

Fire at state Capitol investigated as arson

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Workers look out a window broken by a fire at the Oregon Capitol that damaged the governor's ceremonial office early Saturday in Salem.

SALEM — A three-alarm fire at the Oregon Capitol left the building with smoke, water and fire damage, including in Gov. Ted Kulongoski's ceremonial office and in the offices of some of his high-ranking staff members.

The fire, which started on the south side of the building, was reported by Willamette University students living across the street at about 12:30 a.m. Saturday, and was put out in about 20 minutes, said Capt. Calvin Curths of Oregon State Police. Five janitors working inside the building exited safely after being alerted by a fire alarm.

The blaze is being investigated as an arson, but a cause is not expected to be announced until after the holiday weekend. The state Capitol burned down twice before, most recently in 1935. Extensive renovation work is being done on the Capitol this year, much of it in the area where the fire is thought to have ignited.

The governor and other officials rushed to the Capitol in the morning to inspect the damage.

Senate President Peter Courtney, D-Salem, said in a statement that, “We were doing some work to really get the old girl fixed up, and now this happens. But Oregon has bounced back from fires at our Capitol twice before, and we will fix her up again and restore her to her full glory.”

Most of the Capitol, which was added to the National Registry of Historic Buildings in 1988, escaped the blaze. Besides offices on the second floor, other spots damaged were first-floor hearing rooms and a third-floor room.

Crews arrived early to begin cleaning up water, smoke and ceiling tile damage. Damage estimates will be determined by the building’s facility managers.

Anna Richter Taylor, a Kulongoski spokeswoman, said the offices of the governor’s chief of staff and deputy chief had water damage. The fire will force 19 people who work in the governor’s second-floor offices to be displaced for one to three weeks.

“Come Tuesday, there will be a temporary office space for us,” she said.

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