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Fire hydrant snorkels, developed on Mount Hood, could help save more homes, lives in snowy areas

Published: Friday, December 24, 2010, 1:30 PM Updated: Friday, December 24, 2010, 9:09 PM

By **Stuart Tomlinson, The Oregonian** [Follow](#)

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[+ View full size](#) Scott Freeman

Lt. John Creel of the Hoodland Fire Department in Welches patented a hydrant snorkel design. This is one being tested at Crater Lake National Park.

Imagine you're a firefighter called to a fully involved house fire in **Government Camp** on Mount Hood. In winter. A snowy winter.

One of the first things you're going to want to do when you arrive is get water on that fire. The industry standard is four minutes; anything longer and the chance of stopping the blaze decreases rapidly.

But if the fire hydrant you need is buried under 4 or 5 feet of snow -- not unlikely on Mount Hood -- you're going to spend those precious first minutes digging the hydrant out of the snow.

So about 10 years ago, Lt. John Creel of the **Hoodland Fire Department** in Welches set to work on the problem.

His solution? Create hydrant snorkels - - basically 2.5-inch to 4-inch extension water pipes -- that extend up from the hydrant and reach above the snow. Extensions can be added as the snow piles up, and removed when warmer weather arrives.

A second "wrench" extension is used to turn water on and off. Some of the first snorkels at Government Camp

have had pipe extensions as long as 10 feet, Creel said.

"The benefit is to access your water immediately just as if it was the summertime," said Scott

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Freeman, a Hoodland Fire volunteer who works at the Brightwood station. "In the old days, the rule of thumb was that a fire doubles in size every 60 seconds. Now, because of new materials and all the stuff in people's homes, it's 35 seconds."

There are now 27 of the hydrant snorkels in Government Camp, and the **National Park Service** is testing one of the snorkels at **Crater Lake** -- which averages 44 feet of snow each year. If it's up to snuff, park service officials may add more at Crater Lake and other national parks, Freeman said.

Freeman, a construction worker, was recently laid off. He and Creel decided that now was the time to see about the need for hydrant snorkels at other snowy places from Maine to Oregon. Freeman said he Googled "buried hydrants" and found numerous accounts of firefighters being delayed by snow-bound hydrants.

Freeman said made at least 400 calls, and pushed his cell phone bill up to \$400 in one month alone. At a meeting with the **Anchorage, Alaska**, fire chief, Freeman said the chief turned to a city of Anchorage public works employee and said, "I'm paying you \$2 million each year to clear my hydrants."

For Brett Fischer, general manager for Collins Lake Resort in Government Camp and the Grand Lodges at Mount Hood, the hydrant snorkels are something he's been waiting for.

"They are absolute lifesavers in the terms of what it used to take to dig out the hydrants," Fischer said. "It's very time consuming and a big expense."

The resorts installed 11 of the snorkels this fall -- eight at **Collins Lake** and three at **Grand Lodges**. Those snowy mornings when Fischer and his maintenance crew used to spend hours clearing hydrants are a thing of the past.

Fischer said the 151 condo owners at Collins Lake and the 50 at Grand Lodges pay a fee to their homeowner's association for snow removal. Because of last year's less than average snowfall, that money was used to purchase the snorkels this fall, Fischer said.

"We have a priority list after big snowfalls and fire, life and safety was always first," he said. "Now all we have to do is look to see if they're clear. It's a big burden lifted, and we're saving money."

Creel, who patented the snorkel design about 10 years ago, said the time is right to spread the word about the benefit of hydrant snorkels for snowy climes.

"I've spent more than I've made, but I expect to make a profit some day," Creel said. "The best thing is not having to spend the man-hours making sure the hydrants are clear and keeping up with Mother Nature."

—**Stuart Tomlinson**

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What kind of fire truck can drive on 10 feet deep snow?

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 **lucy8u** December 24, 2010 at 2:03PM [Follow](#)

The hydrants often get covered by the snowbanks that are created when the roads are plowed.


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You're always such a positive commenter.


Fire truck, like everyone else, drive ON TOP of ten feet of snow for most of the winter on the mountain. This allows them to access the hydrants. But I'm sure you know that, right?

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This is very cool.

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 **dakotakid** December 25, 2010 at 9:19AM [Follow](#)


My childhood home had a fire hydrant in front and it was a tough job to dig it out when the snowplow came by after a heavy snow. All the city did was attach a metal pole similar to a CB antenna to make them easier to find if they were buried.

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 **tombdragon** December 25, 2010 at 10:16AM [Follow](#)

This is the kind of innovation we experienced on a regular basis, before we chased the Timber Industry from our state.

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 **grudgewomb** December 25, 2010 at 9:22PM [Follow](#)

funny...i don't recall reading about anyone in the Timber Industry having any input on this? Hidden agenda Monsieur Wombdragon?

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eraserhead

December 25, 2010 at 11:48AM

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What's keeping the water in the snorkle from freezing?

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Harry_Tuttle

December 25, 2010 at 11:08PM

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There is no water in the snorkel until you open up the valve on the hydrant. The valve on the hydrant is below the frost line. As long as you keep the top of the snorkel capped, there should be no snow or ice inside the tube of the snorkel.

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