



Oregon Wildfire Recovery

Independent arborist reviews state hazard tree removal program; finds sound operation underway, provides helpful context for future work

In response to calls for an investigation and as part of the unprecedented effort to remove fire-damaged trees after more than a million acres burned in the 2020 wildfires, an independent arborist reviewed the intricate process underway for evaluating fire-damaged trees for safety purposes. His review finds that the certified arborists and professional foresters performing the work are qualified and the evaluation criteria and marking process are sound.

SALEM, Ore. – A Pacific Northwest arborist with more than 30 years of experience submitted his findings to the state [following a thorough review of the hazard tree removal effort underway](#) to support Oregon’s rebuilding and recovery process.

In response to public concerns and calls for an independent investigation into the work underway, [Galen Wright](#), president of Washington Forestry Consultants, Inc., evaluated the state hazard tree removal program and its workers and drafted a report sharing these findings.

Wright’s review found that the certified arborists and professional foresters working in the field generally meet or exceed the experience and qualifications required to evaluate fire-damaged trees. The report also found that the FEMA-required criteria being used is sound for making these determinations and is being applied appropriately in the field.

“It is our finding that ODOT and the Debris Management Task Force have the necessary operational plan, protocols, contracts and requirements necessary to conduct and provide quality assurance for this hazard tree mitigation program for the 2020 Oregon wildfires. No changes are recommended to the current protocols,” said Wright in the report.

In response to public requests for urgency and a timely review process, Wright spent weeks assessing on-the-ground samples of work in the field; reviewing resumes, certifications and other qualification materials of the crews in the field; and diving into emergency response requirements currently guiding the operation.

Wright’s report gives the operation an A grade and finds 96% agreement with the total fire-damaged trees being marked, noting that more than 99% of the trees marked for removal are dead, dying, or pose a safety threat if left standing. In addition to a very small percentage of some smaller trees set back from the highway that could be potentially unmarked moving forward, Wright’s review also found that there were other stands of unmarked fire-damaged trees that should be marked for future cutting.

“We are honored to be asked to perform this important work helping Oregon families and communities recover and ultimately rebuild,” said Mac Lynde, deputy administrator for delivery and operations at ODOT and the head of the three-agency Debris Management Task Force. “We acknowledge that this is a complex and unprecedented effort with many different opinions and approaches, and we stood ready to implement any potential recommendations resulting from this report. Mr. Wright’s objective and independent findings provide a concrete direction that benefits all Oregonians and reinforces the adaptive nature of this emergency response operation. We appreciate Mr. Wright’s conclusions.”

Wright also found that the arborists and foresters under contract possess the experience and qualifications necessary to perform this work effectively. Of the more than 1,200 contracted crew members and more than 40 arborists and foresters in the field, only one arborist was identified as not fully meeting qualifications for the position due to their entry-level status, although they were a certified arborist. This staffer is not responsible for final decisions and is supervised by more senior colleagues as part of a multi-step review system where their work is routinely monitored before any cutting occurs.

The report provides a helpful snapshot of the scope and scale of trees being cut or removed in these corridors. While the state-led hazard tree operation comprises less than 1% of the total 1-million-acre fire burn area, it was found that more than half (58.3%) of the fire-damaged trees in this area are being left for conservation and monitoring purposes, per the criteria used to evaluate these fire-damaged trees.

“With our initial charge to move quickly, and knowing this work is unprecedented for Oregon, Mr. Wright’s review helps underline the good work underway while providing a roadmap for adapting other areas moving forward. While we work to ensure no more lives are lost at the hands of the 2020 wildfires, we will continue to incorporate feedback from a range of partners to make sure this work is done right and look forward to future planning conversations if this operation becomes an unfortunate new reality for Oregon,” said Lynde.

Lynde said that applying Wright’s input is a critical step toward introducing Oregon to the complex recovery task underway. In addition to Wright’s recommendations, staff and crews will continue ongoing internal program appraisals and hazard tree criteria iterations as necessary and will work with the Secretary of State’s office as part of an annual audit plan.

Additional checks-and-balances are also in place to ensure fire-damaged tree evaluations and markings are thorough and accurate. Arborists and foresters overseeing tree marking are paid hourly rather than by the tree to create a clear separation of duties and eliminate conflicts of interest. Tree cutters are liable for a \$2,000 fine for each unmarked tree that is cut. ODOT incident commanders, environmental monitors, a monitoring firm acting as operation inspectors, a disaster consulting firm with expertise in FEMA reimbursement procedures, and the Army Corps of Engineers all monitor field operations daily as well.

“Our objective remains to remove only dead or dying fire-damaged trees posing a threat to human life and safety and for those trying to rebuild,” said Lynde. “We accept and welcome all feedback to help inform these efforts and will continue to investigate and take swift and corrective action in response to any reports of mismanagement for the duration of this work.”

The 2020 September wildfires go down in history as one of Oregon’s most devastating disasters, burning more than 1 million acres, destroying thousands of homes, and claiming the lives of nine Oregonians. Afterward, communities were confronted by devastation and loss, with swaths of dead burned trees blocking roads, toppling over highways and interfering with cleanup efforts. For Oregon to receive federal reimbursement as part of an emergency response operation, the Wildfire Economic Recovery Council charged ODOT and the Task Force to immediately start work removing debris from nearly 3,000 damaged home sites and the thousands of hazardous dead or dying trees surrounding these areas.

To accomplish this unprecedented effort, teams of certified arborists, professional foresters, field technicians and environmental consultants worked together with state and federal land managers and environmental regulators to draft [an Environmental Protection Plan](#) and criteria for how to evaluate each tree to determine threat levels.

While state-led work is happening only along state highways and near fire-impacted home sites, state crews and independent contractors are not the only ones performing recovery work. Many local groups and landowners, governments and utility companies are also working simultaneously in these areas. Currently, [more than half \(83,000\) of the total estimated 140,000 fire-damaged trees have been assessed and marked, and more than a quarter \(40,700\) have been cut or removed.](#)

“We recognize and mourn the lasting imprint these fires have left on Oregon as we all work together to recover and rebuild,” said Lynde. “We encourage anyone with a question or concern about any aspect of this work to call our hotline at 503-934-1700 so that we can help coordinate and find solutions together.”

READ THE INDEPENDENT FINDINGS REPORT [HERE](#).

Watch:

- How [certified arborists/professional foresters evaluate trees and the values that guide them](#)
- How [this critical recovery work is helping Detroit rebuild and write its next chapter](#)

For more information:

- **Debris and tree hotline for questions and comments: 503-934-1700**
- For the latest news and debris/tree-related content: www.debriscleanupnews.com
- To track the latest status, progress, and dashboard: <https://bit.ly/33KeYS9>
- For FAQs and other property-related information: <https://wildfire.oregon.gov/cleanup>

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