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The Altadena fire: Could it really happen here?

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By [Eric Norberg](https://thebeeneews.com/author/ericnorberg/) (<https://thebeeneews.com/author/ericnorberg/>)

It was just over a year ago that we sat, transfixed to our TV sets, watching two huge sections of the sprawling Los Angeles metropolitan area incinerated by brush fires which moved into residential areas. The spectacle of the Topanga area on fire just northwest of the city, right on the coast along Highway 101 – and the entire community of Altadena, just up the hill from Pasadena, gutted and leveled by fire, with cars melted into puddles of steel beside street curbs – seemed unbelievable and otherworldly. The city where so many movies are made had been transformed into a disaster movie set.

In a recent year here in Portland we saw a foolish teen’s use of fireworks up the Columbia Gorge set off a conflagration that burned for weeks, scorching the vast forested landscape east of Portland, and making us choke on the smoke it blew across the city for many days – but Portland itself escaped the flames.

In the half-century your editor has lived in Portland, we’ve seen a gradual change in the climate along the whole West Coast of the United States – and Oregon now seems to have the climate that used to be normal five hundred miles south of here. Annual winter ice storms are mostly gone, snow is less common, and the summers here are getting hotter. There were at least three significant brushfires in Oaks Bottom near Sellwood and Westmoreland last summer, the causes of which were unclear.

We had thought that Portland’s urban layout, combined with our traditionally-wet climate, would prevent a wildland fire from moving into our city and burning down our homes... but is that really true?

A well-known expert on many subjects who lives in Eastmoreland says it isn’t, and that we need to be preparing to resist such a potential urban disaster. His name is Robert McCullough, and he submitted this guest editorial to THE BEE, for your thoughtful consideration.

What has L.A. Eaton Wildfire taught us about Portland’s wildfire Preparedness?

by Robert McCullough

One year ago, the Eaton Fire, one of the costliest wildfires in U.S. history, destroyed L.A.’s Altadena neighborhood. Nineteen people lost their lives, and over 9,400 buildings were destroyed. Total property values lost amounted to \$25 billion.

Are there lessons from the Easton Fire for Portland?

Yes. The Eaton fire provides a clear list of missteps Portland needs to avoid as droughts, heat, and high winds increase wildfire risk in North America.

While L.A. is larger and more populated than Portland, there are similarities. Like Portland, it is a city built on hillsides. Additionally, it is deeply siloed – with different governments, utilities, and bureaus involved in public safety decisions. Coordination is challenging.

On January 6, 2025, the U.S. Weather Service issued a very accurate Red Flag Warning for L.A. Southern California Edison’s (SCE) very detailed Wildfire Mitigation Plan had prepared for wildfires with active responses – de-energization of overhead power lines, along with precautionary measures, such as upgrading sensors, insulating overhead lines, and undergrounding. L.A. fire, water, and communications were on alert.

In spite of the advance warning and the prior wildfire mitigation plans, L.A. was caught unprepared. The Eaton Fire ignited just a half mile from Altadena homes, reaching structures in less than an hour. Although many surveillance cameras had been deployed to watch for wildfires in L.A., only the security camera of a local gas station captured the ignition point of the fire.

Once the fire reached Altadena, the flying embers ignited homes behind the firefighters. Water was scarce, with demand increasing to four times normal use for fifteen hours. A portion of the Los Angeles Fire Department was offline for repairs. Finally, evacuation notifications also failed repeatedly.

Portland wildfire planning is also deeply siloed. The city contains power transmission facilities from three different utilities. PacifiCorp and the Bonneville Power Administration do not identify and high-risk zones in the city; PGE identifies only one – Forest Park.

Wildfire mitigation includes the bureaus of water, parks, fire, and emergency services. Parks has identified a number of high-risk zones – primarily Forest Park, and the hillsides along the eastern shore of the Willamette. In Portland, danger is in the eyes of the beholder.

Interestingly, although both PGE and the city identify Forest Park as a high-risk zone, neither addresses the adjacent Critical Energy Infrastructure Hub – six miles of highly flammable petrochemical storage.

High tech ignition surveillance of Forest Park consists of two Pano AI camera installations. They are located to the north and south, respectively, of PGE’s Harborton transmission upgrade project. And there is no ignition surveillance of the eastern hillsides of the Willamette.

Addressing wildfire risk starts with a risk evaluation, usually using Technosylva software. The standard assumption, which was used by Southern California Edison, is that the fire will rage unchecked for eight hours – providing an estimate of affected acreage. Valuation of structures within this area is used to calculate the costs and benefits of safety improvements and operational measures. In L.A., this eight-hour assumption underestimated the risk to Altadena of the adjacent power transmission lines, since the fire expanded more quickly and covered more area than estimated.

In the case of transmission lines within Forest Park and adjacent to the petrochemical storage hub south of Harborton, Portland’s utilities do not report specific wildfire risk studies, despite two of the three utilities using that Technosylva software. The large wildfire risk area at Oaks Bottom, adjacent to Sellwood and Westmoreland, lack both a risk evaluation and ignition surveillance.

There are many similarities between L.A. and Portland concerning wildfire risk. Unfortunately, the Eaton Fire teaches us that we are even less prepared than Los Angeles was a year ago.

We thank Mr. McCullough – who, among other things, runs a nationally-recognized firm called “mresearch”, serves as an expert witness at court trials, and is a Reed College graduate (1972) – for his thoughtful and worrisome analysis. And if you would like to hear more, and perhaps ask questions of him, he will be offering a detailed lecture on this subject, followed by a reception, on Tuesday evening, April 14th, from 6 to 9 p.m., in the Vollum Lecture Hall and Lounge at Reed College. There is no charge, and the public is welcome to attend.