Too Little, Too Late: Rural Fire Protection in Lane County
Volunteer Firefighters Increasingly Important

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When Shaun Phay picked up a garden hose and started fighting the fire that was burning his neighbor’s home, he thought it would only be a half hour before the fire department arrived to take over. He was wrong.

“A lot us were unaware that the fire department would not respond at all,” Phay said. “We figured it was going to be a delayed response.”

The house at 37673 Row River Road in Dorena eventually burned to the ground. The resident who lived there fought the blaze with the help of an estimated 20 other area residents. The tools they had were inadequate for the task: garden hoses, wet towels to put over their heads, and a rotating team to direct traffic.

Phay noticed the fire at about 4 p.m. on Valentine’s Day. Although he and the others knew that the home was unsalvageable, they hosed down fence lines and adjacent structures to keep the fire from spreading. Phay was especially concerned when the roof of his garage began smoking from the heat of his neighbor’s fire.

“It was up to the neighborhood and whatever hoses we could muster to try and keep this thing from spreading,” Phay said. “You’re pretty much on your own out here.”

John Wooten, Fire Chief of South Lane County Fire and Rescue, said that his team originally responded when they thought a life was in danger. But once it was confirmed that the resident had safely escaped, he had firefighters retreat because the fire was 10 miles outside of the fire district boundary.

“I feel bad for some of these people in these areas because they don’t realize when they call 911, there is a chance that the fire department is not coming because its out of a protected area,” Wooten said.

According to Wooten, there are approximately 10,000 unprotected structures in Lane County. Joe Raade, Fire/ EMS Training Division Chief for South Lane County Fire and Protection, said that it is especially a problem for residents near Cottage Grove. “If you’re not in anybody’s fire district, your house burns,” Raade said. “That’s a reality here in the Cottage Grove area probably four to five times a year.”

In addition to municipal fire departments, rural fire protection districts cover a large portion of Oregon. Out of the 177 fire districts in Oregon, 44 of them are primarily rural. In Lane County alone, there are 70 fire departments – 19 of which are predominantly rural and volunteer based. Most rural fire protection departments have small paid staffs and rely on volunteers to protect the lives and property of rural landowners.
“We would not be able to provide the level of service we do without the volunteers,” Terry Ney, Chief of Lane Fire Authority, said. “They receive the same training and same certifications that our career personnel do.”

Ney would know. Lane Fire Authority – a combination of Lane Rural Fire/Rescue and Lane County Fire District #1, is dependent on its volunteers. The majority of the staff is made up of volunteers with only 28 career personnel and 90-100 volunteers. Out of its 14 operating stations, only three stations have career personnel. And out of those 28 career staffers, only half are firefighters, the rest paramedics. Volunteers are vital in the effort to protect the residents of the 276 square mile fire district west of Eugene.

But not everyone is in a fire district.

Special fire districts are different from municipal fire departments. A special fire district is typically rural, and is funded by property taxes and additional tax levies. But unlike municipal fire departments, rural fire district budgets are not included in the county or city budget. That means they don’t need to compete for funding with public libraries, police departments, or other public services. On the flip side, if a person lives in an area that did not vote to pay taxes for fire protection, their home is outside of a fire district. This means that when they call 911, no one will come to save their burning home.

This does not include ambulance calls because the state mandates that ambulances must protect all areas of Oregon. Unfortunately if a life is not in danger, a fire department will not respond. That is exactly what happened to the residents of Dorena.

Areas outside of the fire district are technically covered by the Oregon Department of Forestry. But they will only respond if the fire is threatening multiple homes in a wild land fire. Rod Nichols, Public Information Officer for the Department of Forestry, said that houses in forested areas drastically changes the tactics used to fight forest fires.

“Oregon has grown in population and there has been a steady push out into forested areas,” Nichols said. “Our firefighters now have to be constantly aware of developments within the forest or adjacent to the forest.”

Additionally, the Department of Forestry charges a surcharge of $47.50 to help cover the extra expenses of firefighting when homes are threatened by wildfire. Even with this extra funding, there is little chance that the Department of Forestry will be able to save a home, as its primary mission is to fight wild land fires.

This is where the importance of rural fire districts and its volunteers comes back in.

Division Chief Raade said that one of the largest challenges is finding people who are willing to volunteer. “There is less time for people to volunteer now than there used to be,” Raade said. “Employers don’t allow you to walk away from your real job anymore like they used to.”
According to Raade, there are two types of volunteers: “There are those who are doing it because they are interested in doing it as a career, and there are others who doing it because they have careers and this is more of a hobby or a way to give back to their community.”

Stanton Nelson is the second type of volunteer.

Nelson was a volunteer firefighter for 27 years, almost 20 more years than the average volunteer. Nelson was driving one day when he saw the Goshen fire station. He thought, “That’s one of the prettiest fire engines I think I’ve ever seen,” and he asked if they needed volunteers.

Nelson started as a volunteer firefighter and later became an EMT and the Assistant Fire Chief for the Goshen Rural Fire Protection District. He did this while maintaining a job at a local TV station.

“It was kind of a challenge to stay motivated over that 30 years,” Nelson said. “But it was fun, I enjoyed doing what I was doing.”

For Nelson, serving the public was important. “It gives you a real sense of worth when you realize you’ve helped somebody in their time of need,” Nelson said. “It was worth the effort.”

But even for those inside a fire protection district, there is no guarantee that a home can be saved. If there is one person who knows the devastation of fire, it is Crystal McGill.

McGill and her boyfriend were sleeping in on Sunday, April 10, 2011. She awoke to popping sounds, which her boyfriend dismissed as the chickens on the back porch. After she was startled awake a second time, she heard the sound of breaking glass. Bolting out of bed, she ran into the hallway.

“I saw a big orange glow emanating into the living room from the kitchen,” McGill said.

Trying to remain calm, she searched for a phone to call 911.

“I called the dogs out to follow me but I never made sure that they were actually following me,” McGill said.

After making it safely outside, McGill and her boyfriend realized that their three dogs were still inside. McGill’s boyfriend attempted to go back into the house three separate times, while the flames rapidly engulfed the home.

“I was watching the smoke come out of the door and it was getting heavier and darker and deeper,” McGill said.

After breaking a bedroom window in a final attempt to save their animals, McGill stopped her boyfriend. “I finally said, ‘You have to stop, the house is going to explode,’” McGill said. “And he turned around and said, ‘there is nothing left to burn or blow up,’ and I said, ‘We have gas lines.’”
At that moment, their bed next to the window went up in flames. The fire department arrived shortly after.

“That’s where we had to step back and watch the process of our house burning down with our dogs inside,” McGill said.

Although McGill was in too much shock to appreciate the firefighters arrival, later she felt blessed that more than 20 career and volunteer firefighters responded from various districts.

“It would have been even more of a loss if we didn’t have the help from the fire department,” McGill.

Even though McGill and her boyfriend lost their house and all of their possessions, she said that the hardest part was losing their animals.

“I was thankful that they were able to get the fire out enough where we still had our dogs’ bodies to bury,” McGill said. “That would have made it a lot worse emotionally.”

Unfortunately, the resident of the Dorena fire also lost his home and dog.

When Phay learned that the fire department wasn’t coming, he felt frustrated, angry and scared. “You feel like they are letting you down at that point,” Phay said.

Chief Wooten said that because of the location of the home, they would have had zero impact even if they had responded. “Those fires double in size about every sixty seconds,” Wooten said. “It takes us 30 minutes to get there.”

“People just need to understand if they want that protection, it’s not free,” Wooten said. “They have to pay for it.”

For McGill, she said the worst part of this experience was not being able to save her animals. “We had each other and we had to be positive about it,” McGill said. “Yes we had drastic, traumatic loss, but we are going to be ok after this.”

McGill offered some advice for those outside of a fire district: always be prepared and have an evacuation plan. “It may never happen to you – we obviously didn’t think it was going to happen to us,” McGill said. “Always try to prepare yourself.”