



Dealing with fire on the PCT



By **Brendan Taylor**, PCTA Associate Regional Representative

On Labor Day, I stood on the PCT in the Kiavah Wilderness of Southern California, staring at an enormous black smoke cloud billowing up from a canyon south of me. I had a sinking feeling that some part of the Trail was burning. When I got back into cell phone range later that day, my phone bombarded me with messages saying that Oak Creek Canyon and the PCT were on fire.

The fire, started by a plane crash in a side canyon, spread quickly, destroying many private residences and raging over the trail itself, eventually burning 30,000 acres outside Tehachapi. Firefighters eventually brought the Canyon Fire under control, but a 30-mile section of the PCT around Oak Creek Canyon is now closed. This closure is just one of five caused by fire on the PCT at the time of this writing in late September. In many ways, fire is the most challenging trail protection issue the PCTA faces.

The difficulty lies in the fact that fires start in countless and many times unpreventable ways, from plane crashes to lightning strikes to carelessness around a campfire. Fires have a life of their

own, sometimes raging despite tireless efforts of firefighters. If fires go unchecked, the impact to the PCT can be significant. Almost certainly, the agency that manages the land will close the trail to users because of the many hazards present in a burn area, especially burned trees that could come down with the slightest wind gust. Eventually, all of those trees will come down, many of them onto the trail. The resulting log piles and the rapid regrowth of sun-loving brush will make the PCT near impassable until a crew clears the trail – a rather onerous task in remote wilderness settings. What's more, in the immediate aftermath of a fire, rain causes soil to erode because the live root systems of plants and trees are no longer there to hold it all together. Such a scarred landscape is rarely a beautiful scene to behold.

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Top: The PCT traverses damage caused by flames and firefighters battling the Mint Fire near Agua Dulce, Calif. Photo Courtesy of the U.S. Forest Service

Inset: In October, air tankers battled Southern California's Great Fire. Photo by Kevin Pack CAL FIRE



Trail Protection *(continued from inside front cover)*

As regrettable as these impacts are to the PCT, other hazards result from fires. In section F in Oregon, PCTA volunteers were on a project while the Shadow Lake Fire burned not far away. Because of good emergency response planning by crew leaders, emergency managers had their contact information and got word to them. The crew was able to hike out to safety. Unfortunately, they had to end their project early and the closeness of the fire highlighted potential hazards volunteers face when working in the backcountry, namely the sudden appearance of life-threatening fires.

Hikers, especially thru-hikers, face this same problem. They are on the Trail for long periods without any contact from the outside world. In fact, that same volunteer group stopped several hikers from entering the area of the Shadow Lake Fire. In the face of fire, hikers may have to alter their routes over roads and highways, thus negating the natural character of their hike and forcing them to navigate traffic. Those are the lucky ones. Hikers have been forced to either fend for themselves or worse, stop hiking, when there were no established reroutes around burned areas. When fire burns the PCT, it affects more than the Trail and the surrounding landscape; it impacts the greater PCT community as well.



Far left: The Canyon Fire burned along both sides of the PCT in Oak Creek Canyon, roughly seven miles south of Tehachapi Willow Springs Road. Photo by Brendan Taylor

Left and below: Marshaling resources on the Great Fire. Photo by Kevin Pack, CAL FIRE

Right: Environmental Charter High School students brushing trail in the area of the Sheep Fire, Swarthout Canyon, San Bernardino National Forest. Photo by Brendan Taylor




To minimize such negative impacts, the PCTA works with our agency partners and volunteers to reduce the effects of fire. PCTA Columbia Cascades

Regional Representative **Dana Hendricks** has collaborated with the recreation, trails and public affairs officers of the Mt. Hood, Willamette and Deschutes National Forest on a *Thru-hiker Communication Plan*. They developed a process to implement a detour or activate a shuttle to take hikers around closures. When emergency strikes, this plan helps the partners remember whom to contact and what steps to take in the decision-making process about a trail closure and its effect on trail users. Depending on the situation, there may be a good detour option. Otherwise, PCTA might recruit volunteer trail angels to shuttle hikers, stage pick-up and drop-off points around the closure for the shuttles, or put up “trail closure” signs. Dana and the Deschutes National Forest utilized this plan this year for the Shadow Lake Fire. First, they developed a detour, but then the fire expanded into the detour area, so they activated the shuttle system and received help from PCTA volunteers out of Bend, Ore.

After a fire sweeps across the PCT, there is much work to do to reopen the Trail. All of those dead burned trees will blow down. Without the shade and competing plants, brush grows back in burned areas, often occluding the Trail corridor. In Southern California, PCTA Regional Representative **Anitra Kass** is working to restore the PCT to its old self in several burned areas. In the San Bernardino National Forest, she works with the Environmental Charter High School to clear sections of the trail rapidly covered by shrubs after the Sheep Fire. In the area of the Canyon Fire, the PCTA is working with **Craig Beck** of Ridgecrest BLM to put together volunteers to re-sign the burned area after firefighters fall the hazardous trees. Without the amazing collaborative efforts of these government agencies, the PCTA and volunteers, many segments of burned PCT would remain impassable for significant periods.

If you are a user of the PCT, it is no doubt of the utmost importance to you to find out which sections are closed, where active fires are and what efforts are being done to reopen closures. Once a

fire erupts on or near the PCT, the PCTA and its many volunteers jump into action to get word out. Most importantly, agency partners and PCTA staff get word to **Jack Haskel**, PCTA trail information specialist, in Sacramento. Jack will post information to our website, www.pcta.org, on our Facebook page, update our Twitter account [PCTAssociation](https://twitter.com/PCTAssociation), and update our toll free phone line **1-888-PCTRAIL**. To stay informed on the status of fires and closures, regional representatives and Jack will go to certain websites like www.inciweb.org, or to a National Park or Forest site if a fire occurs there. It is also possible to obtain information about fires and closures from other twitter accounts like [@R5_fire_news](https://twitter.com/R5_fire_news), [@CALFIRE](https://twitter.com/CALFIRE), or [@ORfireinfo](https://twitter.com/ORfireinfo), among others. Anyone planning on heading out onto the PCT should make ready use of all these information sources to ensure they will be safe and have an uninterrupted experience, especially since on the PCT, fire is a fact of life. 🐦



The PCTA MISSION

The mission of the Pacific Crest Trail Association is to protect, preserve and promote the Pacific Crest National Scenic Trail as an internationally significant resource for the enjoyment of hikers and equestrians, and for the value that wild and scenic lands provide to all people.