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Is Portland at risk for urban wildfire? A local expert who analyzed Los Angeles fires thinks so

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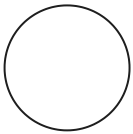




Smoke blanked downtown Portland, as seen from the Pittock Mansion, on Thurs., Oct. 20, 2022. Dave Killen / The Oregonian



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Is Portland at risk for urban wildfire? A local expert who analyzed Los A

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By [Griffin Uribe Brown](#) | [The Oregonian/OregonLive](#)

Some of the conditions behind the devastating 2025 urban wildfires in Los Angeles are present in Portland, posing risk for an unlikely but potentially grave event of similar magnitude, a local expert warns.

Robert McCullough, a Portland economist and consultant in the energy sector, has made this pitch to local and federal officials, utilities and viewers attending his [lectures](#) at Reed College and Portland State University, where he is an adjunct professor.

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The Oregonian



On Jan. 7, 2025, the Palisades and Eaton fires in and near Los Angeles emerged within hours of each other. It took only a few hours for the two small ignitions to explode over hundreds, then thousands of acres amid high winds. The two infernos burned 59 square miles, killed 31 and destroyed more than 15,000 homes and structures. Losses cost billions, making them two of the most destructive fires in California history.

Despite a red flag alert, local authorities were “unprepared in a variety of ways” for the fires, McCullough said. The city lacked ignition surveillance and emergency notifications, and in the case of the Eaton fire, Southern California Edison didn’t shut down power lines amid strong Santa Ana winds.

“Portland is less prepared and has considerably less resources than L.A.,” McCullough said.

McCullough, who analyzed the Los Angeles-area fires for The New York Times and other national outlets, said wildfires move faster and cause far more damage than traditionally assumed. Homes with asphalt roofs can ignite rapidly in urban wildfires.

Like Los Angeles, Portland has steep hillsides in and around densely populated neighborhoods. Those steep grades can promote rapid fire growth, McCullough warns, and present terrain challenges for first responders.

Most of the city’s wildfire mitigation is focused on Forest Park, which is adjacent to a 6-mile stretch of petrochemical tank farms along the west bank of the Willamette River. But he believes risk to structures and lives is also high on the eastern escarpment along the Willamette River at Oaks Bottom.

McCullough also worries Portland’s “siloeed” government agencies and utilities lack a unified response framework, with land management responsibilities divided between various parties.

“We’re like L.A. in that we have a lot of different utilities and bureaus and governments,” McCullough said.

Of the approximately 20% of Portland’s acreage that is urban greenspace, ownership and management is divided between Portland Parks & Recreation and other private owners. Alan Fitzpatrick, Portland Fire & Rescue’s wildland strategic planning manager, said the bureau coordinates with land managers to determine “what it takes to mitigate or reduce risk” in their areas, but the fragmented management is a reality in a densely populated urban setting.

“In any large or complex incident, wildfire or otherwise, bringing that diverse group of folks together is key to success, but it’s always a challenge,” Fitzpatrick said.

City officials in the Portland area primarily rely on 9-1-1 calls and community reports to identify fires, coupled with alerts from a network of AI-enabled wildfire cameras managed by Portland General Electric, said John Wheeler, the head of emergency management in Washington County.

Although a devastating urban wildfire is unlikely in Portland — McCullough calls it a “black swan event” — rising temperatures and persistent drought heighten the chances, particularly during high wind events. Oregon is getting hotter year-over-year, and over half of the state’s counties are currently under drought emergency declarations.

“There are no villains,” McCullough said repeatedly. “We are just not good at adjusting to rapid change.”

Portland Fire & Rescue has multiple mitigation approaches, including education and community preparedness programs, Fitzpatrick said. The city also frequently patrols high risk areas and enforces a strict burn ban. The city’s 31 fire stations, some of which are equipped with brush units, respond quickly to fire reports, he said.

In Los Angeles, the fire penetrated the urban environment in a way “which we had never seen before,” Fitzpatrick said.

McCullough sees PGE’s AI camera network as a successful mitigation model. These cameras, which have [publicly available broadcasts](#), notify local agencies when a fire start is detected, and could potentially reduce response times and wildfire risk.

But he contends that Portland needs more, and PGE is not planning on adding any more in the next two years, according to the utility’s latest [wildfire mitigation plan](#). Other cameras, like those [deployed](#) by ALERTWest and the [University of Oregon](#), are deployed around the state. Fitzpatrick said the city does not plan on commissioning cameras of its own.

McCullough, a longtime resident of Eastmoreland, identified Forest Park and the Oaks Bottom Wildlife Reserve as areas of highest risk. An urban fire at Oaks Bottom, he said, could quickly reach homes and businesses and burn into the Sellwood, Brooklyn and Eastmoreland neighborhoods. Such a conflagration could put up to \$6 billion of property at risk, a rough estimate via analysis from McCullough’s research firm.

The city’s fire department runs frequent training and offers [community education](#) programs to prepare for urban fire, said Kim Kosmas, the coordinator of Portland Fire & Rescue’s Public Education Office. Stations located around high-risk areas often conduct patrols, she added.

Two PGE cameras surveil Forest Park, though PGE’s cameras are focused on electric infrastructure. McCullough recommends Portland add AI ignition detection cameras on the west side of the river. He also said more risk assessment studies would provide critical planning and risk information for the city.

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PGE does conduct analyses to determine and update its high-fire risk zones. Those areas don't include downtown Portland, though some of its cameras can see into the city. Beyond cameras, PGE also has weather stations, sensors on powerlines and other ways to prevent fire, like [undergrounding power cables](#).

In May, state officials predicted a [lengthy and difficult wildfire season](#) in Oregon, citing the combination of drought, El Niño and a warm winter.

McCullough says these conditions will become more common in future years — as will the grim likelihood of a devastating “black swan” fire.



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