

Wildfires ignite demand for firefighters and training facilities

■ Jeff Humphreys



Jeff Humphreys

Wildfires have become an existential threat to the Pacific Northwest, with their effects – in one way or another – felt by virtually everyone across Oregon. Our well-loved natural environments – national forests, state and local parks, and more – are increasingly affected by wildfires. In the past three years alone, nearly three million acres have burned in Oregon, leaving an aftermath of ecological destruction, economic ruin, and tragic loss of life. These fires are a heavy burden on our communities and are quickly amounting to billions of dollars in damage. As 2023's wildfire season ends, it is a good time to reflect on the region's firefighting facility needs and funding.

Why are wildfires increasing? Hotter and drier weather and oceanic wind shifts because of El Niño and La Niña are creating ideal conditions to ignite unprecedented wildfires. With this

rise, fire seasons are longer, and firefighting capabilities and resources are stretched past their limits. To combat the increase in wildfires, we need to increase our investment in firefighting training facilities.

I have focused my career on assessing and designing fire stations, from renovations and seismic upgrades to new facilities. I have been at it for more than two decades and am very passionate about these facilities and the individuals working out of them to serve their communities. I volunteer my time – and through that have been engaged (in the past) as a member of the International Fire Chiefs Association's Environmental Sustainability Committee, and locally as a member of the Oregon Fire Chiefs Foundation for the past 12 years. Most of the facilities I've been involved with are for rural communities, and so I have a strong personal connection to the challenges these agencies face.

Fire department or fire district

Fire agencies can be categorized into two main ones: fire departments or fire districts. Fire departments are typically municipal departments funded by city taxes, and are all or predominantly career staff, while fire districts generally serve several communities and unincorporated areas. Districts are funded by property taxes from the areas they serve and are composed of trained volunteers or a combination of volunteers and career staff. Unlike urban or many suburban fire agencies, rural fire agencies more frequently find themselves being required to respond to wildfire emergencies. Geographically, most of Oregon is served by fire districts.

Invest more in training facilities

Most fire agencies are entirely (or mostly) operated by volunteers. The need for highly skilled firefighters is growing because of the increase of catastrophic fires, and it's essential that we provide the training this force of firefighters –

both volunteer and career – need and deserve. Considering the dire threat wildfires pose nowadays, the facilities available to our rural fire districts are extremely limited. Location is important: ideally, a training center should be in the same region as the firefighters it will serve, minimizing travel time and maximizing local expertise.

Opportunities to meet this need are happening in Oregon. I have been involved in the preliminary study for the \$110 million Rogue Siskiyou Regional (RSR) Training Facility (the first phase will cost closer to \$60 million; it is not yet funded). This facility will be in Gold Beach and serve an area not currently served by a similar in-region fire training facility. It will be unique in Oregon, and the nation, in that it will be run by a local nonprofit organization.

The campus is in design stages but will provide the means to train individuals for wildfire fighting and other emergency response (for example, medical emergencies, vehicle accidents, and water rescue). In addition to training grounds, the facility will include classrooms, a dormitory, and a cafeteria. The facility will have services for those new to the firefighting service and

for career staff looking to expand or hone their skills.

A second regional training facility in the planning stages is CORE3 (Central Oregon Ready Responsive Resilient), a facility that will be in Redmond. The Central Oregon area also lacks adequate regional training facilities. The project will be phased, and eventually include a diverse array of training programs.

A need for funding

Funding is being pursued for both the RSR training facility and CORE3. Required amounts have been secured, but both still need more to cover the anticipated costs of constructing the planned training facility improvements. It is anticipated that some of the money can be secured via state and federal sources, but more will be required.

We all can help by practicing good habits when visiting nature or camping, and avoiding inadvertently being the cause of wildfires. We can also help support these future training facilities by contacting the governor's office, our state senator, or our state representative. Ask your legislators to support our firefighters by funding much-needed resources like the Rogue Siskiyou

Regional (RSR) Training Facility and CORE3 facility. While the funding process is complicated, the more awareness of the need for improvement, the better.

The firefighting profession is an integral service for the common good in the Pacific Northwest, and we need to ensure that we support the profession with the tools and training necessary for a dangerous and essential job. We need to nurture the skills of a younger generation entering the firefighting profession, helping them meet the challenges of an age of catastrophic wildfires.

Investment in training facilities will help safeguard the lives of our firefighters, our communities, and our ecosystem. Let's all help by advocating for these facilities so they can become reality.

Jeff Rhys Humphreys is a principal and architect at Mackenzie. He co-leads the firm's public project business unit, with a specialty in designs of essential facilities like fire stations. Contact him at 971-346-3769 or jhumphreys@mckenze.com.

The opinions, beliefs and viewpoints expressed in the preceding commentary are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the opinions, beliefs and viewpoints of the Daily Journal of Commerce or its editors. Neither the author nor the DJC guarantees the accuracy or completeness of any information published herein.