

Wildfire Mitigation Shapes Successful Outcomes During and After the 2025 Flat Fire in Oregon

Overview

The [Flat Fire](#) started on August 21, 2025, at 4:29 pm a few miles west of Lake Billy Chinook in Jefferson County, Oregon. The fire grew to an estimated 3,000 acres through the first night and eventually to 23,346 acres. Rapid fire growth was due to persistent hot, dry and windy conditions and the steep slopes and difficult firefighting terrain of the Whychus Creek and Deschutes River canyons.

As the Flat Fire spread, 1,450 homes were under immediate threat, while over 4,000 homes were under evacuation order. Despite the fire's size and location threatening the nearby City of Sisters, only five homes and a limited number of outbuildings were lost. Land managers, elected officials, and emergency responders credited extensive mitigation work that was collaboratively designed and implemented as the primary reason why more homes did not burn. Mitigation activities included fuel breaks, defensible space, home hardening, and other proactive measures on public and private lands. This summary highlights several key groups and activities that contributed to successful outcomes during and after the Flat Fire.

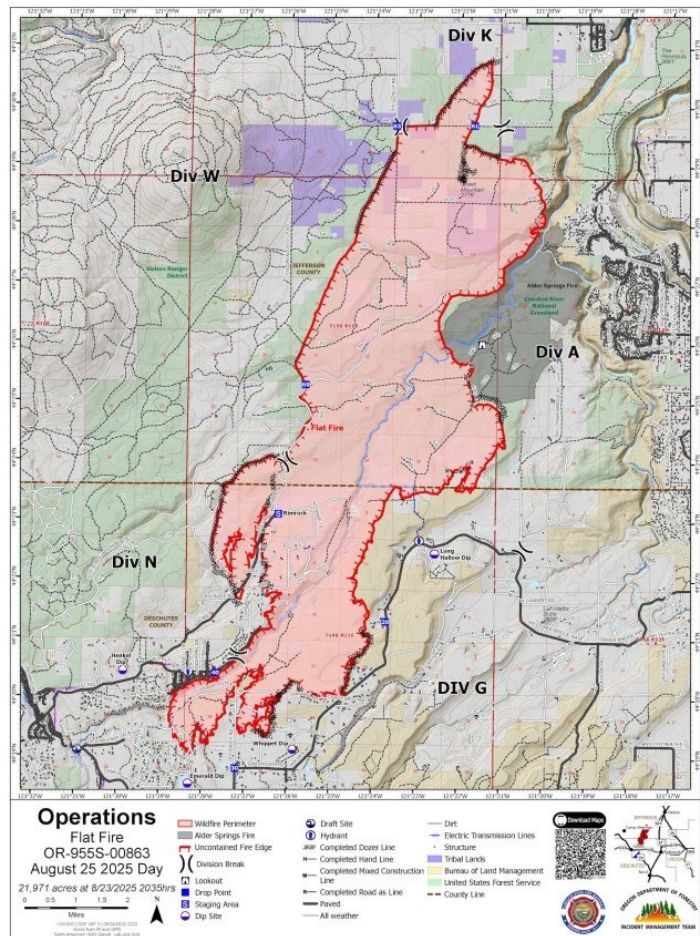


Figure 1. A map showing the Flat Fire perimeter on August 23, 2025 (printed on August 25, 2025). Credit: Oregon Department of Forestry

Identifying Opportunities for a Comprehensive Approach

For the past several decades, many agencies, organizations, and community members have engaged in wildfire mitigation activities throughout the area where the Flat Fire burned or threatened. These groups include the Oregon Department of Forestry, Oregon Department of State Lands, Sisters-Camp Sherman Fire District, Deschutes County, City of Sisters, Deschutes Land Trust, Whychus Canyon Estates community, other private landowners, U.S. Forest Service, and Bureau of Land Management. A large motivating factor for engagement was previous fire history in the area and its ongoing threat to communities and landscapes.

Over time, many stakeholders working in Central Oregon recognized there was a cluster of mitigation projects occurring in the same area. With this recognition, groups saw an opportunity to work more collaboratively and look for ways to stitch mitigation efforts together to align projects for a comprehensive approach. “Once we noticed that [our mitigation efforts] were working out that way, we became more conscious of it and started directing that a little bit more...why don't we see if we can fill in the gaps? And we started targeting the outreach a little bit better,” says Eric Metzger, Community Wildfire Forester for the Oregon Department of Forestry (Central Oregon District).

Using a Range of Activities to Increase Effectiveness

Mitigation projects in Central Oregon have spanned a range of activities: fuel treatments, vegetation management, forest restoration, fuels thinning, defensible space, home hardening, property assessments, education campaigns, and neighborhood engagement programs. Some of these activities focus more on forest and ecosystem health while others are specifically intended to reduce wildfire risk to homes. All these activities have shared an overarching goal of increasing resilience across the region.

The size of mitigation projects has varied. Some treatments are several hundred acres, such as those on National Forest lands. Other treatments have occurred on privately-owned 5-, 10-, or 20-acre parcels. Staff from the [Sisters-Camp Sherman Fire](#) district have also offered educational opportunities and offered free assessments to help homeowners mitigate their properties. As a result, many homeowners voluntarily retrofitted their homes or created defensible space to address vulnerabilities.



Figure 2. The Flat Fire threatened many homes, including this one, where fire burned close to the structure. Previous mitigation work based on recommendations from the Sisters-Camp Sherman Fire District removed combustibles from around the home and increased defensible space which spared the home from fire damage. Credit: Sisters-Camp Sherman Fire District

In some cases, community members have worked together to maximize their impact. For example, the Whychus Canyon Estates – located approximately six miles northeast of Sisters – is a recognized [Firewise/USA® Site](#). Within the community, 28 property owners voluntarily signed an agreement with the Deschutes County Natural Resources Department that resulted in the County creating a 24-acre contiguous shaded fuel break that extended past property lines along the canyon rim. The purpose of this project was to reduce hazardous fuels that posed a risk to Whychus Canyon Estates residents. This project was part of an Oregon State Department of Forestry 20-year Landscape Resiliency strategy and funded through combined funding sources, including the [Western States Fire Manager's Grant](#) and local fundraising donated through the Whychus Canyon Estates [Community Firewise Portal](#).

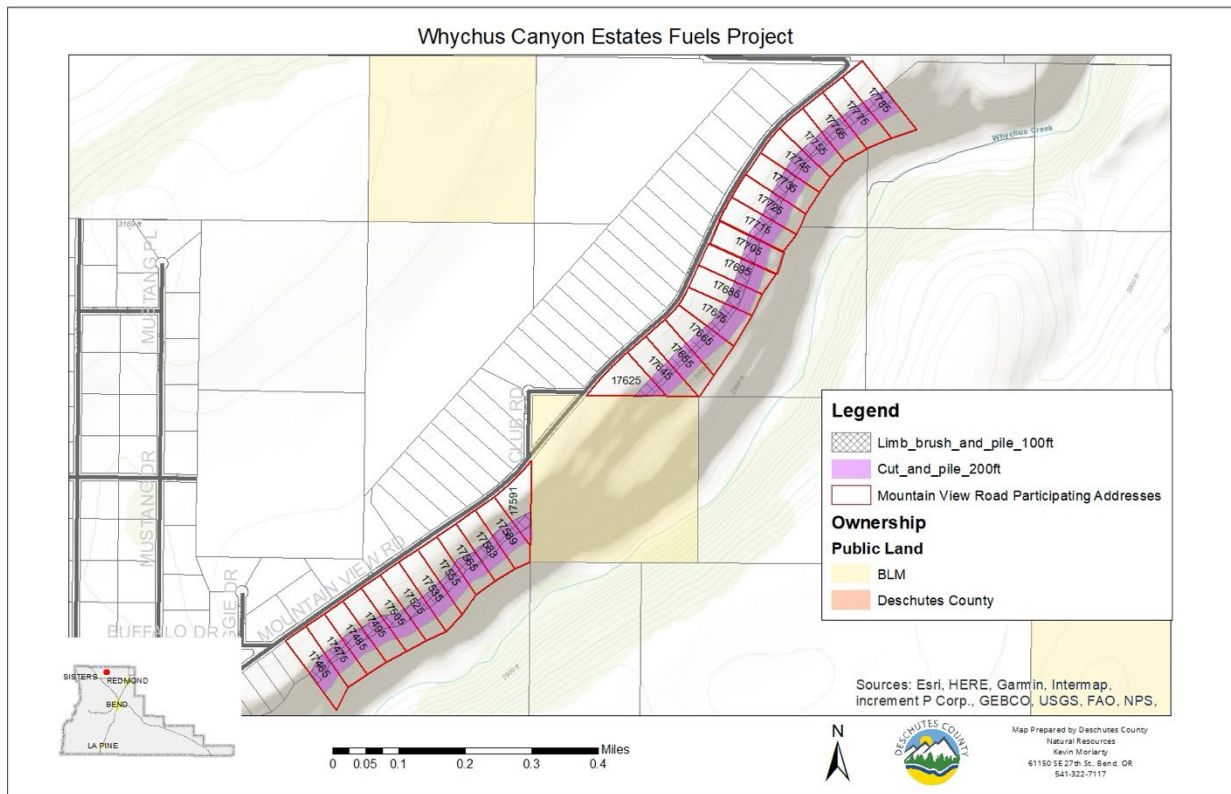


Figure 3. A project map identifying the fuel treatment area in the Whychus Canyon Estates that created a 200 ft. shaded fuel break along the canyon rim. Credit: Deschutes County

During the Flat Fire, these mitigation efforts paid off. The Whychus Canyon Estates defensible space served as a fuel break in the Whychus Canyon and helped firefighters control the Flat Fire when it threatened that community. Fire behavior was also observed to be less intense in other treated areas compared to areas without fuel treatment. First responders reported they felt safer in areas with treatment, allowing them to stay and fight the fire and protect homes. Jeff Puller, Fire Marshal for the Sisters-Camp Sherman Fire District, says of the mitigation: “it gave us a fighting chance for keeping homes and making some attacks on those fires.” This was instrumental, especially for the more than 800 homes that were directly threatened by the Flat Fire.



Figure 4. Sisters-Camp Sherman Fire District created an educational video about mitigation that property owners undertook and how it helped during the Flat Fire. Credit: Screenshot from the Building a Safer Sisters: Fuels Reduction, Firewise, and our Path Forward video, available at <https://vimeo.com/1118789429>)

“It just worked out beautifully that where we stopped the Flat Fire was exactly, literally exactly on the county-treated land, [Oregon Department of Forestry] National Fire Plan treated lands, Sisters’ treated lands...it’s a great way to explain when cross-boundary treatments happen to be there, how effective they can be,” Metzger says.

After the Flat Fire, land managers found that properties where forest thinning had occurred fared better than untreated areas. Forest thinning had the effect of lowering fire intensity and bringing the fire from tree crowns to the surface. This also helped trees within the treated areas survive. Many of these local observations align with [well-documented research](#) on the effectiveness of fuel treatments to support fire suppression efforts, reduce fire spread and reduce fire severity.

Mitigation was funded through different federal, state, and local sources, including National Fire Plan grants, a USDA and NRCS Joint Chiefs’ landscape restoration partnership program called [Buttes to Basins](#), state and county programs, non-profit organizations, and private property owners.

Looking Ahead at Future Resilience

“Five years ago, this fire would have been exponentially more destructive” says Jennifer Letz, Mayor of Sisters. While serving as Mayor, Letz has drawn on her background in wildfire and land management to help champion City mitigation efforts. Prior to the fire in the Spring of 2025, the City of Sisters adopted [defensible space standards](#) for new development. Following the fire, Deschutes County and the City of Sisters approved local ordinances adopting the wildfire mitigation requirements of the [Oregon Residential Specialty Code](#)

[Section R327](#). These provisions are mandatory on all new dwellings and all new accessory structures as of April 1, 2026. Sisters is also looking at other potential changes in their municipal code to address existing structures.



Figure 5. This photo shows the Flat Fire burned at a higher intensity on untreated lands (left) versus the privately owned treated land (right). Firefighters were able to respond to the fire on the treated area. Credit: Oregon Department of Forestry

The Flat Fire and corresponding mitigation successes have resulted in increased voluntary engagement. The Sisters-Camp Sherman Fire District has reported an uptick in property assessment requests, and more neighborhoods in Deschutes County are interested in becoming part of Firewise/USA® program. A group of landowners pursued and received approval to do 150 feet of defensible space-related work on public lands managed by the Bureau of Land Management immediately adjacent to their properties.

As the City of Sisters is likely to expand its urban growth boundary into the same footprint of the Flat Fire, these efforts are helpful to both current and future residents. “All this work that’s already been happening is probably only going to be more and more important. Even just in the next few years, as more of that land gets pulled into the City,” says Kyle Collins, Senior Planner for Deschutes County. In addition, the City’s activities have encouraged other communities in Deschutes County, including the City of Bend, to consider pursuing local code adoption and other mitigation activities to reduce wildfire risk.

Acknowledgements

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