

# as the smoke clears

After a fire decimated the small town of Phoenix, its citizens are left wondering why they never received emergency alerts. What went wrong?

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*Heather Spliethof and her daughter, Sam, assess the wreckage after the Almeda fire ravaged Phoenix, Oregon. They were one of many who did not receive an emergency alert. They lost almost everything.*



M

eghan Hays sits in the living room of her parents' southern Oregon home on a rare sunny February afternoon. She's rolling a small chunk of colored glass around in her palm and delicately wiping remnants of ash off its surface.

Just five months earlier, on September 8, the Almeda fire ravaged Hays' small town of Phoenix, burning thousands of homes in its path. All that was left of her two-story home was a few charred and unrecognizable pieces of her worldly possessions. She's been living in her parents' home ever since.

The chunk of glass she held had been an ornate glass canister. Hays always swore the prized family heirloom would be the one thing she'd grab in a fire. She never thought to grab the canister in the mere minutes before the Almeda fire forced her to evacuate her home. Hays knew the fire was nearby but thought she was safe. She did not receive an emergency alert telling her to leave.

Prior to the fire, Phoenix residents could register for an opt-in service that would provide emergency alerts via cellphone or reverse 911 phone calls to landlines. Residents who did not sign up for opt-in alerts expected to receive warnings via the Emergency Alert System (EAS) from radio or television. The county's preferred method of alerts is the opt-in system, though many residents did not know how to sign up for them.

According to local officials, alerts only went out via the opt-in method, not via the EAS. Only registered civilians received advance warning of the encroaching fire. Those who did not sign up for alerts had little time to evacuate, a situation that amplified the loss they endured. Some would escape with only the clothes they were wearing, their pets and their families.

"If the fire came at night I would be dead, because I wouldn't have seen it coming," says Hays, who had not signed up for an opt-in alert. "There's a reason for the Emergency Alert System."

Hays only knew to evacuate because her friend, Will Clelland, called to tell her that the fire was headed toward her home. Clelland was serving as a fire battalion chief on the day of the fire.

Hays' experience mirrored that of many residents in Jackson County who ended up relying on law enforcement officers to inform them to evacuate. "The police officers from the sheriff's office and of the cities were the evacuation system," Clelland says. "They did amazing work getting hundreds of people physically out of their homes, like carrying old ladies down the stairs and putting them in cars."

Many residents of Phoenix, and the neighboring town of



*At the heart of southeastern Oregon's Rogue Valley lies the desolation caused by the Almeda fire.*

*Drone provided by Jeremy Brady with Ascent Media.*





right: Fire District 3 Battalion Chief **Will Clelland** sifts through the emergency dispatch system in the front seat of his engine.

below: **Meghan Hays** on her driveway in front of where her house once stood. “You have a big lesson in materialism when you lose everything,” says Hays.



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Talent, were left confused, frightened and unprepared to evacuate — and demanding an explanation. In local Phoenix and Talent community Facebook groups, over 50 people came forward with their stories of frustration and anger.

Bonnie Roberts, a Phoenix resident, had just minutes to evacuate 17 of her animals: chickens, goats, birds, dogs and cats. There was no time for cages and leashes. She frantically gathered the animals into her cars until the smoke made breathing unbearable. All that she could do was drive away as fast as she could with her daughters in tow, unsure about the safety of the animals she left behind.

“The alert system was the complete failure,” says Roberts. “It was the fact that nobody had the proper warning. We had to do everything last minute.”

#### WHAT WENT WRONG IN PHOENIX

The Almeda fire started on the morning of September 8 in Ashland, which is approximately eight miles south of Phoenix. The fire traveled quickly north, fueled by high winds and invasive, highly flammable Himalayan blackberries. According to Jackson County Sheriff Nathan Sickler, at times the fire was moving at 20 mph. Affecting Phoenix, Talent, Central Point, Ashland and Medford, the fire ultimately devastated more than 3,000 acres, destroyed over 2,650 properties, and led to the loss of three lives.

Chief Clelland has worked for the Oregon fire service for 23 years. His 65-member team — Fire District 3 — covers eight communities and services both Phoenix and Talent during major emergencies. Clelland has worked on the force through years of wildfires, but even five months later the Almeda fire still shocks him.

“We had called back every Fire District 3 Central Point Station employee that we had. That’s never happened in 60 years,” Clelland says. “In addition to going from Ashland toward Phoenix [the fire’s] also going outward, so every minute it’s getting wider and that makes it obviously harder to control.”

In addition to controlling the spread of this massive fire, Jackson County officials had to deal with a complicated emergency alert system. Alerts are created through a collaborative effort involving the sheriff’s department, fire departments and emergency management. As firefighters work in

the field, they log details about the fire into a system called Everbridge, a hub that keeps both first responders and the emergency manager informed.

The emergency manager can use information from fire and law enforcement to create an evacuation plan and alerts following Oregon’s three-step Ready, Set, and Go! procedure. Each step updates residents on the level of risk and when they need to evacuate. The sheriff’s department and fire departments work with the emergency manager to coordinate the proper messaging and evacuation procedures. The emergency manager needs input from fire and law enforcement to send messaging to the public to ensure that the right messages are communicated at the right time.

But on the day of the fire, messages only went to those who had signed up for opt-in alerts. That left both officials and residents in the area asking afterward: What happened to the radio and TV EAS alerts?

Due to the complexities of the alert system and the several different groups that are involved in creating and sending these alerts, getting a clear answer as to why the alert system was only partially deployed is difficult. “You’re taking information from a variety of positions and issuing it,” says Clelland. “On that day the cities were also doing their own piece of the pie, so you did have disorganization. There were issues there.”

In May, Andrew Phelps, Oregon’s director of state emergency management, said he was still not clear why broadcast EAS alerts were not transmitted in the Phoenix area and was awaiting a post-fire investigation report.

According to Sickler, the county’s emergency manager is the only person who can deploy both the cellphone alerts and the Emergency Alert System. “I don’t know all the ins and outs of everything or the decisions, but I do know Everbridge is like the state-of-the-art system,” said Sickler. When asked why broadcast alerts were not deployed, he said: “I can’t answer that question.”

In Jackson County, Stacey Anderson-Belt was the emergency manager. Anderson-Belt resigned from her position in January. When asked to comment on her involvement in the fire, she declined.

Phelps said that making the decision to send an EAS alert is “a lot to put on one person’s shoulders.” He added that





Sam Spliethof and her boyfriend, Adam Case, stand amid what Spliethof refers to as the “skeletons of things.”

Anderson-Belt “was a one-person emergency management shop for a pretty large county with significant hazards.”

NAVIGATING THE CHAOS

In the midst of the confusion and chaos of one of the most damaging fires in Oregon’s history, the small town of Phoenix was in disarray.

“Everybody went into lifesaving mode instead of planning mode. It became apparent to our guys and everybody involved that we were barely able to stay ahead of the fire,” says Sickler.

And as he looks back at the events of the day, Sickler says more harm than good may have occurred had the EAS been deployed. “Our guys that were in the fire firmly believe if the county would have sent out a generic five-countywide message, that’s the Emergency Alert System, the pressure would have collapsed the roadways even further in the fires,” says Sickler. “The guys on the ground were like, ‘If any more people would have tried to go back to their houses to get things, it would have been devastating for us because it would have worsened the traffic condition.’”

But Hays, who left her home shortly after receiving the phone call from her friend Clelland, says in the case of emergencies such as the Almeda fire, the importance of alerts and evacuation notices is magnified. “When somebody is panicking and they’re trying to get out, you don’t tell them what roads are closed. You tell them what roads are open. You give them an exact evacuation route,” says Hays. “I would like to see better leadership.”

Heather Spliethof, a Phoenix resident, and her daughter, Sam, spent hours on the day of the fire searching online for

information, only to find nothing. Immediately after law enforcement evacuated their family, the fire jumped the fence into their trailer park and burned every trailer in minutes.

“They didn’t tell us anything about how close it was or where it was or where it was headed. They just told us to get in our cars and head towards Medford,” says Spliethof, who moved into Federal Emergency Management Agency housing with nothing but donated clothing and the few things that the family grabbed before they were evacuated. “You’ve got to let people know their houses are about to burn and they could die.”

At the time of the fire, Sam Spliethof was preparing to start her first year at the University of Oregon. She didn’t have time to grab anything but her laptop and a couple of household items. She would eventually move to Eugene with her boyfriend, Adam Case, and with a broken desk, an air mattress and a t-shirt she received in remembrance of the fire. The back of the shirt reads: “From the ashes, we rise.”

“It was really hard to focus more attention into putting all of your effort into school when you’re just worried about what’s going to happen to your family,” Sam says.

AS THE ASH SETTLES

Following the Almeda fire, the state and county launched investigations and initiated changes in their systems.

Jackson County has hired a private company to investigate the response to the fire by law enforcement, emergency responders and governmental entities such as emergency management. The After Action Report, originally set to be released this spring, will analyze all systems used in the fire, including the emergency alerts, to identify any room for

improvement or changes. It will also analyze disaster relief response for civilians.

Phelps, along with many, seek to better understand what happened in Jackson County. “Was it just the system was overwhelmed? Were things happening too quickly? A lack of familiarity with the tools that were available?” says Phelps.

In the meantime, the county has hired a replacement emergency manager who started in the position on May 10. Sickler says eventually an additional person will work with the emergency manager, and the county is training more people to deploy alerts instead of just one person with the authority to do so. According to Phelps, having only one emergency manager in the Almeda fire was a challenge, and reevaluating statewide investment in emergency management is necessary.

“I think one of the takeaways is to invest in emergency management. In Jackson County they were doing the best with the system that they had invested in,” says Phelps.

The state of Oregon announced in May the launch of a new statewide emergency alert system, called OR-Alert. Even though OR-Alert uses the same Everbridge system as the opt-in alerts used in the Almeda fire, prior registration is not required to receive alerts. The Jackson County Sheriff’s department is also developing a cellphone app to alert citizens of emergencies.

While Chief Clelland is waiting for the After Action Report, he is prepared to analyze his department closely. He also says he would like citizens to enroll in all local emergency alert systems and engage in fire preparedness.

“Our systems have to be designed for the worst-case

scenario. We do our best to bridge as many gaps as we see. We just know that there’s gonna be some emergency, something that outpaces us, but the public ultimately has to have some engagement in their own safety,” says Clelland. “No matter what we do to fix the system, we have to look out for each other. You can’t be reliant on someone else — but it’s sure nice to have someone else.”

The scars of the last fire season are deep and have manifested in different ways and from person to person. Months passed before Bonnie Roberts was able to bring her beloved goats home to their backyard oasis. Heather and Sam Spliethof still find it difficult to visit the site of their former home as they pick apart what was once their life, reminiscing over former neighbors and shared memories. And many Phoenix residents admit to being plagued with PTSD. For Meghan Hays, the sight of smoke billowing in the air churns an uneasy feeling, bringing back unwanted memories and fears. “I was driving to Ashland and I saw smoke,” she recalls. “Somebody was cooking their breakfast in front of their tent and I just panicked.”

As chair of her neighborhood’s Homeowners Association, Hays has become even more involved in fire safety. In regard to tackling the rebuilding process, Hays says that she hopes to make a difference in her community.

“It’s really hard to start rebuilding when there’s so many unknowns, and you’re feeling kind of like a balloon. You’re just floating around and you don’t have an anchor,” Hays says. “It’s grief. It’s like a corkscrew. It spirals up and down, and you just have to work through it and know that whatever path you’re on is the path that you need.”



Hays takes in her neighborhood after the Almeda Fire. “It’s not going to be the same. All the trees are gone,” Hays says. “This was a beautiful place.”