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Thursday, September 17, 2020

To: Spencer Nebel, City Manager

From: Rob Murphy, Fire Chief

Re: Report on Fire Department response to the Echo Mountain Complex Fire

On Monday, September 7 Lincoln County experienced a historic east wind event. This event caused wide spread damage including power outages, downed wires, damaged trees, and fires. The two biggest were the Kimberling Mountain Fire and the Echo Mountain Fire. Both of these fires started just before midnight on September 7. They quickly grew and started spreading west along the Salmon River Drainage that includes Highway 18. First arriving units from North Lincoln Fire & Rescue quickly realized the severity of the situation and began emergency evacuations and requested more resources.

Over the next 6 days fire resources from Lincoln County, along with Tillamook, Yamhill, Polk, and Benton County all sent apparatus and personnel to help NLF&R. Newport Fire Department sent resources for 5 days in a row. On Tuesday, September 8, NFD had an Engine, a brush unit, a water tender, a Chief Officer all working the Echo Mountain Fire. We also sent an engine to cover Depoe Bay Fire District and staffed another engine and a rescue unit to cover Newport. All this was possible because the staff and volunteers of Newport Fire Department stepped up and answered the call when our neighbors needed help. We received support from our families, local businesses and members of the community who brought us food, water and other supplies. The support we received was very much appreciated.

As of this morning, the Echo Mountain Complex fire burned 2,552 acres. It is 45% contained. There are currently 575 personnel working the fire including hand crews, engine crews, water tenders and dozers. There are still 1,500 structures that are threatened. The Incident Management Team is currently listing 100 structures destroyed, however damage assessment is still in process and that number is expected to rise.

While this fire is still considered active, already discussions are beginning about what are the lessons to be learned from this. The analysis and review will take some time to complete, but it is imperative we do this, and do it right. We have to ask ourselves the hard questions such as what could we have done better, what gaps and vulnerabilities exist and how do we fix them. And

finally, we have to ask ourselves, can this happen again. This is probably one of the most important questions. I will tell you the answer is **YES**. We need to rid ourselves of the misnomer that wildfire is not a threat on the Oregon Coast. Wildfire has happened, and it will happen again. If Echo Mountain Fire had started 30 miles to the South, east of Newport, we would be the community who had lost homes and burned our forests. There have been documented major wildfires that burned the Oregon Coast as far back as the 1840's. Just three years ago, the 2,500 Road Fire threatened the City of Depoe Bay. Chief Pimlot (recently retired Chief of Cal-Fire) wrote that Southern California's wildfire problem is now Northern California's wildfire problem. So, then logic tells us that Northern California's wildfire problem is now Southern Oregon's wildfire problem, and so on. In 2017, the Chetco Bar Fire burned hundreds of thousands of acres and threatened the city of Brookings Oregon. This just emphasizes how real the threat of wildfire is here.

Once we accept that wildfire is a legitimate risk and that risk must be managed, what do we do? First, we need to recognize this danger is not just a problem for the Fire Department to deal with. This affects the entire community. We need to involve all levels of the community and local government. Second, we need to complete a thorough and objective review of the Echo Mountain Fire and our response so we can identify gaps, risks, and develop an action plan. I propose we focus on three main areas: Education, Preparation, and Mitigation.

#### **EDUCATION:**

- Educate residents on the dangers of wildfire, teach them about the "Ready, Set, Go" evacuation system, and encourage them to sign up for Lincoln Alerts for early notifications.
- Teach families to have a Ready, Set, Go plan. Know where your important documents are, know ahead of time what things you would want to load up if the call to evacuate came, and make sure all members of your family know the meeting place.
- Teach property owners what they need to do to develop and maintain a "survivable space". What trees and shrubs should be cut back, what plants are fire resistive, what types of vent covers prevent fire brands from entering your attic, etc.

#### **PREPERATION:**

- Perform a thorough and objective after action review of the City response to the Echo Mountain Fire. What went well, what should we have done different, analyze gaps and needs. Develop an action plan.
- Perform the same review on a County wide level. Because this fire was truly a County and region wide response.
- Develop a wildfire response plan. This differs from a Community Wildfire Protection Plan. A response plan spells out how each City Department would respond in the event of a wildfire. This plan then becomes an addendum to the City Emergency Operations Plan.

## **MITIGATION:**

- Property owners develop and maintain “Survivable Spaces” around their homes.
- Identify City properties at risk for wildfire and perform risk reduction measures. These may include: fuels reduction, maintaining and improving access roads, establishing preemptive closures of high-risk areas anytime the Fire Danger Level reaches “High”.
- The Fire Department has established 3 goals to have in place before the beginning of next fire season. First, have wildland PPE (Helmet, brush jacket, pants, boots) for all members who would fight a wildfire. Second, all members are trained to the Basic Wildland Firefighter Level (S-130, S-190). All officers are trained to the Engine Boss Level (S-290). Third, obtain and have in service a Type VI brush engine.

The damage that resulted from the Echo Mountain Complex Fire is tragic, and the people and community will be recovering for some time to come. We must do our part and recognize that wildfire is a legitimate threat to the Oregon Coast and the City of Newport. We all have a duty to recognize the hazards wildfire brings and work together to mitigate the risk and be better prepared to respond to future events. We cannot tell our selves “I didn’t believe it would ever happen here”.