

Fire and ice: PCT in the era of climate change

By Alex Brown, Sierra

I'm climbing the western flank of Mt. Washington, a jutting outpost of volcanic rock in the Oregon Cascades, when I hear the all-too-familiar thrum of helicopter blades. Nearly four months into my through-hike of the Pacific Crest Trail, I've come to associate the sound with bad news. In Southern California, rotors had garbled the loudspeaker-blared instructions of the rescue team hovering over our camp, dispatched to pick up a hiker suffering from altitude sickness. More than 1,000 trail miles later, just shy of the Oregon border, I'd spent days watching choppers go back and forth overhead, refilling on water to fight the blazes that were filling the valleys below with hazy smoke.

This time, the helicopter buzzes close, past the skeletal burned-out trees I'm hiking through, and hovers over a slope east of the trail. I hear it just behind the trees as I finish my climb, but it's gone by the time I top the ridge and follow the trail to the right. There, in the spot vacated by the chopper, I see tendrils of smoke rising from the trees, just 100 or so yards off the trail. My hiking buddies and I gawk at the sight, scarcely believing the fire is so close. We quickly hike on, not saying much. A couple miles later, we cross paths with a fire crew, 15 or more strong, hiking toward the blaze as we make tracks in the opposite direction.

"Last year was the most challenging year we've had in terms of dealing with closures on the PCT," said Beth Boyst, who for the last 11 years has been the trail's chief administrator with the U.S. Forest Service (the PCT passes through all different designations of federal and state land, but USFS holds the lead oversight role).

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