

Could Portland handle an urban wildfire? Expert warns city isn't fully prepared

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6–7 minutes

An expert says Portland relies too heavily on 911 calls to detect wildfires of the likes of California's Eaton Fire, while the city says it's prepared.

PORTLAND, Ore. — The next major wildfire threatening Portland may not begin deep in the woods. It could ignite inside city limits.

As Oregon's wildfire seasons grow longer and more destructive, a debate is growing over whether Portland is prepared for an urban wildfire. City officials say they are. One wildfire expert argues the city is relying on outdated technology that could cost precious minutes when every second counts.

"This is the new reality, this is the new normal, and we're not yet fully prepared," said Robert McCullough, who owns an energy consulting firm that provides research and planning on wildfire risks in Portland.

McCullough believes Portland could one day experience an urban wildfire similar to the one that devastated [Altadena, California](#), killing 19 people and destroying 9,000 buildings.

"Many people think it can't happen here, but the fact is it can happen here," he said.

A debate over wildfire detection

McCullough says Portland depends too heavily on 911 calls from residents to locate wildfires.

"The people calling don't know where the fire is, and we had a lot of experience with that in L.A.," he said.

Instead, he wants the city to expand its use of artificial intelligence-powered wildfire detection cameras capable of spotting fires within seconds.

Portland currently has two of those cameras, both in Forest Park and operated by Portland General Electric.

McCullough argues the technology should be expanded into other wildfire-prone areas, including Oaks Bottom.

"You are getting amateurs telling you where to go," he said. "But also there really isn't an easy way to describe some of the areas."

Portland Fire says people are the best detectors

Portland Fire's wildfire planning manager, Alan Fitzpatrick, disagrees that more cameras are the answer.

"Where cameras or other detection methods really shine are in the frontier, in that rural environment where we don't have eyes on the landscape," Fitzpatrick said.

In a city, he said, residents often spot fires quickly and provide

firefighters with enough information to respond.

"Here in the urban center of Portland, we get really good information from people very quickly," Fitzpatrick said. "Our crews are out the door with great information from where the fire is, rather than, 'Hey, there is some smoke.'"

Lessons from Altadena

McCullough said Portland shares several characteristics with Altadena, including steep, heavily forested terrain where homes sit close to vegetation.

Those same conditions exist in several of Portland's highest-risk wildfire areas, including Forest Park, the West Hills, Powell Butte and the Willamette Bluffs, where steep slopes, dense vegetation and nearby neighborhoods can allow fires to spread quickly. Portland Fire says abundant vegetation, rugged terrain and seasonal hot, dry winds all increase the city's wildfire risk, particularly in areas where homes border natural landscapes.

Fitzpatrick said Portland Fire has already planned for those neighborhoods.

"They preplan for those," he said.

The bureau says firefighters know where those steep and difficult-to-access areas are and can quickly dispatch the resources needed if a wildfire breaks out.

One thing both sides agree on

While McCullough and Portland Fire disagree over the best way to detect wildfires, they agree on one issue: maintaining enough

firefighters to respond when one starts.

Portland Fire is facing up to \$4 million in potential budget cuts.

McCullough and Fitzpatrick both said keeping the bureau staffed at roughly 800 firefighters is critical, warning that reducing those numbers could leave the city more vulnerable when multiple emergencies happen at once.

What homeowners can do now

While the debate over detection technology continues, Portland Fire says homeowners can take steps now to reduce their wildfire risk.

The bureau offers free [Wildland-Urban Interface Home Assessments](#) for residents living in or near wildfire hazard areas. During the visit, wildfire specialists evaluate a property and provide recommendations on creating defensible space, reducing vegetation around a home and making it more resistant to wildfire. Residents can request an assessment through Portland Fire's website.

Portland Fire says creating defensible space, a buffer between a home and surrounding vegetation, can help slow the spread of wildfire and give firefighters a safer area to defend a property. Recommendations can include trimming vegetation, removing combustible materials near the home and reducing other potential wildfire fuels.