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'It's not lost. It's changed'

OREGON | Two years ago, the Lookout fire tore through this research forest, torching many study sites. What happened after surprised scientists.



KAREN DUCY / THE SEATTLE TIMES

Mark Harmon, a forest decomposition expert and professor emeritus at Oregon State University, surveys the Cold Creek site, the most extensively burned part of the H.J. Andrews Experimental Forest, southeast of Eugene, Ore. "The fire reorganizes things," said Harmon.

By **LYNDA V. MAPES**
Seattle Times environment reporter

ATOP LOOKOUT MOUNTAIN,
H.J. Andrews Experimental Forest —

This summit face was the coldest part of the mountain, shaded in thick old-growth forest. But nearly two years ago — after a roasting-hot run of dry summer weather — a lightning strike set the mountain on fire. The Lookout fire burned three-quarters of this unique place, one of the nation's premier

research forests, southeast of Eugene, Ore. Now what's unfolding in the aftermath could inform the future of other forests burned as wildfire becomes fiercer and more frequent with climate change.

The fire did at least \$800,000 in damage, burning up tags, wiring, sensors and other scientific instruments, while fire-fighting equipment tore up roads. Federal funds and insurance only partly cover the damage Andrews administrators are still assessing. Many researchers, including grad-

uate students, also had their work upended when their study sites burned.

But the fire also ignited a whole new research agenda. Because there is such a wealth of long-term data collected in this research forest founded in 1948, scientists have a unique baseline from which to understand what it means when a forest burns — and

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H.J. ANDREWS FOREST, other research sites may get the ax > **A7**

Microsoft pledges \$4B to AI education

By **ALEX HALVERSON**
Seattle Times business reporter

Microsoft plans to donate \$4 billion worth of cash, technology and training to enhance artificial intelligence education, a substantial bequest as the Redmond software giant aims to make billions more off a technology it expects to be on par with the introduction of electricity.

Microsoft President Brad Smith announced the commitment Wednesday during an event held at the Museum of History & Industry in Seattle.

The \$4 billion effort over the next five years will flow through a new organization within the company called Microsoft Elevate, which the company describes as a successor and expansion of the longtime Microsoft Philanthropies team. Elevate will have about 300 employees, with the goal of helping more than 20 million people earn AI credentials.

The tech industry as a whole threw its arms around AI after OpenAI launched a generative

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U.S. measles cases reach highest total since 2000

By **JONATHAN CORUM**
AND **TEDDY ROSENBLUTH**

The New York Times

There have now been more measles cases in 2025 than in any other year since the contagious virus was declared eliminated in the United States in 2000, according to new data released Wednesday by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

The grim milestone represents an alarming setback for the country's public health and heightens concerns that if childhood vaccination rates do not improve, deadly outbreaks of measles — once considered a disease of the past — will become the new normal.

Experts fear that with no clear end to the spread in sight, the country is barreling toward another turning point: losing elimination status, a designation given to countries that have not had continuous spread of measles

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State will backfill \$11M in federal cuts to Planned Parenthood, Ferguson says

By **SHAUNA SOWERSBY**
Seattle Times staff reporter

Washington leaders plan to backfill the loss of about \$11 million in federal funding for local Planned Parenthood services if cuts to the organization by the latest U.S. spending bill are approved by a federal judge.

In a news conference Wednesday at Planned Parenthood in Seattle's Central District, Gov. Bob Ferguson said the funding, which would be diverted from the state's Health Care Authority, would only be necessary if a lawsuit filed in federal court this week is not successful. On Monday, Planned Parenthood

sued over cuts from President Donald Trump's "Big Beautiful Bill" that appear to specifically target the organization. That same day, a federal judge blocked a provision of the bill that imposes a one-year cut to Medicaid reimbursement for nonprofit organizations that also offer abortion services.

The contentious budget bill, which includes trillions of dollars of tax cuts, was signed into law July 4. Ferguson, who referred to it as the "big betrayal of a bill," said it would cut about \$3 billion in annual Medicaid funding to Washington state.

The Trump bill "intentionally targets Planned Parenthood and other similar health care providers that offer reproductive health care," Ferguson said, adding that the one-year moratorium on

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With report on deadly Air India crash possibly days away, focus shifts to key 787 switches

By **LAUREN ROSENBLATT**
Seattle Times business reporter

Investigators may soon release preliminary information about the fatal Air India Boeing 787 crash

that happened last month.

Following guidelines from the International Civil Aviation Organization — a United Nations agency that recommends practices for the

industry — states in charge of an investigation must submit a preliminary report within 30 days of an accident.

It's not clear how detailed that

much-anticipated report will be; according to ICAO guidelines, authorities don't even have to release it to the public. But aviation industry watchers largely expect some details to be released as early as Friday, the 30-day mark since the June 12 crash.

As that deadline approaches,

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FROM THE FRONT PAGE

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FROM A1

federal Planned Parenthood funding would go into effect immediately, pending a ruling from the federal court.

In Washington, Planned Parenthood receives about \$22 million annually in Medicaid funding, with approximately \$11 million of that from the federal government, Ferguson said.

Washington's Medicaid program, called Apple

Health, is the primary payer for Planned Parenthood services, Ferguson, who was joined by U.S. Rep. Pramila Jayapal at the news conference, said the promised state backfill of the federal cuts would be for one year.

Ferguson's announcement Wednesday does not restore state funding axed by lawmakers in the final budget for the 2025-27 biennium that cut about \$8.5 million from the Abortion Access Project, which connects Washingtonians and those from out of state to abortion

services.

State lawmakers wrestled with the estimated \$12 billion to \$16 billion deficit while balancing the budget, which led to several cuts and layoffs throughout state government as well as a \$9 billion tax increase. The governor said he would try to restore state funding for Planned Parenthood in the state supplemental budget, which lawmakers will tackle in the 2026 legislative session.

Ferguson said he'd backfill the federal funding cut using

dollars from the HCA if the federal lawsuit fails, which would be about half of a percent of the agency's total budget.

But because the state, unlike the federal government, cannot run a budget deficit, Washington does not have billions of dollars to backfill the billions of dollars in broader cuts to Medicaid services included in the Trump tax cut bill, Ferguson said. He noted that those broader cuts, unlike the cuts to abortion services, will not take effect until after the

2026 midterm elections for Congress.

U.S. District Judge Indra Talwani, who ruled to temporarily stop cuts to Planned Parenthood, will rule on July 21 whether or not to grant a longer injunction.

In a news release Wednesday, Planned Parenthood said it serves more than 100,000 patients in Washington at 30 facilities statewide annually, and that nearly half of those patients use Medicaid for care.

Under federal law, federal funds are already barred

from being used for abortion services, unless it is medically necessary to protect the life of the mother.

While some Planned Parenthood facilities do offer abortion services, such as medication abortions and in-clinic procedures, depending on state law, they also offer a wide range of other services such as family planning, cancer screenings and STD testing and treatment.

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Under federal law, federal funds are already barred

< Forest

FROM A1

starts over. Already, there are surprising discoveries.

There is new and greater diversity, and a bigger population of birds in the forest than before the fire, as species never recorded here before cruise into burned areas.

Towering totems of charred old-growth trees and blackened snags are revealing secrets and surprises about how fire behaves. There are changes in the chemistry of soils and streams, shifts in daily maximum air temperatures where the fire burned hottest, creating a newly open canopy. Sediment in streams, shifts in aquatic species — salamander populations crashed — and so much more to understand.

"We have grown in appreciation for fire; there is a balance of fearing and respecting it," said Brooke Penultima, the lead scientist at the Andrews.

She helped with the evacuation, packing up the library, and even the stuffed spotted owls that decorated the administrative office — now unpacked from storage and put back in the library with all the books — but who knows for how long? "I think our new normal is living alongside fire," Penultima said, "and researching alongside fire."

Change is always the rule in nature. Fire has underscored that.

"People say, 'Oh the forest was lost.' It's not lost. It's changed," said Mark Harmon, a forest decomposition expert and professor emeritus at Oregon State University. Half of his research plots at the Andrews burned. The experiment may now be more exciting than ever. There is so much to be learned, Harmon said, "as long as you throw out everything you think you know about fire."

Into the blast zone

Forest fires don't burn evenly; they are always a mix of severely, moderately and lightly burned areas. At the Andrews, most of the forest was lightly or moderately burned. But some areas burned so hot that every tree died, and all the organic matter on the ground was roasted, down to the mineral soil. That's where half of Harmon's research plots were.

Walking the ground recently, the sun beat down where before it was shaded by old-growth trees. Harmon carried metal stakes to remark his plots, replacing the fiberglass ones that melted to just the glass fibers, piled like white fur.

There were ghost logs, where only the metal marker tags were left, the shape of the log left by the ash. Other logs had formed hoodoos, parabolas and arches; black sculptures made by the fire that consumed the punky decomposing wood, but left charred remains of the sounder heartwood. Burned to its elemental lignin, some logs had the cubic textured backs of alligators. Others were glassy as obsidian, and some had the molten slump of a marshmallow too long on the stick.

It was an eerily beautiful landscape, full of surprises challenging almost every-

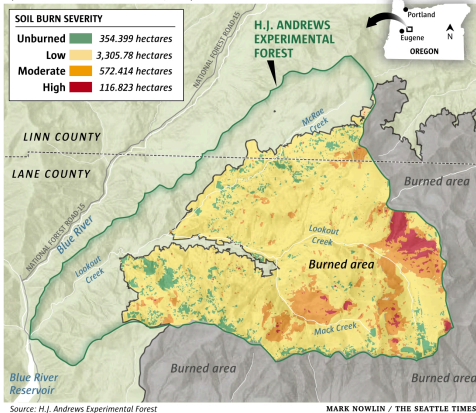


KAREN DUCY / THE SEATTLE TIMES

An Oregon polemonium stretches skyward in the H.J. Andrews Experimental Forest in Oregon last month. Plants are bringing fresh color to the charred earth and blackened trees.

After the fire

Almost two years after it burned, the H.J. Andrews Experimental Forest, one of the nation's premier federal research forests, is replete with new science and new life.



Source: H.J. Andrews Experimental Forest

territory is wrecked. I'm leaving," Betts said.

The numbers of hermit warblers, western tanagers and other long-distance migrants did not drop, and overall, there are increases.

"They pack in to the remaining patches," Betts said. The hypothesis is that birds, being mobile, are making a number of decisions. They are acting on personal information — their knowledge of the terrain to which they return as they always have. But they also are acting on social information. Birds displaced by fires elsewhere are moving in to settle where others of their kind already are. Whether they will stay, only time will tell. It will depend on whether the habitat is suitable for them.

Birds also use vegetation cues.

When you are a woodpecker, you are looking for dead wood. So Betts was not surprised to hear the percussive announcement of one of the most reliable colonists of burned areas: the black-backed woodpecker.

Repetitive flights to one snag in particular caught his eye: It was a nest, drilled into a burned tree, with young being fed by both parents.

It wasn't just the birds' living things up. Green plants were burgeoning through the char in the soil. Dog tooth violet was blooming amid the stumps of trees felled by firefighters. Black-fern was bursting up through the bulldozer tracks where crews cut a fireline. Blackened, charred, roasted, burned, broken, cut, stumped, bulldozed, battered. Yes. The forest was all of these things.

But also healing, greening, changing, recolonizing, rewilding.

Fire moss gleamed in a golden coat. Hairy woodpeckers, northern flickers and olive-sided flycatchers and yellow-rumped warblers were all carrying on. Meadows that had been shrinking as trees moved in were reopened too, a boon for pollinators already busy in the creamy blossoms of avalanche lilies.

Ladybugs patrolled the new leaves and a plethora of deer tracks and a big scat pile from a bear showed some mammalian appreciation for all the fresh growth to be had in these woods, as red flowering currant, pink trillium

About the project

Climate Lab is a Seattle Times initiative that explores the effects of climate change in the Pacific Northwest and beyond. The project is funded in part by The Bullitt Foundation, CO2 Foundation, Jim and Birte Falconer, Mike and Becky Hughes, Henry M. Jackson Foundation, Martin-Fabert Foundation, University of Washington and Walker Family Foundation, and its fiscal sponsor is the Seattle Foundation.

and more stretched toward the sun. "The fire has opened the way for these herbaceous flowering species," Betts said, passing a blackened vine maple burgeoning with buds. "In a few more years, it will be hard to walk through here."

This is the normal process of succession, with a fire leaving a lot of dead trees standing, followed by a green up of shrubs and finally trees, that eventually shade out some of the understory, until the whole cycle starts over with a new disturbance. Species come and go as the structure and food sources they require change.

Turning up the heat

The Lookout fire is regarded to be within the range of normal events at the Andrews. But climate change and its hotter, drier summers played a role. "This fire was going to burn, but climate change loaded the dice; it made it more likely, and more severe," Betts said.

Some of the losses are hard to take. So much old growth has already been lost to logging in the Northwest — about 90% — that to lose more in this fire hurt, Betts said. And some species, such as hemlock and red cedar, are having a hard time persisting in the hotter, drier, changing climate. Will there ever again in the burned areas be old-growth majesty of their kind?

This being a research forest, at least one investigator could not resist probing how other researchers were processing the fire, emotionally.

Michael Paul Nelson is a professor of environmental ethics and philosophy at Oregon State University. So he and a collaborator, Claire Rapp, conducted more than 40 interviews to probe the idea of naturalness, and how that influenced the way people reacted to the fire. In their 2025 paper, they reported that to the degree people felt the fire was a natural event, they were excited to get on with their research. They had moved on emotionally from the burn. For those who saw it as a human-influenced event linked to climate change, there was, and is, a recalcitrant grief.

So it goes, as forests burn and the climate warms, Nelson said in an interview. But no one should be surprised at the events unfolding, as forest management practices, and environmental and social changes we have wrought — including removing Indigenous management of these forests — write their results on the land.

"We live in a time of harvest," Nelson said. "What we need to do now, is plant new seeds."

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thing people think they know about fire. For one, that trees burn down, or forests burn up. They do not.

Most of the trees here were the same height and girth they were before the fire and still standing. Their trunks were black, their twigs still attached too, just dead, and gleaming silver against the black char. Why?

The trees were alive and full of water, so when the fire came, Harmon explained, the twigs and branches sizzled and steamed but did not burn off. "Even the most severe fire killed all the trees, but did not combust even the smallest twigs."

In all, less than 10 to 15% of the forest's carbon combusted, even where the fire killed all the trees, he noted.

"The fire reorganizes things," Harmon said. His work now will be to understand how the fire behaved and the trees were burned, depending on the species, the structure of the stand, and their condition at the time of the fire. In death, as in life, nothing about this forest is simple.

New terrain, new life

In nature there are not good or bad things, just change, a resetting of communities of animals and



KAREN DUCY / THE SEATTLE TIMES

Before the Lookout fire, mountain bluebirds had never been recorded in the area.

plants as they respond to environmental conditions. So Matt Betts, an ornithologist and lead principal investigator of the Long Term Ecological Research Program funded by the National Science Foundation at the H.J. Andrews, was not surprised — but definitely delighted — when he saw something blue flash in the charred black snags on Lookout Mountain.

"Mountain bluebird!" said Betts, identifying a bird never recorded here, but now taking advantage of this open area. This is a species that specializes in so-called early seral habitat: the first stage of life in a forest after a disturbance, whether by fire, wind, logging or other force that

opens the ground to the sky. Its wings were sapphire, its breast a soft, creamy buff. The bird, about the size of a sparrow, was going about its day, unaware of its role documenting the start of a new world.

It will take time and more research to see what is really going on. But Betts and his collaborators have a few ideas they are pursuing. Migratory birds are site faithful, and they flew back here from Brazil, Central America, Mexico and other wintering grounds to discover the place they always nest transformed. What happened next is interesting. "It seems to us they just didn't come back and say, 'Oh my