

Ben: My name is Ben and I am a fourth grader in Cascade Locks Elementary School. I was just watching TV with my little brother, and I noticed they were talking about some sort of fire, so they showed me outback, and this humungous cloud of smoke. It was crazy and, that looked like a giant volcano, and I was really terrified and stuff.

Graham Z.: Ben is a student at Cascade Locks Elementary School. He was evacuated with everyone else in town on September 3rd, 2017, after the Eagle Creek fire threatened to burn the town and the school to the ground.

Ben: So my parents just packed the stuff and we left. I was worried that I was going to come back to see our house burnt down, and one of the other things I was worried about was maybe one of our pets dying.

Graham Z.: It was a traumatizing experience for all the kids in town, as their lives were turned upside down, they wondered if the world they knew would still be there after the fire. That's a tough experience at any age, but especially for a child. Fortunately, Ben and his family made it through the fire without any loss or damage, as did the rest of Cascade Locks. Then last summer, a year after the fire, the kids got the opportunity to go for a hike in the gorge with some scientists, who could explain what sort of process the forest was going through, sharing that this was a natural thing for the forest, and that it would heal and regrow.

Janet Arthur: I think before we went on the field trip, the kids still were carrying around a lot of confusion and fear around what happened in the fire and how it affected their lives.

Graham Z.: That's Janet Arthur, a teacher at Ben's school, who joined the kids on their hike. She told us about many of the challenges for these youngsters before, during, and after the fire.

Janet Arthur: He'd been one that had suffered quite a bit as far as having to relocate three or four times during the Eagle Creek fire, so he had a lot of, I would say, trauma around that whole issue.

Graham Z.: In the end, the field trip was really transformative and profound for all the children, and helped them move past a lot of their fears for the forest and for themselves.

Janet Arthur: We walked through the forest, they had us looking for specific things, and I was actually even amazed at how things looked to be, you know, boots on the ground, with what we were seeing and how things were changing, growing back already was amazing, and this was July.

Ben: And, we got to see the forest, and learn how it was actually pretty good for the forest, and it was still really beautiful and stuff. There was a lot more vegetation

and life than I expected, and even though yesterday it was a lot of burnt stuff, it wasn't too bad. And there was generally still a lot of plants surrounding it. I felt like it was natural.

Janet Arthur: There was awe in their eyes, and the experts were telling us how the forest would now be better because of this, and how forests go through cycles, and this happens every so often, and that's how the forest rebuilds itself. And then when we were looking for signs of life and growth, and they really just were on their hands and knees, just really looking over things as if their little eyes were, you know, like just melded into the ground. You know, just, it was wonderful, it just gives me shivers.

Janet Arthur: Their trauma had somehow just sort of been healed, you know, or at least the beginnings of healing of their trauma. Yeah. It just, it did, it was just magical, it really was. And I tell people that was like, one of the best day of my entire summer.

Jim Aikman: And, do you think that now the forest is getting better?

Ben: Yeah, I think the forest is going to be okay.

Jim Aikman: And you get to grow up with the trees, like, the trees are growing back, grown back and you're growing up.

Ben: Yeah. I did get like about a nine or 10 year ahead start, but they live longer anyway.

Jim Aikman: That's awesome.

Ben: Sitting in the tiny, colorful chairs in the library of Cascade Locks Elementary School, Jim and I were both moved by the full circle that these kids had experienced with the fire, presenting yet another silver lining to the disaster in Cascade Locks. From the terror of the first days, fearing that they would lose the safety and security of their whole world in that town, to a place of excitement and wonder at the beautiful regeneration that is now happening.

Ben: They're having the chance to watch the natural environment recover from trauma, and like Janet said, perhaps even recover from a bit of their own. As far as silver linings go, that feels really good. However, in another room down the road at Hood River, a young man's outlook was not quite so bright.

Ben: As the fire died down, a large scale criminal investigation immediately swung into action, involving a number of law enforcement agencies. The community wanted somebody to pin the tragedy on, and they wanted a swift sentencing. Oregon State Police worked in conjunction with the US Forest Service to determine conclusively that their suspect, the 15 year old boy from Vancouver, Washington, was in fact the one who threw the smoke bomb into the forest.

Ben: When the kid arrived at the arraignment, he was charged with a litany of crimes, from reckless burning, to the ambiguous catchall of 'criminal mischief'. If the judge determined that he set off the smoke bomb intending to start a fire, then he could be charged with first degree arson, which could come with seven and a half years in prison, or worse. Fortunately for him, he would be tried it as a juvenile and his case would remain anonymous, but for the kid, the good news pretty much stopped there, as he and his family prepared for Judgment Day.

Ben: This is Wildfire, a podcast about the past, present, the future of wildfire in North America. I'm your host, Graham Zimmerman, and I've teamed up with my dear friend and co-host, Jim Aikman, to tell this story. Our goal with this podcast is to supply you with the info that you need to be a more informed citizen on this fascinating and devastating subject. This is episode five, the future of wildfire.

Ben: As we have talked about wildfire, we have used the story of Oregon Eagle Creek Fire in 2017 to bring home the important elements of the discussion. In the last episode we took a look at the history of wildfire management in North America, and looking back at Eagle Creek, we did some introspection about the young man who started it. For this final episode, I'll be looking into the political spectrum around wildfire, and also looking into some management solutions for dealing with future wildfire in the United States. But first, Jim'll be wrapping things up in the Columbia River Gorge, concluding the story of the Eagle Creek Fire.

Ben: And so now, we're going to fast forward away from the first few weeks and months of the fire, to a time when the acute danger of the fire had faded into memory, when the ashes stopped falling, and we were all waiting to see what would come next.

Jim Aikman: When I first started talking to people about the kid that started the fire, I defaulted to hushed tones and careful language, as if we were sharing secrets or something, because I knew how highly charged this subject is. Everyone that lives in this area has feelings about that kid, feelings which have certainly changed over time, but not necessarily shrunk in intensity.

Jim Aikman: It's been an interesting journey for me personally, to spend so much time considering what he did and trying to understand where he came from. We've shared what we know about him from the news, and we've done a modest amount of speculating about what's going on in kids' heads, speaking with the school counselor in the last episode, but for this episode, where we're bringing the kid's story to a conclusion, I really wanted to get even deeper, to try and build a more complete picture of a person who has become highly mysterious to me.

Jim Aikman: With the little information that was provided about him, remember that we never learned his name, it's too easy for imaginations to run wild, which isn't always healthy. And so, in the early months of 2018, the kid was preparing for

his day in court. His name, his family, his lawyer, his court date, all of those details remained confidential, because the community had not reacted very graciously to his crime, and that's putting it lightly. He received death threats, all kinds of aggression, more accurately, people were pissed and wanted justice.

Noah Brown: Oh man, I hated the kid.

Jim Aikman: That's Noah Brown, a high school student from Salem who was one of the hikers that was trapped by the fire, along with Robbie Dunn's from the first episode.

Noah Brown: He just destroyed this, like insanely beautiful, meaningful place, just because of the some ignorant dumb move on his part.

Jim Aikman: And here's Robbie.

Robbie Dones: Our lives were affected, and guaranteed that we got extremely lucky with what happened, or in our situation. You know, that fire got met with a lot of environmental limitations that like stopped it from going, I think, like full Chernobyl.

Jim Aikman: Of course, everyone I spoke to was angry at this kid for what he did, but I wanted to hear from him. Was He angry at himself? I spent a lot of time over the last few months trying to make contact, and in the end I decided to let it go, but my curiosity remains peaked, really more than ever. So I set out to find a little bit more about his community to try and understand where he comes from. Scouring news articles, I gleaned the bare minimum of information.

Jim Aikman: He's the third oldest sibling in a large family. His father is a cook, often preparing meals for their church group where his mother sings in the choir. He's close with his family, his church, and his friends, and perhaps most interesting, he moved here with his family from Ukraine in 2000. The Portland area actually has a large community of Ukrainian and Russian speaking immigrants who've arrived over the last century. In the beginning of the 20th century, many people fled the Soviet Union during the Bolshevik Revolution.

Jim Aikman: After World War II, thousands more were displaced and found a new home in the States. And more recently, after Soviet travel restrictions lessened in the 80s, we've seen a lot of chain migration, where families from Russia and the Ukraine come to the States to join family members who have already established a home here.

Matthew Tate: You have what, now we call the new Russians.

Jim Aikman: That's the Father Matthew Tate, a priest at an Eastern Orthodox Church in Portland with a high number of Ukrainians in his congregation.

Matthew Tate: And they're a whole different types of people, all three waves are totally different.

Jim Aikman: I reached out to Father Matthew because I wanted to paint a clearer image of the kind of world this kid lives in. This is obviously a delicate matter and I don't want to assume too much, but speaking with Father Matthew did give me a better impression of the Ukrainian immigrant community, what they value and why they're here.

Matthew Tate: So they love their own culture, they love their own food, you know, they love their language, and they love their history, and they share that with each other, and they don't exclude us. They're very interested in the American life, and history, and things like that sort, and generally speaking, they're pretty happy and thankful to be here.

Jim Aikman: Father Matthew characterized Ukrainians as somewhat conservative, family oriented, somewhat insular, but very happy to be living in the US. So when the news broke that the kid was a Ukrainian immigrant, that community was rightfully concerned. They feared an anti-immigrant backlash and prayed that it would not change the welcoming environment that they had found here in the Pacific Northwest. And to get even closer, Father Matthew introduced me to Father Valotamere Yvorski, a pastor at a Ukrainian church in Portland. He moved to the states in 2013.

Jim Aikman: I feel bad asking such a simple question about something that is such a big subject, but what's the experience like in this particular area to be an immigrant?

Valodymir Y.: [inaudible 00:13:08], im migrant is, I think, is a very nice place to be here. Pretty easy to live here for the Ukrainians that just came from Ukraine. It's a very welcoming place.

Jim Aikman: I was relieved to hear that this area has been warm and welcoming to people like Father Valotamere, the kid and his family, and started to understand their fears about backlash, threatening everything they'd built here. Are fireworks at all like the Ukrainian cultural thing?

Valodymir Y.: It's very popular for Christmas, and maybe for Easter, or it might be for [inaudible 00:13:42] New Year to have fireworks. It's very popular, pretty popular in Ukraine. And especially, in Ukraine, to have like this fireworks is very expensive, because when you come to USA you see you can afford good fireworks, probably just wanted to try it.

Jim Aikman: So this was maybe something that culturally he was pretty used to doing, he didn't know what-

Valodymir Y.: Yes, yes.

Jim Aikman: How dry and what those consequences would really be.

Valodymir Y.: Yes, yes, probably. In Ukraine you sometimes go, and you could fun, and everything, and do like fireworks, and other things, and it's like, sure it was like accident, you know. Maybe he wasn't very careful, and now, because of this accident he has done, in big trouble. Usually Ukrainians, like in other countries, they like followed the law, you know, very strictly. Very rarely they can find someone that doesn't follow the law. They're hardworking people, they don't cause any trouble, and also, Ukrainian are those people who prefer to assimilate to the culture than fight against the culture. You know?

Jim Aikman: Of course, I had every expectation to hear that Ukrainians are kind, considerate people, who love this area as much as the rest of us, and everything I was hearing was leading me to assume that this kid is probably a nice guy with respect for the laws and cultural mores of this country. But he had made a huge mistake, and he would have to pay a price for that. There was just no way around it.

Jim Aikman: He had started a fire that burned 49,000 acres of forest, 76 square miles. A fire that closed a major highway, keeping hundreds of thousands of people from visiting the gorge, and its many businesses that rely on tourism to stay afloat. Oregon Parks and Recreation had to lay off a few dozen people to make up for lost business.

Jim Aikman: The many families of the gorge that evacuated suffered enormous financial burdens and emotional trauma. 5,000 homes were threatened by the fire. The slopes of the gorge were destabilized as the root systems holding the dirt together burned up, leaving it prone to landslides and rockfall. The fire rained ash on Portland for days, and the smoke-filled air was a serious health hazard for more than a week. Many of the trails and campgrounds in the gorge are still close to this day. Clearly the consequences of this fire were far reaching, and all of this would need to be considered in court.

Jim Aikman: By all accounts, the trial was contentious. One article called it a lot of hemming and hawing. The judge had a difficult time finding the words for his closing statement, saying, "A national treasure is scarred for generations." Even he had a hard time keeping his emotions out of the ruling.

Jim Aikman: On Friday, February 16th, the kid pled guilty to a total of 12 charges. Eight counts of reckless burning, two counts of throwing away lighted materials in a prohibited area, one count of criminal mischief, one count of recklessly endangering another person, and possession of fireworks. And in the end, after a difficult trial, the judge came up with his punishment. The kid would serve no jail time, but he would be fined the total amount of damages from the fire, and that added up to \$36,618,330 and 24 cents. Truly an astronomical number.

Jim Aikman: The kid will be set up for monthly payments for the rest of his life. His payments will be split between the people affected by the fire, the Oregon Department of Transportation, and the US Forest Service. The kid's lawyer called it absurd, and cruel, and unusual. It's really an unimaginable number for most of us, and not something this kid would realistically ever be able to pay.

Jim Aikman: Apparently it's not unusual in Oregon for people starting criminally negligent fires to be fined for the entire amount of damages, but never has a case involved such a high price tag. On top of the fine, he was given five years of probation. He must be home every day between the hours-

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Jim Aikman: ... was given five years of probation. He must be home, every day, between the hours of 6:00 PM and 6:00 AM and he cannot leave Washington and Oregon states. He was given nearly 2,000 hours of community service and would have to write letters apologizing to everyone impacted by the fire, and he was banned from ever returning to the Columbia River Gorge Scenic Area. His life had changed forever.

Speaker 1: It made me upset because it wasn't about trying to find the learning moment and trying to find the fix in this situation. It was about just punishing him and judge, jury, executioner, people didn't care what happened or anything else, but the story, they just saw headlines, saw red, and they wanted him to feel bad and be punished for it. I feel like that was not the best way to handle the situation.

Jim Aikman: Reading the news and hearing from all these people, it's still really hard for me to wrap my head around the outcome of his trial.

Speaker 2: And to have that on your back, and especially how long the fire lasted, how worked up people in this area got, rightfully so, for what was going on, I think he's well aware of the damage that he made and I think, personally, there's going to be a lot to have to live with. That's going to be tough.

Jim Aikman: The kid declined to speak to any journalists or address the public, except for a single statement that he read at his trial. Here's what he said.

Jim Aikman: "I want to express how sorry I am for what I did. I know a lot of people suffered because of a bad decision that I made. I'm sorry, to the first responders who risked their lives to put out the fires. I'm sorry, to the hikers who were trapped. I am sorry to the people who worried about their safety, and their homes that day, and for weeks afterwards. I am truly sorry about the loss of nature that occurred because of my careless action."

Jim Aikman: "Every day I think about this terrible decision and it's awful consequences. Every time I hear people talk about the fire, I put myself down. I know I will have to live with this bad decision for the rest of my life. I know I have to earn your

forgiveness, and one day I hope I will. I apologize with all my heart to everyone in the Gorge."

Jim Aikman: The kid's mother also made very few public statements, but did share that her son had suffered emotional trauma from the experience. There is no doubt that he was feeling the gravity of his punishment and the devastating implications that it had on his future.

Jim Aikman: Sharing all of this out loud, it still feels really heavy. Exploring this subject, trying to understand the kid and his community, I really can't help but feel for that young man. And it makes me wonder, did he really deserve such a harsh treatment? Don't Americans do the same thing every year in July? All over the country, people are reckless and irresponsible with fireworks. I spent the 4th of July in Bend last year where somebody started a fire in the middle of the day on Pilot Butte, a busy park right in the middle of town, and the city still proceeded with their massive fireworks show that evening at the same park, in spite of the risks.

Jim Aikman: In central Oregon in 2013 outside Warm Springs, a woman started a wildfire on purpose, just so her firefighter friends would have something to do. She intentionally burned more than 50,000 acres of land, and she was only fined \$7.9 million. She hadn't started that fire by accident, it was intentional, and she was fined a fraction of the kid's punishment.

Jim Aikman: And in Eagle Creek, it truly was an accident. Police spent months questioning the kid, studying video evidence and social media posts, and determined that he did not intend to start a fire in that forest. The fact is, even if he hadn't started that fire, with that smoke bomb, it would have happened eventually, one way or another. It was inevitable that that forest would burn. As we've learned throughout this series, it simply has too. In fact, experts even agree that the forests in that area were overdue for a major fire. Overdue.

Jim Aikman: After everything we've learned on this podcast, the many conversations with experts and scientists, was this outcome really a fair and rational punishment for one kid's stupid mistake?

Jim Aikman: We learned earlier in the series how people around here feel about their Gorge, and the idea that they had lost a loved one, led to some really reactionary emotions that I have to think had an influence on the ruling. But over the last two years, since the fire went out, tempers around here have definitely cooled. It seemed like everyone I talked to had come around to a place of empathy and compassion, replacing anger and vengeance.

Speaker 1: I feel like everyone's been a 16 year old dumb kid before and it does not absolve some one of responsibility of their action, but I do believe that the opportunity for redemption is much more paramount when you're that age.

- Speaker 3: As time has passed, you start to get different viewpoints. Start to understand, like oh yeah, he didn't know any better.
- Speaker 2: Now that time has passed and we've learned more about that situation, I think he made a really, really, really bad mistake. But I don't think that he needs to be vilified the way that some people would like for him to be punished. I think having this ... the damage he caused [inaudible 00:23:25] his own consciousness is enough. He has to live with that shame his whole life.
- Speaker 4: I'm not angry anymore. I'm disappointed in the choices that he made, and maybe he'll learn something from it.
- Speaker 4: The only reason that I'm able to move forward, move past it a little bit, is because I'm a mom now and I know that one day my child will make mistakes and I hope that they're not that massive.
- Speaker 5: Is it heartbreakingly sad that it was some kid that started it? Yeah, that's, from the level of a parent, I just can't imagine it. Cannot imagine it. That was the worst day. That was the worst day, for a lot of parents to see that.
- Jim Aikman: Unfortunately for the kid, there's no going back in time to let some of that compassion influence his punishment. But he will get the chance, after 10 years, to have the \$37 million fine re-evaluated. I personally hope that he gets a little more objectivity and understanding from the judge who will hopefully know a little bit more about how forests work, but we'll have to wait and see.
- Jim Aikman: We've learned that fires are a natural part of this Gorge, and always will be. The fire in Eagle Creek certainly started in a very unfortunate way, but we now know that it would have happened either way, which makes me wonder, was this kid a scapegoat? A victim of circumstance caught in a perfect storm. I'm really not sure.
- Jim Aikman: And the final question becomes, isn't the system of forestry management that left the Columbia River Gorge so extremely vulnerable to a catastrophic fire as much to blame for what happened in Eagle Creek as this 15 year old kid? And if so, should the full burden of responsibility fall on his head? Should he bear all of the blame and pay the whole price? Of course this kid should be punished, he committed a crime that caused horrible devastation, but shouldn't we also be taking a look at our forestry policies to better prevent this kind of thing? And of course we could all be more careful and responsible with how we interact with nature, but do we need to learn that at his expense?
- Jim Aikman: To be clear, I do not have the answers, but here we are, two years later, and the fire is out. The kid has been charged and is carrying on with his payments and community service. It's safe to say that he's learned his lesson. At least I hope so. And I hope that we've all learned some valuable lessons as well. To be better stewards of our planet. To be more responsible in nature. To be more humble

and respectful and compassionate. And above all else, I hope that it can lead to an opportunity for healing. For the people hurt by the fire to heal. For the kid and his family to heal. And finally, for the forest to heal and regrow.

Graham: You're back with Graham now. As we've just heard from Jim, we've moved past the Eagle Creek fire. It's now almost two years in the rear view mirror and we're entering the 2019 wildfire season. But the fire didn't up and die with a single definitive final gasp. Instead, it simmered quietly in the Gorge for quite some time.

Graham: Here's Patrick Shannon from the National Forest Foundation, whom we'll hear from a lot more later in the episode.

Patrick Shannon: The good thing is that it happening late in the year we knew that the rain was going to come and that really helped quite a bit to put the fire out. And in the wintertime the Gorge gets lots of rain, so it did dampen the fire. Once it was contained, the forest service kept monitoring it and didn't declare it fully out. I was surprised at that, and throughout the winter they didn't declare it out despite the fact that we are getting a whole bunch of rain.

Graham: Of course, we were all happy that the primary threat of the fire was gone, even if the fire was not fully out. It was the end of a long and emotional nightmare, but this was just one fire, in one Gorge, in one state. As we've learned, this is a national issue. Catastrophic fires have been ravaging the western United States every summer for a long, long time now, and it only seems to be getting worse.

Graham: So, what are we doing at a political level from the top down to combat this problem? How do our politicians think that we should proceed? They are, after all, the ones we elected to make this kind of decision.

Graham: As we look to the future of wildfire and how we deal with it, for better or for worse, we cannot discount politics and the important role that they play in this conversation. Not only do lawmakers have massive sway in how we deal with our forests as a society, but also, in the United States, we live in a representative democracy, meaning that our vote for these lawmakers is one of our primary ways to effect this conversation.

Graham: In the case of the Eagle Creek fire, we have a very interesting case study in partisan politics derived primarily from a congressional line that is drawn directly through the burn area, nearly straight down Eagle Creek. That line is the split between the 2nd and 3rd Representative Districts of Oregon.

Graham: The 2nd District of Oregon is enormous, encompassing all of sparsely populated central and eastern Oregon. This is where I live, and out here we're represented by Greg Walden, an entrenched Republican. The 3rd district encompasses Clackamas and Multnomah Counties, which includes much of Portland, which is

where Jim lives, and this area is represented by a staunch Democrat named Earl Blumenauer.

Graham: Between Jim and me, we live on both sides of this district line and are represented, independently, by two politicians with drastically different outlooks. So I dug in to find out how representatives who share this Eagle Creek burn area feel about the future of wildfire. And, as a quick note, we reached out to both of these guys and to their staff but were unable to line up meetings, so this is all based on their voting records and past statements.

Graham: Walden and Blumenauer approached the wildfire conversation from nearly opposite ends of the spectrum. Blumenauer is primarily focused on disaster relief. He is considered a leader in Congress on disaster preparedness, mitigation, and recovery. In September, 2017 he shared that, "The devastation of the wildfires at home in Oregon and hurricanes in the southeast require our urgent efforts to help the victims of these tragic events, but also show how vital it is to reduce future risks."

Graham: This quote from 2015 demonstrated that he also sees dealing with climate change as an important part of the solution. "The scientific evidence and the overwhelming consensus it has created as clear, the immediate impacts of record temperatures, erratic and very dangerous weather patterns, ocean acidification, drought, disease, social disruption, and wildfires, all have predictable impacts that already cost us dearly, with many more severe problems on the horizon."

Graham: Walden, on the other hand, has recently come around to agreeing that climate change is a potential issue, but has been focused on forestry management as our solution moving forward. In February of this year, he said, "Oregonians choke on smoke every summer from wildfires that burn across our poorly managed federal forests, filling our skies with ash, and polluting our air sheds with carbon dioxide. Managing our forests not only reduces the risk of these catastrophic fires, but the intergovernmental panel on climate change says that sustainably managing our forests will create the longest sustained carbon mitigation benefit."

Graham: So we're really looking at two different solutions coming from two sides of the aisle. One that is primarily focused on adaptation to climate change, while making sure that we have disaster relief in place, and the other saying that we just need to manage our forests better. Both sound reasonable. So, what is the solution and why can't they agree?

Graham: To find out, I stepped away from the political world and went to track down a fellow named Dr. Paul Hesburgh. As I've talked to folks in the scientific community, Paul's name has come up time and time again as a thought leader in the realm of wildfire and planning for the future. He has been working as a Forester for 41 years, 35 of which have been spent with the Forest Service

Research and Development Group where he works as a Landscape Ecologist and Fire Ecologist in the Pacific Northwest Research Station.

Graham: On top of all of this, he holds affiliate professorships at the University of Washington, Oregon State University, University of Idaho and Washington State University. This guy knows his stuff, and we got straight into it.

Dr. Paul H: As a Research Landscape Ecologist I study large landscapes, and essentially, I explore what makes them tick. What we found has been pretty striking. We've been finding that the annual acres burned has been revving up and increasing consistently from year to year and decade to decade, and that us quite alarmed. One of the things that we're seeing is this nexus of a warming and drying climate interacting with something like a hundred years or more of fire exclusion, which increased the area of forests and it increased the density of many of our forests, and this is a pretty hot recipe when you think about it.

Graham: With this, I asked Paul to give me a clear answer on whether or not climate change is real and how it might affect forest fires.

Dr. Paul H: The studies throughout the world now are really conclusive. Rational minds aren't arguing about whether or not we're living in a new climate change world. We are, period. Most of the acres in the US today are being burned in these extreme fire weather events. It's impossible to put firefighters in front of those lanes because death and damage is a high certainty. This is something that should really get our attention.

Graham: The obvious question then is, what do we do and is this old method of fire suppression, that in this show we've been very critical of, still part of the program?

Dr. Paul H: It's irresponsible to go forward and not still try to use fire suppression as an active component of a toolkit, but the key is that fire suppression alone can't solve this riddle. So this cohesive strategy has got a three legged stool approach, and it makes a ton of sense.

Dr. Paul H: The first one, like I suggested before, is that we continue to do safe and effective fire suppression. Our wildfire response is to protect people, instructors, and human communities. But where we have the opportunity, we used fire in ways that are clever, proactively, to basically buy down that problem.

Dr. Paul H: We need to create wildfire adapted communities. People need to harden their homes and their landscapes, and their businesses, get ready for the fires that are coming, because they're coming, and we can get ready before the fact.

Dr. Paul H: Then, this third leg of the stool is to restore these resilient landscapes that we now understand existed historically, and native Americans maintain by recurrent use of fire.

Dr. Paul H: If we do these things together, we have a pretty high likelihood of putting ourselves in a position where we'll be able to live more sensibly with fire. But the scale of the problem is large and so the scale of the investment needs to be pretty large. There are published studies right now that suggest that, with the current scale of the problem, about 40 to 50% of the landscape needs to be treated, and that's a pretty big job.

Graham: Paul and a large group of multidisciplinary scientists were placed on the cutting edge of figuring out how to make this happen. What they came with were seven core landscape principles that they think will move us in a direction that's much more symbiotic with respect to wildfire.

Graham: I'm going to breeze through the highly condensed version of these, lest we get too far into the weeds. But, in this ...

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Graham: [inaudible 00:36:00], lest we get too far into the weeds. But in the show notes you will find a link to Paul's peer-edited article, in which he presents them in fantastic detail. The first principle is that regional landscapes function as multi-level, cross-connected hierarchies. Principle two is that topography provides a natural template for vegetation and disturbance patterns. The third principle is that disturbance and succession drive ecosystem change. Principles four and five have to do with forest patches, which are defined as land which has tree crown cover over more than 10%, basically just a small section of a larger forest. The first of these is that predictable patch size distribution historically emerged from linked climate disturbed topography vegetation interactions, and the second is that successional patches are landscapes within landscapes. Principle six is that widely distributed, large, old trees provide a critical backbone to dry pine and dry to mesic mixed conifer forest landscapes. Lastly, principle seven.

Paul: The last principle is about us people. The seventh principle deals with the problem of land ownership and land allocation, how we sliced and diced a more reasonable ecological landscape and put landlines and boundaries all over the place that don't align with more intuitive ecological boundaries, and they fragment the landscape. It makes sense for us to work collaboratively across ownerships to now develop more ecologically sound projects that follow ecological boundaries, rather than land ownership lines.

Graham: I know that's a lot, and if you really want to understand what it all means, I really recommend digging into Paul's article or his TED Talk, which is also linked in the show notes. But I really think it's important to understand, if nothing else, just how complex these issues are and how hard folks are working on solving

these riddles. So, one of the final questions that I had for Paul about his vision for the future related back to policy and what are the road blocks that are in our way?

Paul: The primary road block I think is that we, the people, are not actively involved in this participatory experiment. We're not speaking up. We're not getting off the couch and talking about really what we want for future generations. We need to get involved. We need to stand up for public land. I think we have the opportunity to really affect change, and I think it's absolutely essential. We're in gridlock right now over lands and land management. I have to say I think land managers need our good minds and our good will to find the ecologically and socially appropriate mixes that we can all live with. We need to step in and help solve the riddle.

Graham: Now, at the beginning of this blog we presented the positions of two lawmakers who represent this area, and we presented them as opposing, which in our current political climate is how we look at most topics. But given what we have just learned from Paul, I think that on this particular issue we can shift our optics. Paul is arguing that we need to update our forest management strategies and to deal with climate change, both in terms of mitigation and adaptation. In many ways he is saying that elements of both Blumenauer's and Walden's perspectives are correct and that instead of arguing which side of the aisle to agree with, we need to pull the discussion of forestry and fire management out of the dregs of the current political climate and move forward on both fronts. It's not a choice. It is not an argument. We simply need to listen to each other's opinions and work together to make them happen.

Graham: This seems so simple, but we all know that it can be very challenging. It will take time. It will take tenacity, and it will require the involvement of the citizenry, from you. That is one of our hopes from this podcast, that it will help you, the listener, feel more informed, so that you can engage with your representatives and urge them to elevate this issue on their agendas and work together on them. So, at the end of our interview, after over an hour of talking deep science, Paul left me with a really interesting idea, something that I found really tangible, the idea that in today's world, in which we know that fire suppression is only a small part of the solution, we don't need to turn our backs on Smokey the Bear, who's famously shared that. "Only you can prevent forest fires."

Graham: Rather, we just need to give him an update. Maybe he should say, quote, "You need to prevent forest fires and leave their ignition to nature and to the professionals," because in our changing climate we, as individuals, need to be more responsible than ever with fires. While we need to support prescribed burns, and learn to live with the smoke emitted from them, and be more active and aware stewards of our forest, we also need to make sure that we are not being the causes of the fires.

- Graham: At the start of this episode we heard from a group of children who live in Cascade Locks about their field trip to see the new growth in the areas that had burned. As we wrap up the story in Eagle Creek, we wanted to explore a little more about what is going on in the gorge right now, as it recovers from the fire. In order to do that we got in touch with Patrick Shannon, who you heard from at the top of the show. He's the director of the National Forest Foundation. That's one of the organizations that is working on restoring the areas affected by the Eagle Creek fire.
- Patrick Shannon: We work really closely with the US Forest Service. They're our primary partner. So, we're in communication with them all the time.
- Graham: We started by talking about the dying breaths of the fire itself. As Patrick shared in the introduction to the episode, throughout the winter it rained heavily on the gorge, removing the threat of fire from most people's minds, but the Forest Service had still not declared the fire officially out.
- Patrick Shannon: To my surprise, I think it was March of 2018, they actually had a log that was smoldering still from the fire, and it reignited. So, it really wasn't until the spring of 2018, a year ago, when they actually declared the fire out.
- Graham: That seems incredible to me as well, but for Patrick and his team this was only the starting point of their work, and they were facing some treacherous obstacles.
- Patrick Shannon: Given all the rain and the steepness that's in the gorge, the Forest Service was taking a cautious approach to understand what the impacts were. It's really hazardous at that steep of slopes. So, no one really knew exactly what the next steps were until pretty late in the spring of 2018. What they said they really needed was to focus on reopening the trails, so people can explore the gorge again, but do it in safe way.
- Graham: This was a really neat decision, because it was designed to let people get in as soon as possible to see the space and watch it grow back naturally.
- Patrick Shannon: With the funds we raised from people we worked with two organizations, Trail Keepers of Oregon and the Pacific Crest Trail Association, and in partnering with them we were able to open over 60 miles of trail in 2018. So, that's great. I mean, it's a great start. We really want people to go experience the gorge as it is now. Just like you were mentioning with the students, they can see for themselves what it's like to have fire come through a forest. So, we want to help people get there and just want to make sure that the trails are safe.
- Graham: But as Patrick shared, it is hard work in a dangerous environment.

Patrick Shannon: This is clearing rock slides from trails. Since it's in a wilderness area, they can't use chainsaws, and so they had to use crosscut saws to cut two foot diameter trees that were across the trail.

Graham: It's also a very dynamic environment.

Patrick Shannon: There was a trail that was open and I hiked on two weeks ago that they closed again, because a big rock slide had covered the trail. It's going to be an ever evolving area to explore.

Graham: But for Patrick it's all worth it, and he wants to get communities back into these areas, so that they can better understand them.

Patrick Shannon: I'll say that I just encourage people [inaudible 00:44:23] to check out the areas that are open, because, again, I was there just last week as well, and there are flowers blooming. There's trillium blooming right now. It's really beautiful. It'll look different, but it's still a beautiful place to explore and enjoy, and it will be hopefully for generations to come. I would say go out and check it out now, because it'll look different in the fall. It'll look different next spring, and it's going to continually change, so something to watch over time.

Graham: Well, here we are at the end of the story. It's the spring of 2019 in Oregon, almost two years after the Eagle Creek Fire started and a year after it finally stopped burning. We've been on quite a journey. Over the course of this series we've learned that fire is natural in our forests. We've learned how Native Americans lived with wildfire for thousands of years. We've learned how wildfire fighting works. We've heard all about the history of wildfire management in this country. Finally, we've done our best to present ideas for the future, carefully formulated by some of the most informed people that we can find, so that we can all work together to live more in tune with this natural phenomenon. Looking back on the early days of the Eagle Creek Fire and the incredible stories that came out of it, as well as the fascinating and illuminating scientific discussions, we've really taken the subject from point A to point B, from disaster to regrowth, from resistance to acceptance, from anger to compassion.

Graham: Thanks to our many helpful guests, Jim and I are definitely leaving this podcast feeling way more informed, and it's drastically changed the way that we both perceive wildfire, which at first in episode one we described in all its formidable, terrifying glory, but for us we really gained a whole new appreciation for it. At least for ourselves we've demystified it and objectified it, and we hope you have too. Because something we've really established is that we will never get rid of it. Fire was here long before we arrived and will likely stick around long after we're gone. As the cold and rainy winter in the Columbia River Gorge began to subside, Jim and I laced up our boots for a day on the trails, much like we would have before September 2017, but with a wholly transformed perspective on the green and somewhat blackened forest around us.

Graham: Walking through the trees now we see a much more vibrant and dynamic world, alive in its own incredibly process, existing completely independent from us humans, but also in harmony with us, giving us the oxygen we need to breathe and filling our hearts with a deep love for the natural world. It's a beautiful thing to suddenly see a place for all of its unique details, like a person waking up from cataract surgery, finally able to see, or finally grasping a piece of music for its outstanding genius. Every little part of these massive ecosystems goes into making it a perfectly functional whole, and the many natural processes almost miraculously spooling to form something more successful and ancient than we'll probably ever fully understand.

Graham: But as much as we've learned about these miracles of nature, we've learned just as much about humanity, the heroics of Robby [Dunns 00:47:49] leading the hikers out of the first day of the fire, Tom [Huker 00:47:53] standing his ground to save his house, Lance Lighty's team saving the Multnomah Lodge, Allie High and her two year old son, Phoenix, the many firefighters who put their lives on the line in Eagle Creek and all over the country. And yes, we've been force to reckon with the horrible mistake and exorbitant punishment of the young man who threw a smoke bomb on Labor Day Weekend. Despite all of this new information, our many new, inspiring friends, and our best efforts to make sense of what happened just outside of Portland in 2017, we still can't say that we will know exactly what to do next. That will hopefully be a conversation by smarter, more influential people than us, but at least we're ready to engage, ready to move forward with intention, rather than confusion, less reaction and more understanding, better equipped to assess the subject objectively.

Graham: And we might not all like some of the elements of the solution. We will need to endure smaller, prescribed fires to avoid the massive ones, but that is a compromise that we're just going to have to make, because we know there will never be a panacea for the, quote, wildfire problem. Our population will continue to grow. Society will continue to spread, and we'll face more complicated problems, as we do our best to live in harmony with our planet, instead of in opposition to it. After all, we are all on the same team, you, me, Congressmen Blumenauer and Walden, the firefighters, and the forests. We're all in this together, blessed to live out our lives on this incredible planet. I, for one, am grateful. It's been a joy sharing this story with you, until next time, this has been REI Presents Wildfire.

Graham: Our story about Eagle Creek has wrapped up, but we've got one more bonus episode coming your way, in which we're going to talk about the language of wildfire and work on giving you the tools that you need to both communicate and understand the communications coming your way about wildfire in the future. So, we invite you to tune in for one more next week. Wildfire is a production of REI, Bedrock Film Works, and Pod Peak, and part of the REI Podcast Network. The podcast was written by Jim Aikman and myself, Graham Zimmerman, and it was produced by the two of us, alongside Chelsea Davis and

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PART 3 OF 3 ENDS [00:51:01]