until we take meaningful action, this is going to keep happening.”

(Story continues below)

Rising occurrence of giant wildfires

Terrible wildfires are nothing new in Oregon's history, whether it's the Bandon example or the Tillamook Burns of 1933 to 1951.

The largest wildfires in state history are actually believed to have taken place in the 1800s. The Silverton Fire of 1865 is listed as Oregon's largest at 988,000 acres. A number of other fires apparently reached 400,000 to 800,000 acres in those early days, though accurate mapping is questionable.

The era of giant fires started coming to an end with the creation of the Forest Service and Oregon Department of Forestry, which brought almost a century of aggressive suppression.

But putting out every fire led to a buildup of fuels in the forest that, combined with rising temperatures, led to the return of megafires in Oregon beginning with the 2002 Biscuit (500,000 acres) in Southern Oregon and B&B Complex (90,000 acres) on Santiam Pass.

Explore Oregon Podcast: [The day Silver Falls State Park almost burned in the Labor Day fires](#)

In this Aug. 17, 2002, file photo, a Sikorsky 61 helicopter prepares to refuel in Agness, Ore., as a column of smoke rises from the Biscuit Fire. John Gress / Associated Press

“It was a wake-up call,” Oregon State University forestry professor John Bailey told the Statesman Journal in 2019. “It was that ‘ah-ha’ moment, showing us that past management policies and climate change would make these types of fires more common.”

That's exactly how it has worked out.

In the decade before Biscuit and B&B — from 1992 to 2001 — Oregon wildfires burned an average of 198,000 acres per year, according to the NWCC. In the years between 2002 and 2017, that number jumped to an average of 433,541 acres burned each year.

From 2012 to 2020, the average jumps to 650,000 acres burned per year.

And the fires have become increasingly dangerous. While Oregon was sparsely populated back in the 1800s, the situation has changed, with Oregon's fast-growing population pushing into the wildland urban interface.

(Story continues below)

Oregon had a number of very close calls in the past five years. The Chetco Bar Fire in 2017 came within a few miles and a shift in the weather of burning into Brookings, with a population of almost 8,000 people. The Eagle Creek Fire, also in 2017, trapped 150 hikers and shut down I-84 while threatening Cascade Locks.

Numerous large fires ignited and burned for weeks in Southern Oregon in 2018, but with a big wind event, it could have been far worse.

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In other words, the ingredients for a 2020-style blowup have been around numerous times in recent years. And there's a good chance they will return in Augusts and Septembers to come.

“If we keep doing what we’re doing, we’re going to keep seeing big fires and the possibility of more small Oregon towns being heavily damaged,” Ballou said.

“There are a lot of places in Oregon that wouldn’t take long for a wildfire to simply erase from the map.”

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