THROUGH THE FIRE

NATURAL DISASTERS ARE DESTROYING SOME OF AMERICA'S MOST ICONIC MOUNTAIN BIKE TRAILS. HERE'S HOW ONE COMMUNITY IN OREGON RALLIED TO PRESERVE THEIR BELOVED WONDERLAND.

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IN 2021, TWO NIGHTS BEFORE THE ALPINE EPIC— the premier race in Oakridge, Oregon, perhaps the preeminent mountain-biking town in the Pacific Northwest—Michelle Emmons sat at her kitchen table, preparing the final list of riders. Then her phone began to buzz. By texts and by emails, friends warned her about a brewing storm. As she looked over her shoulder, out the window, she saw black clouds snarling down Aubrey Mountain. Lightning pierced the hills.

Emmons first visited Oakridge, an old logging town tucked along the western slope of the Cascade Range, in 2010 at the invitation of a man she was dating. Though it was late spring, they found themselves having to hike their bikes through sections of unmelted snow. Eventually, they reached

Previous spread: Michelle Emmons rides through a burn zone on the Heckletooth Trail, near Oakridge, Oregon.

Emmons first rode in the forests around Oakridge in 2010 and was immediately hooked. She moved there shortly after.

A shuttle van operated by Cog Wild delivers riders to the Hardesty Trail. Cog Wild is one of several mountain bike guiding services in town.

Alpine Ridge, a small pinnacle some 12 miles north and 3,000 feet above town, clad in massive fir trees spangled in threads of sunbeam. But they hadn't come to bask in the forest: They launched into the long and ripping descent that has made the Alpine Trail one of the most famous rides in the Pacific Northwest—a trail that has reshaped the town of Oakridge.

That experience reshaped Emmons, too. Until that moment, she'd been at best a casual mountain biker. "Somehow I got introduced to this Kool-Aid that I never stopped drinking," she later told me. She began to return to Oakridge nearly every weekend—to seek more trails, to build her climbing skills. To set herself free. She'd found rides less than an hour from her home in Eugene, Oregon, that felt like they were deep in the backcountry.

Within a year, she became well-enough known around Oakridge that the organizers of the Cascade Cream Puff asked her to take the helm of the event. The 100-mile cross-country race had helped put Oakridge on the mountain-biking map. Over 15 years, though, it had lost some steam, and Emmons was determined to bring back the glory days. For seven years she tinkered with formats, and by 2019, after offering shorter distances and rebranding it as the Alpine Epic—honoring the beloved trail—she finally felt like she'd found a winning formula.

> WE ARE OUT IN THE WORLD EVERY DAY AND ARE SEEING THE IMPACTS **EXTREME WEATHER AND CLIMATE CHANGE** ARE HAVING ON THE WORLD.

As if to seal her triumph, Emmons and her husband found a dream house in the hills above town. From the deck, they could look down on a meadow where elk grazed, or up to the peak of Aubrey Mountain, which at sunset flared orange with alpenglow. She rented out a separate, three-bedroom unit, noting in her Airbnb listing that guests could ride straight from the house to a popular trailhead. For her day job with an environmental nonprofit, Emmons often worked from her kitchen table, surrounded by windows from which she could watch the weather blow in.

Then, just as the couple was settling into the house, the first reports of a novel coronavirus began to trickle out of China. By that next summer, the pandemic forced Emmons to cancel the race. So in 2021, as that lightning arrived, she was feeling pressure to produce a successful restart.

The previous year, drought led to major fires across the state; now, again, the forests were dry. The storm sparked a small blaze near the Alpine Trail: just 20 acres, maybe less—but still enough to doom the race. Even on a mellow day, Emmons buzzes with energy. She's a multitasker, unable to sit still for long. That day her stress went off the charts. Emmons stayed up late that night, sending out emails, but some riders never got the memo: They made the long drive into the mountains for naught. She had to sit at the local bike shop and break the bad news as riders arrived to register. "It was kind of heartbreaking," she said.

Just weeks later, a high-pressure system settled over the area, creating a "heat dome" that trapped warm air, leading to weeks of record-breaking high temperatures. In August 2022, a fire broke out atop a nearby mountain and reached within three miles of Oakridge, prompting a Level 3 evacuation: Everyone must go. Emmons found herself ushering guests out of her Airbnb.

The endless chaos left Emmons exhausted, emotionally and financially. When I first spoke with her, in early 2023, she was ready to give up on the race and move on to new projects. That meant that the event that helped turn Oakridge into a sporting mecca was set to sputter out. Oakridge had been cited as a success story, an example of an impoverished old timber town pivoting toward a new and cleaner economy. Now it was becoming a different kind of harbinger: a preview of the struggles that mountain biking will face amid more destructive weather to come.

BY THE TIME the Cascade Cream Puff debuted in 1995, mountain bikers had been enjoying the trails around Oakridge for about a decade, and a few pioneering riders had begun to settle in; out-of-town friends congregated in their homes for weekends of riding. "Everyone would sleep on the floor," said Kirin Stryker, one of those early visitors.

Kevin Rowell was among this early wave: He moved to Oakridge in 1996, seeking to escape a life amid sprawl. Early on, while scouting the local logging roads, Rowell stopped his jeep at a ditch that had been cut across the road and filled with concrete and rebar. He got out to investigate. A voice came from the trees: "What are you doing?"

Rowell was startled, but responded. "I asked him, like, 'What are *you* doing?'" Rowell remembers. That is how Rowell first heard about the Timber Wars.

Oakridge had once been a bustling timber town. But, unable to compete against cheaper sources of wood, the nearby mills had shuttered; the town's prospects were plummeting. Then came the activists fighting against the last gasp of logging and what it was doing to old-growth forests. On a mountain just a few miles outside of Oakridge, protestors built a fortress surrounded by a 10-foot wall built from scavenged timber and, beyond that, a moat with a drawbridge. From a 20-foot watchtower, a sentry could watch for the U.S. Forest Service. This camp, hastily assembled in late 1995, remained occupied for nearly a year. Thus, Oakridge became a key site in a decades-long battle over the forests of the Northwest.

Many pro-timber locals looked at the new wave of mountain bikers with skepticism. It probably didn't help Rowell that he then had blond hair reaching to his waist. Whenever he walked into the grocery store, people would stop and stare.

For a time, at least, the tensions held back the sport's development: Randy Dreiling, a regular Oakridge visitor, who then lived in Eugene, began to dream about launching a shuttle company in Oakridge, but worried that he'd be mistaken for an eco-terrorist. Not until 2002, as the tensions began to settle, did he pursue his plan. And even after he moved to town and opened Oregon Adventures, Dreiling wound up in scuffles in bars and tailed by residents toting video cameras, he says.

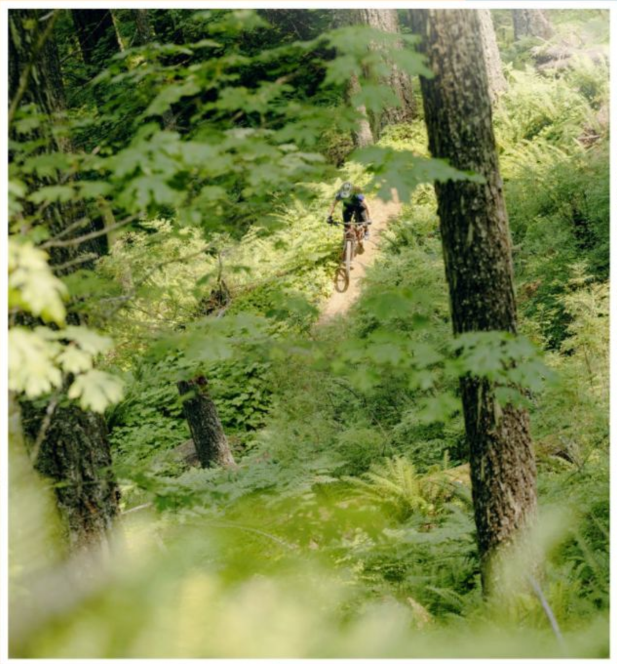
But as the Timber Wars faded into history, Dreiling's willingness to invest in an otherwise moribund town gained notice. He attended chamber of commerce meetings, then became its executive director. Suddenly a mountain biker was in charge.

Dreiling soon launched an annual festival, Mountain Bike Oregon, and built relationships at the state and federal levels that helped bring in funds for more trail building. Rowell, who had taken a job with the Forest Service, became a key partner. In 2008, the International Mountain Biking Association recognized their accomplishments, naming Oakridge a "gold-level ride center," one of only six such destinations in the world. A few years later, a University of Oregon master's thesis that examined the impact of tourism found that bikers made around 15,000 trips to Oakridge each year, bringing in as much as $4.9 million, a hefty chunk of change in a little town.

And those numbers preceded the latest growth spurt. In 2014, Kirin Stryker and her husband Lev expanded their Bend, Oregon–based mountain bike guiding business, Cog Wild, into Oakridge. By 2020, the Oakridge operations made up a third of their business. Then, two other shuttle companies opened. Outdoor recreation, it seemed, was a new model for a small town that had once depended on extraction. The science of climate change was well known by then, of course, but in the lush forests of Oregon, few people were worried that it might impact this new economy.

THAT NO LONGER seems to be the case. I found Emmons—and Oakridge—a few years back, when I began to reach out to outdoor athletes across the country to discuss their experiences with climate change. The stories were endless and varied. In flatlands outside of New Orleans, where I live, the sole major trail had been repeatedly swamped by floodwaters from the Mississippi. I heard stories about how unprecedented rainstorms were washing

Nick Gibson, owner of Trans Cascadia Excursions, an Oakridge-area shuttle company, photographed on a smoky day in Westfir, Oregon.



Above: Michelle Emmons rips down the Dead Mountain Trail. Right and bottom: The number of smoke-filled days in the Pacific Northwest continues to rise.

out trails from Vermont to British Columbia. As I was reporting this story, western North Carolina—one of the biking hubs of the East—was devastated by flooding from Hurricane Helene, with whole towns and businesses washed away. Then came the fires around Los Angeles that burned for weeks earlier this year.

Fire is perhaps the most devastating manifestation of an increasingly warmer climate. Even a distant fire can smear the sky with smoke, making outdoor activities hazardous. Barry Wicks, a pro rider based in Bend, Oregon, told me he keeps an app on his phone so that during fire season he can check on the air quality: "Like, where can I go that [the Air Quality Index is] fairly marginal, low enough that I can go ride?" In recent years, there's been so much fire across the West that it's changing the way mountain bikers think about the sport. One recent summer, some friends, mostly teachers, wanted to get out of town for a few days before school picked back up. "I was like, 'Well, we can't really plan that because we don't know what's going to be on fire,'" Wicks said. "It totally changes the calculus." The kind of freewheeling adventure that first drew Michelle Emmons is impossible now.

Wicks works with Protect Our Winters, an organization that mobilizes outdoor athletes to fight climate change. Launched with a focus on winter sports, the nonprofit expanded to include mountain biking in 2022. Some see that kind of activism as a needed corrective. Kristian Jackson, a senior lecturer in recreation management at Appalachian State University in North Carolina and a leader in the local mountain bike scene, told me he felt like the community had its collective head in the sand. Given the impacts a warmer climate will have on mountain biking, riders may need to do more.

Jackson attributed the silence in part to how much work bikers have had to do to gain access to trails: After writing grants, holding meetings, and finding volunteers to move dirt, trail advocates find there's not much left for climate activism. It hasn't helped that some strict conservationists see bikes as unsuitable for federally designated wilderness—too fast, too mechanical—which has created a schism between seeming allies. But there's also the fact that people come to mountain biking because it's a joyful thing, and don't necessarily want to get political. "Just recreating in general, it's a very, very privileged thing," Nick Gibson, the owner of Trans Cascadia Excursions, one of the Oakridge-area

shuttle companies, told me. That made him wary of getting too climate-centric as a business owner, for fear of being perceived as hypocritical. (Gibson also noted, rightly, that the fires are a complex problem, often distilled to just a climate issue; among other factors, forest management practices—including decades of fire suppression—played a role in the recent disasters.)

In 2020, David Wiens, the executive director of the International Mountain Bicycling Association (IMBA), told a journalist that the group "does best when it stays in its lane"—which seemed to mean, in essence, that IMBA should stay out of the climate fight. (Wiens told *Bicycling* that while he did not want to rehash that conversation, he is "deeply concerned" about climate change and that IMBA aims to preserve public lands and help the sport adapt.) Wicks, though, sees mountain bikers as key potential advocates: They're canaries in the coal mine. "Most people aren't spending very much time out in the wilderness," he said. "As outdoor recreationists, we're out there in the environment—we're not just going through air-conditioned buildings. We're out there in the mountains, on the trails, and that's where you notice these things." It's his duty, in other words, to raise the red flag.

In Oregon, the canary began to choke in 2020. Throughout that summer—with COVID-19 already stifling the tourism economy—the region suffered a severe drought. Then, on Labor Day, dry winds roared in from the east. The gusts ripped power lines down, and the resulting sparks may have stoked some flames; elsewhere, the wind whipped

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Left: Kirin Stryker flows down the Alpine Trail, which put Oakridge on the map. Above: A burn area near the Heckletooth Trail.

small, smoldering lightning burns into much larger conflagrations. Within three days, five separate "megafires" were burning throughout the Cascades. In the 50 years prior, a million acres of forest had burned on the western slopes of this mountain range; the Labor Day fires churned through nearly as much land in a matter of weeks.

These megafires "razed whole towns," Kirin Stryker told me. "It [was] pretty apocalyptic." At least nine people died; 90,000 were forced from their homes. Total property damage reached $7 billion. Cailin O'Brien-Feeney, who then worked as the director of the Oregon Office of Outdoor Recreation, told me the fires changed people's perspectives. Before that fall, there had been a sense of complacency: Sure, down in California their drier forests had been burning for decades, but Oregon had seemed safe. Now locals learned a lesson we may all learn soon enough: There are few safe places in the new world we've unleashed.

AS I DUG into the issue, I found that no one could pinpoint how much fires have cost mountain biking. The official reports of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, the United Nations–convened body that summarizes climate science, note that ski seasons may soon disappear in some popular destinations. That's easy to measure, since if there's no snow, there's no skiing. But when Dom Winter, the head of policy and advocacy with the United Kingdom chapter of Protect Our Winters, decided to study the future of mountain biking, he realized the climate discussion was short on numbers.

"It's quite the early days on that side of it," Winter told me. He found plenty of anecdotal data about climate impacts on biking. Floods and fires: The physical effects were obvious. "But it's hard to get that final step of exactly how frequently [those impacts] would cause a problem," Winter said.

So, to jump-start the conversation, Winter compiled what is in effect a taxonomy of how those physical impacts will alter the sport. The resulting report—*Downhill From Here*—offers several categories. One is access: Extreme weather will close some trails. Another is rider health and safety, whether due to dangerous heat or wildfire smoke. Specific events, too, may have to be canceled. Finally, there's the more ineffable idea of "experience." As some trails close, will riders be forced to cluster together in the same few areas, diminishing the joy all around? How many people will miss out on that conversion moment that Michelle Emmons had on the Alpine Trail?

Winter noted that the next step for researchers will be to dig into specific locations to map out the impacts; from these case studies, a more general sense of the issue might emerge. Which is precisely what brought me to Oregon. The 2020 megafires spared Oakridge, though the Forest Service instituted a "blanket closure" across the Willamette National Forest that closed the trails, and the outfitters "just kind of sat still for a while," Stryker told me. But two hours' drive south, in a patch of forest along the North Umpqua River, the flames were far more devastating: 30 miles of infrastructure along the North Umpqua Trail, a long-distance biking and hiking route, were destroyed.

Audrey Squires, who at the time worked as a restoration program coordinator for the National Forest Foundation, met me at the trailhead. The nonprofit aims to link people with federally owned forests, and much of Squires's job consisted of trying to raise funds to fully restore the North Umpqua Trail—or the "NUT," as it's known to fans. We stood together before an arboreal graveyard. The fir trees had been turned by the fire into tall, blackened poles bereft of needles. With the canopy gone, there was at least a clear view down to the North Umpqua River; thanks to the sunlight, a profusion of shrubs covered the forest floor.

Squires told me that she'd already been able to ride the first few miles of the trail by bike, but the work was ongoing: A crew of high schoolers was hacking at the brush and sawing through downed trunks—clearing the ground so a professional trail-building crew could install new bridges and boardwalks. The word "BEES" was spray-painted on one of the trunks, a signal that the dead wood had been colonized by a hive and ought to be left alone.

Squires introduced me to one of the crew leaders overseeing the students. He had been born and raised in Glide, he told us, a small town just west of the trailhead, where the local mill had managed to hold out until 2006. Squires hoped that the NUT might deliver the same kind of partial revitalization taking hold in Oakridge: There's now a daily shuttle service, and outfitters offer multiday supported tours on the NUT; the first local mountain bike race, the Nutcracker, had debuted in 2018. These initiatives meant that after a few years of quiet, new restaurants were opening in Glide, catering to mountain tourists—a sign that the recreation economy had been building steam. But the Nutcracker had been unable to return since the fires. The new era in Glide would have to be postponed.

"I think it'll come," Squires said. "But the fire is a huge setback."

Even a small burn can mean substantial work for trail managers. Kevin Rowell, the long-haired rider turned Forest Service ranger, said that after one fire near Oakridge in 2000, eight years passed before the killed trees finally stopped collapsing. Squires had introduced me to officials from the Bureau of Land Management and the Forest Service, the two federal agencies that own the land along the NUT. They noted that while they'd removed the most dangerous snags along the trail already, here, too, trees will keep falling for a decade or more.

We hiked a mile down the closed trail to reach one sign of progress: a newly installed bridge built from iron, rather than wood, to ensure it will not need to be replaced if another fire burns here. Squires had been on site for the installation. Given the terrain, the work had to be conducted by helicopter. Over several trips, the bridge and its foundation, hanging from a cable, were carefully lowered into place; then the charred old structure was carried out. Because of the expense of this procedure, the total cost to replace the 15 bridges that burned along the NUT will likely reach $2.2 million.

And that doesn't include repairs to the trail itself. At one point on our walk, the NUT ran along a sheer, rocky slope that had been completely cleared of vegetation. With nothing to hold the soil in place, the footing often gave way. It was clear why no one would be racing here anytime soon. As I scanned the slopes, I could forget that a trail had ever run here at all. Squires indicated that explosives may be necessary to blast new flat benches into the bedrock in such sites—bringing the total estimated costs for restoration to $3 million.

SQUIRES TALKED ABOUT how she hoped the fires would be a motivator as much as a deterrent, that people might be inspired by the disaster to contribute to the trails that meant so much to mountain biking. I encountered similar talk from other riders in Oregon: Resilient Headwaters, a coalition meant to uncover grown-over trails in a canyon in central Oregon, touts the potential for increased tourism to inject new cash into a fire-ravaged region.

Trails can do more than bring in money: Gabriel Tiller, a trailbuilder and planner who helped organize Resilient Headwaters, points out that trail networks can offer firefighters access to backcountry burns. In some places, singletrack trails have provided enough space to double as a firebreak.

In the "vision deck" that lays out the case for Resilient Headwaters, Oakridge and its multi-million-dollar recreation economy is cited as a proof point. Then again, studies show that the conditions that made the Labor Day fires so bad—extended drought combined with dry, east winds—will grow more common, thanks to the warmer air. Indeed, there have been so many fires in the years since 2020 that I found locals' memories blurred into a smear. What years were the evacuations? Which trails burned in which fires? No one could get their timeline straight. From another point of view, then, Oakridge is less a proof point than a warning of the risks of depending too heavily on tourism.

And fire, again, is not the only threat, even in Oakridge. The same rain in 2022 that nearly ruined the Alpine Epic meant that for four weekends in a row, Cog Wild could not run its shuttles, Stryker told me. By the Saturday before Memorial Day—a big kickoff weekend, when tourist traffic starts to ramp up—the conditions finally looked encouraging. A big group had come from California and rented out several of Cog Wild's vans; public shuttles were running as planned. The Strykers themselves decided to get out and ride, too. The first route they tried—Hardesty to Eula—seemed just fine: steep and tight-packed, running through dense forest, the singletrack drained well in the rain. After the Strykers finished, they hitched a ride on the shuttle to Lawler, another beloved trail. "And it was like soup," Kirin Stryker said. They didn't even wait to get to town: The Strykers pulled off at an overlook and called the office in Bend. Start processing the cancellations, they told their employees.

"IT WAS AWFUL," Stryker said later, an unpopular choice that was necessary not just for the local ecology, but to sustain her business. "If we don't steward responsibly, we could lose our permits," she noted.

A barista at a coffee shop told me there's a feeling of PTSD in town. Gibson put it more bluntly: 2022 "was fucked," thanks to months of some of the worst air quality in the world.

Randy Dreiling, the entrepreneur who started

Oakridge's first shuttle service, said that all these fiascos caused him to rack up debt. Eventually, he gave his real estate back to the bank and shuttered the company. When I asked if the company was a victim of climate change, Dreiling's reply was clear: "Absolutely."

The companies that remain in town are scrambling, searching for ways to steady their business. Emmons told me she'd learned to stop putting dates on her T-shirts and medals for the Alpine Epic, so that if a race gets canceled at the last minute, she won't wind up thousands of dollars in the hole. The owners of the Westfir Inn, a bed and breakfast, began running shuttles in 2019; they told me they were contemplating buying a second property somewhere farther north, perhaps in Alaska, to hedge against a natural disaster. (Eventually, they sold the lodge, though they still own the guiding service that runs shuttles.) When every place seems at risk, the more locations you do business, the likelier it could be that one survives.

Kirin Stryker noted that if they had not already been running trips in Bend, which so far has been luckier than Oakridge, they, like Dreiling, might have folded, too.

I ARRIVED IN Oakridge amid a bout of what locals know as "Juneuary" weather: Though the official start of summer was just a few days away, the temperatures hovered in the forties. Fog and rain shrouded the mountains, which, combined with the following days of sunshine, helped to refresh and soften the trails. As I shuttled up through the forests, the ferns dripped with dew. Moss slipped off every tree's bark and roots. It was hard for me to imagine this place could ever burn.

But my driver corrected me: I was seeing the first rainfall in weeks. He pointed at the yellowed grasses in the pastures we drove past. A worrying sign, in his estimation. The rain, he figured, had bought the mountains maybe an extra week. But it was inevitable that fires would still come that summer. "It's the usual now," as Nick Gibson later put it to me—not just because of climate change, but because of the many ways humans had changed the region's already-dynamic landscape.

Indeed, by late July, a month after my visit, a fire broke out near a campground northwest of Oakridge. Cog Wild sent out a newsletter encouraging customers to check smoke forecasts and be prepared to adjust as necessary. ("Consider yourself a risk factor," the email suggested, given that many fires are accidentally started by careless campers.) Soon, a second fire smoldered just a mile and a half from Michelle Emmons's home. Then in 2024, despite clear skies and firm trails, a cluster of small lightning fires closed Alpine Trail—tanking business, since the town now lacked its biggest draw.

To the south, along the Umpqua River, things were tougher. The town of Roseburg was besieged by smoke for weeks after my visit. I had met Paul Whitworth, the president of the Umpqua Velo Club, on my hike along the NUT; he was, he figured, among the first people ever to bike on the trail. He emailed to tell me that just days before his club's big event, the venue was commandeered as a base camp for fire crews. He had to scramble to set four new routes. The day wound up beautiful, he told me, but the stress of the scramble had made it unlikely that he'd plan another event. The "unpredictable climate," he said, just made it too hard. On the North Umpqua Trail itself, a second bridge was installed in 2024, and funding was secured to complete the trail repairs, but the Nutcracker remained on hold.

The mountain bikers in Oakridge, though, were forging onward—enthusiastic, even, about how the scene was growing. Stryker indicated that in the year after my visit, new restaurants had opened and a regular farmers' market had taken hold. Some new arrivals had revived an old tradition of regular disco dance parties. And perhaps there's good reason to be bullish about Oakridge's mountain bike future: Interest in outdoor sports has been increasing despite—or maybe even because of—the climate disasters.

"It used to be if you were the mayor of some town, [your priorities] were like, 'fire, water, sewer, police,'" says Ashley Korenblat. "Now it's 'fire, water, sewer, police'—trails." Korenblat, a hall-of-fame mountain biker, now runs a nonprofit consultancy, Public Land Solutions, that helps communities pivot away from total dependence on oil-and-gas economies and toward a recreation economy. Some academics speculate that climate change might send even more people outside, if only for the psychological salve of nature. And that, Korenblat says, could lead to a virtuous cycle, since when landscapes are protected for trails, that tends to discourage extraction and development. More oil in the ground, more trees in the forest—that means less carbon in the air.

WHEN I FIRST called around, gathering climate stories, Michelle Emmons had sounded dispirited. The Oakridge downpours had complicated the 2022 Alpine Epic, since the forest permits required that she "mitigate" any impacts, and the wet conditions would increase the damage; anticipating that smoke might inhibit the restoration, she changed the course to focus on less-sensitive trails. After another fire hit Oakridge that August, the smoke and flames put a damper on the work. She found herself exhausted and despairing.

But when I met her in person the next summer, she, too, was in far better spirits. The latest Alpine Epic, held a few weeks earlier, had been a triumph. The course ran through an active timber sale, a site where a crew was working six days a week felling timber, a fact that threatened to once more cancel the race. But Kevin Rowell, the Forest Service trail manager, approached the timber crew foreman and explained the situation. The entire crew agreed to take off that Saturday, working on Sunday instead. ("Blew my mind," Rowell said—a sign of a sea change in the local culture.) Volunteers had stepped up, too, keeping the event running smoothly. Almost 200 riders entered—the race's biggest-ever field. Emmons told me afterward that it would be a disservice to end the race. She is searching for someone else to take over, not because she's in despair, but because she's pursuing larger political ambitions: She ran for Congress in 2022 and 2024, campaigns that fell short but, combined with her professional work, put new demands on her time.

Emmons indicated that her renewed enthusiasm was not just due to one successful race. Throughout the years of pandemic and fire, a new coalition has emerged. The local trail-building community had once been a bit of a free-for-all, different groups pursuing whatever trails they preferred. Now the work is conducted under the umbrella of one organization, the Oakridge Trails Alliance, or OTA.

The fires have opened up a funding stream as the Forest Service steers money toward fire recovery. Since 2020, new federal laws have brought more than $600,000 to the OTA. Emmons noted that the week before I visited Oakridge, the OTA had helped Trans Cascadia, working under the direction of the Forest Service, reopen a new set of trails on Heckletooth Mountain. "Sure, there's a lot of problems that have come along with climate change," she said. "But within every problem, there is an opportunity." The OTA, she noted, is working to ensure the restored trails will be more resilient in future disasters; through collaborations, the group is considering how the trails might be fire barriers and firefighter access points.

Before I left Oregon, on my last day in Oakridge, I drove up into the forests. I had been intrigued by Rowell's stories of the protestors he'd found there, and decided to seek the site where they'd built a fort and locked themselves down for a year. I had a set of written directions but lacked a good map. As I ascended the mountain, my cell phone signal dwindled to nothing, and after navigating a half-dozen unmarked forks and intersections, I gave up on my quest. I told myself that I couldn't have missed much: After 30 years, whatever was left of the camp would have been swallowed by the forest. Besides, the area had been singed by fire.

Still, I kept driving, following whatever gravel road seemed least likely to cost me my rental car deposit. The deeper I got, the more I understood the idea that forests constitute a place all their own. As Emmons told me, just a few miles from Oakridge, you can forget that there is any town at all. Even if I could not find the fort, its name—Cascadia Free State—seemed fitting. I understood then why Emmons had fallen in love with mountain biking. I remembered why we all fall in love with outdoor adventures, the way it allows you to leave behind the troubles of the world. But we cannot escape climate change.

Eventually, by happenstance, I found myself atop Heckletooth Mountain—site of the recently reopened trail. So I parked the car and began to explore.

Nick Gibson, the owner of Trans Cascadia, had organized the work party and later described the event to me: There were 35 volunteers, he said, most of whom camped in a meadow outside of Oakridge and shuttled up the mountain every morning. As the sun lifted over the mountain, they drank steaming cups of coffee; there was whiskey to sip in the evenings, as the sun slipped down again. On the fourth and final day of the work camp, free shuttles carted everyone up to the trailheads—a celebratory day of riding.

It sounded like an echo of the old Cascadia fort, though this time there was not a fight, just an effort to work together to rebuild. No one thinks that's enough to stop the chaos. "I'm expecting fires this year," Gibson had told me—which proved to be correct. But after a fire comes ashes. And what will rise from those ashes? If we want to keep mountain biking—and keep this world intact—we need more efforts like this. ***B***