

Emergency Services in Tillamook County: Meeting the Rising Demand

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Tillamook County's fire departments and districts serve both the 27,000 full-time residents and the 3.25 million visitors who travel here annually to enjoy the Oregon Coast's beaches, forests, and outdoor recreation. This surge in population places a significant strain on local emergency services, which operate with limited full-time staffing and rely heavily on volunteers. Year after year, departments are facing a continued rise in emergency incidents due to both a growing population and increasing tourism. Emergency call volumes spike dramatically during peak tourist season, with July and August seeing more than double the calls of winter months.

Combined, Bay City Fire Department and Tillamook Fire District responded to nearly 1,400 calls last year, with some days requiring responses to 10, 15, or even 20 emergencies.

Tourist-related incidents account for a large share of calls. Last year, Tillamook Fire responded to 190 motor vehicle accidents (MVAs), and Bay City Fire to 76 MVAs, with at least 45% involving non-county residents. Visitors unfamiliar with coastal and mountain roads contribute to accidents along Highway 101, Highway 6, Highway 22, and Highway 53, creating an additional burden on emergency responders. Beyond MVAs, fire departments respond to beach, trail, and water rescues at popular destinations like Cape Lookout and Cape Meares, campfire and outdoor fire incidents, and medical emergencies ranging from cardiac arrests to falls on rugged terrain. Some departments, like Tillamook Fire District, do not run a Quick Response Team (QRT) and only respond to medical calls under specific criteria, such as high-priority cases or ambulance service requests. This means that much of their emergency response focuses on fires, MVAs, and technical rescues, rather than primarily EMS calls.

Bay City Fire and Tillamook Fire operate with only three full-time and three part-time firefighters combined, meaning emergency response depends heavily on approximately 45 volunteers between both departments. However, these volunteers have full-time jobs and family commitments, which can limit availability. Across the rest of the county, departments face similar challenges—volunteers and paid staff respond together 24/7, year-round. There is no distinction between daytime and nighttime response; emergencies happen at all hours, and departments rely on whoever is available whenever the call comes in.

At the same time, fire departments across Oregon are seeing a steady decline in both career and volunteer firefighters, even as emergency calls continue to rise statewide. This trend presents an ongoing challenge for maintaining adequate emergency response, as departments struggle to recruit and retain personnel while facing increased call volumes.

Tourism drives economic growth in Tillamook County, but it also brings a higher emergency response burden. Visitors traveling coastal highways and exploring state parks require fire and medical services at an increasing rate. Without sustainable solutions, local fire departments will continue to struggle to meet demand, impacting response times and public safety for both residents and visitors alike.

— Tillamook County Fire Departments & Districts