

Energy

Portland expert warns of LA-style wildfire risk here



One year after the January 2025 Eaton fire, thousands of empty lots and construction projects show the rebuilding in the devastated area.

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Story Highlights

- Robert McCullough argues that Portland faces wildfire risks similar to the Eaton fire.
- Portland General Electric has deployed almost 40 cameras across its service territory.
- McCullough says utilities lack regulatory incentives to innovate and move quickly.

Robert McCullough emphasized that he attaches no villains to his assessment that Portland faces wildfire disaster risk beyond what's known to lurk in and around Forest Park.

"I'm coming here without anyone to complain about," the principal at McCullough Research said in a Reed College lecture delivered last week.

Yet the Portland economist, a frequent energy-sector consultant, argued that the Eaton fire in Southern California in January 2025 nevertheless holds a frightening lesson for the Rose City.

See also: [How wildfires threaten Oregon's competitive advantage](#)

"The risks are real that a major event can actually cause the same level of problems here," McCullough said.

He pointed at Oaks Bottom in Southeast Portland as an unrecognized high-risk area, with more than 10,000 nearby homes vulnerable to a fast-moving wildfire like the one that quickly overwhelmed Altadena and other communities in the Eaton fire.

That inland fire, burning concurrently with the Palisades fire across the LA basin near the Pacific Ocean, destroyed more than 9,000 buildings and killed 17 people.

McCullough's firm worked with The New York Times last year in reviewing Southern California Edison and private data about the Eaton fire's origin and spread. Utility executives have acknowledged that its equipment likely ignited the blaze.

The fire started and grew into a deadly monster despite considerable investment and planning by the utility and other entities in Southern California. So what went wrong?

McCullough highlighted fundamental realities that opened the door to failures and said they could apply to Portland.

Broadly, for more than a century investor-owned utilities – like Southern California Edison, and Portland General Electric and PacifiCorp in Portland – have not been regulated to move fast and innovate, McCullough said.

"We actually only do things that have level after level of regulatory approval, which means we are always a year, two years, three years behind, which is fine so long as we don't have global warming," McCullough said. "But we do have global warming."

As a result, assumptions about the Eaton fire risks – of towers or lines failing, of the speed at which a fire might spread – were amiss, McCullough said.

"They violated the common sense of the outcome by assuming that this would be a small fire," he said.

A forward-thinking view could have led to deployment of smart, high-definition surveillance cameras from a company called Pano AI in the area where the fire

started, McCullough suggested. Or it could have led to a public safety power shutoff ahead of the fire based on high wind and fire danger forecasts.

PGE has surveillance cameras in Forest Park where it has major infrastructure, including towers and power lines, McCullough said, but not in Southeast Portland. He put the cost of one at about \$50,000.

"This is the sort of equipment we should have on the west side pointing east because of the amount of population at risk," McCullough said. Showing a map of areas PGE has defined as high risk, he said, "You notice they're doing a hell of a lot of hard work, but none of it's here because they're focused on their infrastructure."

McCullough said one of his goals was to "goose City Council" on the issue of wider Pano AI ignition surveillance.

For its part, a PGE spokesperson said the company has "almost 40" cameras deployed, based on analysis of its entire service territory and where its equipment might become a starting point for a fire.

Portland Fire & Rescue acknowledged that the Oaks Bottom risk could spike high a few days a year with heat and winds.

"PF&R will evaluate the values at risk should a fire occur in the Oaks Bottom area and will prioritize protecting those values with our incident objectives based on where the fire is on the landscape, its size and the rate of spread," Alan Fitzpatrick, wildland strategic planning manager, said in written replies to Business Journal questions.

As for Pano AI cameras, Portland firefighters have access to system alerts, Fitzpatrick said, but they may not make a big difference in an area such as Oaks Bottom.

"So far, it has been our experience that our urban and suburban centers are so densely populated that our fire crews are dispatched within seconds of Pano AI alerting, because someone nearby has called 911," he said.

McCullough also raised lack of planning integration – "siloing" – as another fundamental impediment. As just one example, he said the U.S. Forest Service did little to assess the risk of leasing land where the fire ignited to Southern California Edison.

"The shareholders in all of this need to sit in the same room," McCullough said of what he'd like to see in Portland.