

ROAD TO RECOVERY: A 'can do' spirit emerges as Santiam Canyon residents face rebuilding

salemreporter.com/posts/2954/road-to-recovery-a-can-do-spirit-emerges-as-santiam-canyon-residents-face-rebuilding



Free SPECIAL REPORT

Homeowners and business operators throughout the Santiam Canyon are assessing the damage and options for the future. Rebuilding will be a long, tough process as specialists plot a path forward for the national forest.

By Rachel Alexander, Saphara Harrell and Jake Thomas - Salem Reporter

September 24, 2020 at 7:27am

[NOTE: This report is being provided free as a community service of Salem Reporter. Support such work with your subscription.]

Jeff Chipman saw the U.S. flag through the smoke blanketing Detroit's business core.

Untouched by wildfire, it hung from a pole outside the Lodge at Detroit Lake, itself half destroyed.

[Salem's local news - subscribe today]

Chipman was surprised the flag wasn't burned. On the same street, fire had leveled two restaurants, a grocery and a church.

He reeled down the flag, rescuing what he considered a symbol of strength and resilience.

The people of Detroit and the Santiam Canyon will need both for what's ahead.

From Mehama to Idanha and beyond, approximately 500 homes are gone and others so damaged by smoke they may be uninhabitable. The fire was destructive in remote communities such as Elkhorn and Breitenbush. In Detroit, the city's water system may need to be replaced.

Government buildings, the Gates post office and Detroit city hall among them, are gone.

And the destruction to the forest itself has yet to be measured. The Willamette National Forest, a prime source of wood for sawmills, manages most of the ground covered by the Beachie Creek and Lionshead Fires. Combined, the two fires covered nearly 400,000 acres, though recent aerial photos show a mosaic of torched and untouched Douglas firs.

While property owners, government officials and insurance adjusters begin to calculate the losses, which will be in the millions, the scale is clear. The Santiam Canyon has never suffered such a calamity and uncertainty hangs over the roughly 10,000 people who live there.

Some question whether they will return.

Edward Bowman, who long ago retired from a state highway job, doesn't know if the Detroit home he's lived in for 45 years will be usable because of heavy smoke damage. At 81, he doesn't think he can rebuild.

The owners of Cedars Restaurant and Lounge, advertising it as the "Best Place by a Dam Site" and one of the oldest businesses in Detroit, haven't publicly said what they will do but the city's mayor said he understands they probably aren't coming back.

Others are more resolute.

Elaine DeGeorge, who has owned the Lodge at Detroit Lake for 12 years, sees opportunity for the community amid the smoke and ashes. She wants to join in that rebirth.

“We’re ready to rebuild,” DeGeorge said.



A view from a drone on Tuesday, Sept. 22, shows the damage in downtown Detroit. Wildfire continues to burn in forest across Detroit Lake. (Oregon Department of Transportation photo)

History tied to the forest

The Santiam Canyon has long endured dramatic twists in fortunes.

For millennia, native peoples from both sides of the Cascades called the canyon home. In the mid-1800s, trappers and miners arrived, making their own claims to the land.

Turning the towering Douglas firs into lumber required mills, men and machines. Starting in the late 1800s, the Hammond Lumber Company established logging camps along the Santiam, using rail spurs up side canyons to lug out logs.

Other entrepreneurs put up mills and towns formed around them – Mehama, Lyons, and Gates.

The largest settlement was Mill City, formed in 1887 when a group of Stayton businessmen opened the Santiam Lumbering Company, expecting to sell timber to the newly constructed Oregon Pacific Railroad. There had been ambitions the railroad would punch its way up and over the Cascade summit, becoming part of a transcontinental rail system, a dream never fulfilled.

Instead, the Mill City lumber operation went bust, bought out by the Hammond Lumber Company, which became the major business in town and built a store, hotel and other amenities. Then, during the Great Depression, Hammond quit the canyon, closing all its operations in 1935 in a devastating development for the community.

A decade later another major change came to the canyon when the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers started work to dam the North Santiam River in two places. The Detroit and Big Cliff Dams were installed to protect farms 50 miles away in the Willamette Valley from flooding.

But to do that required putting the original town of Detroit at the bottom of what would become Detroit Lake. The Corps advised the townspeople to clear out. Any remaining buildings would be burned.

The Hammond Lumber Company had kept its holdings in the canyon and in 1950 platted the new Detroit with 300 lots and new streets.

When Detroit was incorporated two years later, Hammond sold 67 lots for a total of \$42,800. Residents of old Detroit bought 45 and the rest went to recent arrivals looking for their own lakeside retreat or hoping to cash in on the expected tourism boom, according to Bob Reinhardt, a Boise State University history professor who authored the book “Struggle on the North Santiam.”

Some residents moved their homes up to the new town. The Cedars Restaurant, established three years earlier, was dragged on sleds to a new location in the heart of the new city.

Elsewhere in the canyon, the small towns continued to thrive off the surrounding forest, populated by those who went into the woods each day to cut trees and those who went to the mills to turn massive logs into 2x4s and other lumber. The industry expanded in the 1940s to meet the demand for post-World War II housing.

New businesses emerged to serve the workers and the visitors drawn by the lake.

Gene Coles, now 92, arrived in Mehama in 1948, right out of high school and lured by the prospect of a job. He opened a butcher shop in the town’s main store, featuring 365 freezer lockers to store customers’ meat.

When that store burned, he moved across the highway to open Gene’s Meat Market. The market served locals but also became a favorite for travelers stopping by for the custom-processed meats. It became a canyon fixture - and then was lost in the recent fire.



Gene Coles, owner of Gene's Meat Market in Mehama, stands in a smokey street near his home in Stayton on Thursday, Sept. 17. (Amanda Loman/Salem Reporter)

While the nine-mile long lake displaced homes and businesses, it also bolstered a recreation industry that led to new businesses and jobs. Two marinas – Kane’s on the west side of town and the Detroit Lake Marina on the north – could hold about 700 boats between them, renting everything from kayaks to pontoons.

Detroit Lake became an Oregon mecca – the busiest lake in the state. Detroit Lake State Recreation Area and its 300-plus sites on the edge of the lake developed into the state’s most popular campground.

And the Cedars Restaurant and Lounge remained a centerpiece business.

Sandi Elwood, 51, is a real estate agent who lives in Salem but grew up in Detroit.

As a teenager in the 1980s, she’d meet her friends at the Cedars on weekends, talking over French fries with Thousand Island dressing and milkshakes. The Logger Burger, topped with bacon and a fried egg, was a favorite, she said.

Elwood took a job at the restaurant at 14, washing dishes. By 16, she was a waitress, a job she kept for seven years.

She’d open the restaurant at 5 a.m. to a parking lot full of truckers and loggers waiting for their coffee. Regulars’ orders were ready to go on the counter, she said.

“I just loved it. I loved the smell of chainsaws,” she said.

“My values, my work ethics ... all of that stems and comes from working there in that restaurant,” said Elwood.

But the 1980s also saw an intensifying national fight over federal timberlands. Environmentalists sought to protect old-growth forests and their creatures. Timber operators said they needed federal trees to keep mills running and people employed.

As the fight dragged on, one small mill after another operating in the canyon shut down. Unemployed workers moved away. Schools lost enrollment, consolidating eventually into a single school system to educate children from Mill City to Idanha.

A political tightrope

In the ensuing decades, the U.S. Forest Service faced lawsuits, Congressional mandates and increasingly stringent regulations on how to manage the public’s forests.

Those in charge of the Willamette National Forest sought to meet the commercial need for timber while recognizing the growing insistence that those who wanted to hike and camp in the woods had to be given equal due.

That effort is evident in the national forest’s recent plans for major projects.

One – the Highway 46 project – was launched in 2018 to reduce the risk and impact of wildfires around the Breitenbush community.

Forest Service records for the project noted that the “high priority viewshed” is popular for recreation but that “timber harvest is still a very important component in the economy.”

The intent to harvest 23 million board feet “is needed to ensure the Willamette National Forest continues to supply a reliable supply of timber products,” according to the agency’s decision.

Part of the work was intended to reduce natural fuels in the Breitenbush area, including two communities of summer homes and the Breitenbush Hot Springs Retreat and Conference Center.

The Forest Service in 2018 said those communities were surrounded by “dense older forest with heavy fuel loadings” that put them at risk of wildfire. The structures were classified as “prep and leave” and “determined to be non-defensible,” the agency said in assessing the need for the project.

During the most recent wildfire, scores of buildings in that area were destroyed, though key structures at the hot springs, including the lodge, survived.

A Forest Service spokesman said by email Tuesday that the status of Highway 46 project is “unknown.” Another 9 million board feet in the area was to be auctioned next week but that has been postponed.

Several logging operations are now on hold as timber operators and Forest Service specialists assess what’s become of all that timber.

Tim Lahey, timber program manager for the Willamette National Forest, said the agency would move as rapidly as possible to assess its holdings. He said similar assessments also will be needed on ground in the area that is managed by the U.S. Bureau of Land Management and industrial owners.

He said the Forest Service would try to do such work through the winter and perhaps start salvage logging operations next summer.

“That would be the most ideal situation,” Lahey said. “It is ambitious.”



Tyler Freres, vice president of Freres Lumber, stands next to a stack of logs at the company's mill in Lyons. (Jake Thomas/Salem Reporter)

That work is of keen interest to Tyler Freres.

He grew up in the lumber company founded in 1922 by his grandfather and now serves as vice president of sales for Freres Lumber Company Inc. He said the canyon had over a dozen wood product companies in the early 1990s. But only a handful remained by the time he started working for Freres Lumber in 1998.

Freres Lumber dominates the local industry with its six plants in Mill City and Lyons that produce veneer and stick lumber, supplied by about 80 truckloads a day of logs coming off the state and national forest and its 17,000 acres of private timberlands. It employs more than 400 – and would employ more if it could find the workers.

Supply is everything to the company, he said. Historic changes, including reduced federal timber harvests since the 1990s, have complicated the economics, he said. There's also intense competition against imported finished panels and wood products from China and Brazil, he said.

"When you reduce supply, the cost of that material goes up considerably because all the mills are competing for the same logs," he said. "So we have very high log prices, very low product prices for the last year and a half to two years. So it's been a very difficult period."

And now the fires left uncertainty about what trees remain viable – and what can be done with the burned trees.

Freres explained that if the trees are too charred by the fires, it takes too long to peel them sufficiently to get to usable wood. The burned logs can be turned into chips but paper companies that rely on chips to make paper won't take them. Instead, they can be used to generate electricity at the company's biomass facility.

Freres said the clock is running on making use of singed timber. Rot and insects can take a toll within 18 months, turning valuable wood into unusable debris.

He said the company is also worried that trees under 20 years old won't survive.

"We will recover as much as we can but there's a whole lot of that timber volume out there that we're not gonna have access to in the future," he said.

The fate of much of that timber rests with federal authorities.

After a major wildfire, teams of specialists from the Forest Service examine the terrain, considering damage to roads and what's needed to again make them safe. They study soil conditions. Intense heat can sterilize ground, leaving no organisms vital to new generations of vegetation. And they look over tree stands to judge what ought to be taken down and when that can be done.

Dave Warnack, who as supervisor is the top executive on the Willamette National Forest, said Wednesday said such work is starting even as Forest Service employees posted to the Santiam Canyon deal with the loss of their own homes.

He said because the fires were so extensive, plans for managing for the forest likely have to change.

"It's pretty much a re-thinking and reassessment of our entire program of work for the year 2021," Warnack said.

But that requires opening roads in the forest.

"One of our immediate needs post-fire really includes a focus on securing access along primary travel routes through the forest," Warnack said. "We acknowledge there are hundreds of miles of road to make safe."

He said the coalition of government agencies and private industry and property owners fashioned to battle the wildfires will be needed to plan the recovery.

Warnack understands the public will be eager to get back into the woods. He noted the national forest has registered record-breaking numbers of visitors, spurred by people seeking a respite from the restrictions imposed by the coronavirus.

He cautions patience.

"It's a multi-year job ahead of us," Warnack said.

Restore and rebuild

While fire crews work on the still-burning wildfires, the work of restoring life to the Santiam Canyon is underway.

In Detroit, crews from Zipfly Fiber jury-rigged repairs to their damaged building so emergency responders would have internet access. Utility crews from Consumers Powers managed to get electricity up and running in Detroit – but the company has few customers to serve. Three-quarters of their 400 customers no longer have a building to power.

Lower in the canyon, evacuation zones have been reduced, allowing property owners and their helpers to get in and see what's ahead. It's not always bad news.

In Gates over the weekend, bird calls and chainsaws echoed around town as locals cleared downed and burned out trees from still-smoking lots. A Little Free Library outside a burned home still stands, a copy of "The Voyages of Doctor Doolittle" inside without a single scorch.

Todd Miller is superintendent of the Santiam Canyon School District and spent the night of the fire helping his parents fend off flames from their ranch outside Gates. He then went to check on the condition of the local school buildings in Mill City, prepared to clear the road himself with a chainsaw if needed. Miller found the structures intact, though smelling of smoke.

Since then, the high school has been reprinting diplomas and class photos for graduates, sometimes from decades earlier, who lost the artifacts in the fires.

At the Gates Community Church of Christ, Pastor Mike Stair convened the first service in the church sanctuary on Sept 20. Thirteen families in the congregation lost their homes, he said.

His afternoon sermon was on Isaiah 61, "about God bringing beauty from ashes."

Their fellowship hall is filled to the ceiling with donated pet food, drinks and clothing. There is so much that donors have been asked to hold off any more deliveries.

Outside the church, Red Cross volunteers passed out wood-framed screens so families can sift through the ashes of their home. One woman told the group she was hoping to find her wedding ring in the rubble.



A path has been carved through fallen trees on the North Fork Road to provide access for emergency crews and firefighters. The road remains closed to the public beyond mile post 1. (Marion County Sheriff's Office photo)

Meantime, government officials and others from the ground and in the air are assessing what needs to be done.

Andrew Phelps, director of Oregon Emergency Management, said it will likely be weeks before Highway 22 can fully open. The highway remains closed from Idanha to the Santiam Junction.

Katherine Benenati, Transportation Department spokeswoman, said highway crews and contractors will have to remove thousands of hazard trees - county officials say that could number about 10,000. The work takes more than cutting down obviously damaged trees. She said that some that appear in good shape had root systems weakened by underground fire, leaving them vulnerable to tipping over.

She said the fires left many slopes in the canyon vulnerable to slides and rockfalls.

“We don’t know the extent of the closures we’re going to be facing but we know they are going to be long term just based on what we’re seeing,” Benenati said.



A crew removes damaged trees outside of Mill City on Sunday, Sept. 20. (Amanda Loman/Salem Reporter)

Going home again

Getting life anywhere back to normal means getting people back into homes.

Building replacement homes in canyons instead of subdivisions takes more time and money. And no one wants to estimate yet when new homes could start rising.

Getting sewer, water and electricity for those homes is one challenge.

Removing what's left of burned structures is another, likely requiring hundreds of truckloads. Mike Erdmann, CEO of the Home Builders Association of Marion and Polk Counties, said that much of the debris will have to be tested for asbestos, lead paint and other contaminants before it goes into a landfill.

Marion County Commissioner Kevin Cameron said the county is working with the state and federal agencies on a clean-up plan to help property owners.

And then there is the construction. Oregon's building industry has been in a boom, and the supply of carpenters, electricians and plumbers is so tight that commercial, government and residential projects have had to compete for crews. The demand to build hundreds of new homes in the canyon will further strain that supply.

"I'm very concerned about that," Erdmann said. "We are having trouble keeping up right now with the level of housing demand."

If crews are available, winter weather would be another challenge since state officials have warned that slopes stripped of vegetation will be prone to road-closing landslides. Erdmann said that access to more remote homesites will be limited until roads can be cleared of downed trees.

That all gives owners time to decide whether they are rebuilding or pulling out.

Ed Bowman, the retired highway worker, said he always maintained his Detroit home, trimming the limbs off trees on his 2 ½ acres and thinks that may have saved his home of 45 years from burning. But he hasn't been back to assess the damage and is unsure if smoke will render the home a complete loss like his insurance company told him.

He doesn't know if he has the strength to rebuild and thinks he and his wife will likely move out.

"If we possibly could, I would rebuild the home there because we love it. I'm at the age where I don't know if I want to start building a home again," he said. "Starting to build a home from scratch on a scarred landscape, I just can't imagine."

Elwood, the real estate agent who grew up in Detroit, narrated videos right after the fires, ticking off names and the occasional observation about when she had sold a particular home.

She remains close to many residents, and said some are waiting to see what the local business owners decide. She said that's especially true of the two marinas and the Cedars Restaurant. "It's going to need to start with the roots," she said.

Jim Trett, the Detroit mayor, said he's heard from some residents they won't be coming back.

Stair, the Gates pastor, said that "most everybody's gonna be rebuilding. One family's not too sure because she's 89 and she goes, 'I don't know if I'll be alive by the time I get the house done.'"

Optimism and spirit

But even as the ashes cool, some see opportunity for creating a more robust Santiam Canyon.

Trett said the Detroit City Council is scheduled to meet next week to plan. Before the fires, he said the town was making progress on infrastructure upgrades, nearing completion on a \$3.2 million water line project and preparing for Zply Fiber to install high-speed internet.

A big need is sewer service to replace septic tanks with modern wastewater treatment, a step that could allow more housing and business in the town.

"Long term, there is a real opportunity to rebuild these communities in a positive way to last the next 100 years," said Cameron, the county commissioner who lived in Detroit.

What's evident from Trett, Cameron and others is that a hardy spirit is evolving, a determination to restore and rebuild.

That was apparent last Saturday, when the Front Street Station in Salem hosted a fundraising evening.

Chipman, who typically spends every weekend in Detroit, brought that flag he rescued to contribute to the auction.

A family with property in Detroit made the winning bid of \$50,000 – money going into a fund to help Detroit rebuild.

"Everyone's anxious to get up there and build and get our community back together again, to get our friends together again," Chipman said.

DeGeorge said she may take up an idea from her husband, who died seven years ago. In 2010, he built new units for their Detroit motel and then suggested setting the town apart by renaming it Detroit Lake. That plan never took hold, but DeGeorge thinks it's a good idea now given what the community faces.

"It would be a reawakening – rename it and start over," she said.



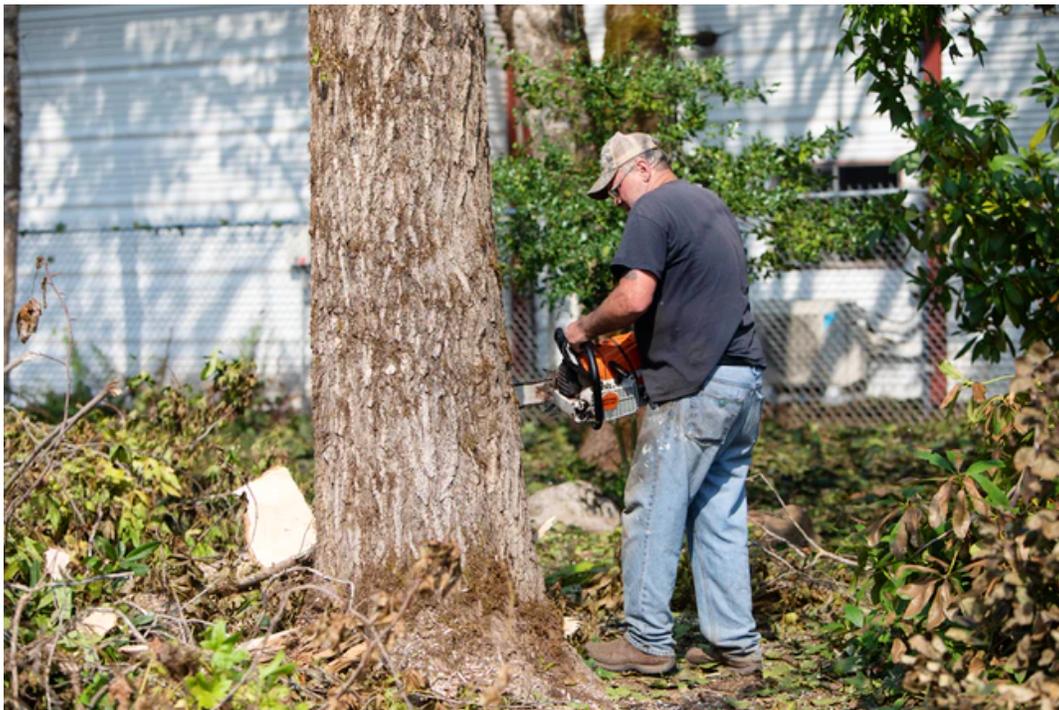
***Parishioners gather for a service at the Gates Community Church of Christ on Sunday, Sept. 20.
(Amanda Loman/Salem Reporter)***



A cat walks through the remains of a burned home in Gates on Sunday, Sept. 20. (Amanda Loman/Salem Reporter)



Fresh flowers woven into a fence spell out 'RISE!' on Sunday, Sept. 20. (Amanda Loman/Salem Reporter)



Tim Smith of Mill City works on cutting down damaged trees on the property of Ken Cartwright in Gates on Sunday, Sept. 20. (Amanda Loman/Salem Reporter)

CONTACT REPORTERS:

Rachel Alexander: rachel@salemreporter.com or 503-575-1241

Saphara Harrell: saphara@salemreporter.com or 503-549-6250

Jake Thomas: jake@salemreporter.com or 503-575-1251.

Editor Les Zaitz contributed to this report.

SUPPORT SALEM REPORTER'S JOURNALISM - A monthly subscription starts at \$5. Go [HERE](#). Or contribute to keep our reporters and photographers on duty. Go [HERE](#). Checks can be sent: Salem Reporter, 2925 River Rd S #280 Salem OR 97302. ***Your support matters.***

Learn how we do our work at Salem Reporter - [read our principles.](#)