

A fire waiting to happen? Researcher warns SE Portland could mirror L.A.-style wildfires

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PORTLAND, Ore. (KATU) — Michael Ponce moved from Nashville to Portland's Sellwood-Moreland neighborhood a couple of years ago.

"We're a couple blocks from the river. We take our dog there most every day in the summer," he told KATU while walking along the popular stretch along Southeast 13th Avenue near Tacoma Street on a recent Thursday afternoon.

"It's easy to think that wildfires are going to happen, you know, an hour east or in the mountains," Ponce said.

However, urban wildfires are no longer a distant threat.

So, is Southeast Portland headed for a wildfire wake-up call?

Robert McCullough is a researcher at Reed College. He fears that the kind of destruction we saw last year in Los Angeles could happen in Portland.

Several neighborhoods surround Oaks Bottom, including Sellwood-Moreland, Brooklyn, Reed and Eastmoreland. They are more dense than Altadena where the Eaton Fire covered a mile in under 30 minutes.

That means this part of southeast Portland could have far less time to react.

Portland Fire & Rescue confirmed to KATU there were three fires that erupted in Oaks Bottom in the last year and that the area is their highest concern for a fire threat outside of Forest Park.

However, there aren't any fire detection systems at Oaks Bottom like the cameras at Forest Park.

McCullough believes cameras with artificial intelligence could allow fire crews to respond faster.

"The AI can identify smoke and flames 60 times a minute and get that information directly to the people who need to know it. Now, Eaton didn't have one either and that was a mistake of the modeling at [SoCal Edison]."

PF&R said there are no cameras in this area because it is so densely populated that someone would see a fire and quickly call 911. So, it would make little to no difference if there was a camera.

Portland General Electric does not plan on adding any AI cameras to the area either.

"We look at both long-term conditions and what's happening right now to understand wildfire risk. This includes things like vegetation, terrain and how the power system is built, as well as current weather, drought conditions and how dry fuels are. Because wildfire risk changes with the seasons and the weather, we adjust our safety actions as conditions change. This information helps guide where we clear vegetation, inspect equipment, strengthen the grid (e.g. where to install the fire detection cameras we talked about) and prepare crews to reduce wildfire risk and keep communities safe," PGE spokesperson John Farmer said in a statement.

"We're also deeply siloed. Multiple utilities, multiple bureaus, multiple governments. Those are sometimes not communicating as well as they could. That happened as well in LA," McCullough told KATU.

PF&R spokesperson Rick Graves told KATU he has spent many hours viewing reports, listening to and participating in webinars and noticed a common pattern.

"Communication during complex incident response, no matter how well it goes, is always an area identified for continuous improvement in these reports and studies. Adequate staffing for large complex incidents with well trained and equipped folks is a challenge, this often leads to a breakdown in communications, or siloing as Mr. McCullough suggested in his talk," Graves said.

Portland General Electric said it works closely with many agencies at all levels.

"Throughout the year, we work closely with local, state, Tribal and federal land and emergency management agencies, fire districts and emergency responders to understand their unique needs, share PGE's Wildfire Mitigation Plan, and identify opportunities to partner," Farmer said.

Still, Ponce is thinking ahead, suggesting that "We should maybe have an emergency plan if possible."

Preparation is a year-round effort, and everyone has a responsibility to be ready:

Emergency Plan. Have an emergency plan that includes where you can go in the event of an outage, especially if you rely on electricity for a medical condition or medication. Planning checklists and resources are available on portlandgeneral.com/beprepared.

Outage Kit. Everyone should have enough supplies to sustain their family for at least three days. We recommend placing items in waterproof and rodent-proof containers and replenishing your kit at least once a year. Planning checklists and resources are available on portlandgeneral.com/beprepared.



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