



To: Members of the House Veterans and Emergency Preparedness Committee

From: Sheriff Matt English
Hood River County Sheriffs' Office
Oregon State Sheriffs' Association

Date: February 28, 2019

Re: Support for HB 2503 – Coalition effort to address Search and Rescue/Recreational Response funding and issues

Chair Evans, Vice-Chair Lewis, Vice-Chair Meek and esteemed members of the committee -

In our state, Search and Rescue is a statutory mandate for Sheriffs. There are currently no dedicated funding sources to support Search and Rescue. Counties are required to find ways to maintain these programs and often rely on inadequate funding sources and donations to make ends meet.

Currently under ORS 404.270 counties can only recover \$500 from SAR operations. This is a civil penalty that doesn't reflect actual 21st Century costs but also requires some statutory benchmarks be met before collection can be attempted. Furthermore, there are philosophical debates surrounding the fee itself. As a result, the fee is not collected.

Sheriffs are also charged with running recreational safety programs that are key components of search and rescue. These include:

- Marine Patrol
- Off Highway Vehicle Enforcement
- Forest Patrol Programs

Several sheriffs have received search and rescue funding from Title III through the federal Secure Rural Schools Act. Over the years, that money has dwindled to a fraction of what Sheriffs previously received and all payments stopped for a period until Congress reauthorized SRS funding in 2018 but the funding has not been reauthorized for 2019.

The Oregon State Marine Board has notified Sheriffs that their marine programs will take a 6% reduction for the next biennium and if OSMB bills aren't approved through the legislature, Sheriff's we will take a

reduction that is 23% below this biennium's funding level.

Many of our SAR missions across the state occur on federal land. Some Sheriffs get a small amount of funding from the USFS for forest patrol, others receive some assistance from BLM.

As we have seen increases in ecotourism, outdoor recreation and overall better access to the fantastic natural resources this state has to offer, there has been a marked increase in recreation related emergencies. In my county, we saw an increase of about 25% between 2011 and 2013. That number has remained consistent and continues to tick upwards.

According to Oregon Emergency Management's statistics, annually nearly 98% of SAR's conducted statewide, are for out of county residents

Many small counties are reaching a breaking point where the demand for services is exceeding the resources, we have available to us. Several Sheriff's worry about their ability to provide adequate services going forward and some have considered public pleas to warn visitors that they can't respond in an appropriate or timely fashion if they find themselves in trouble. In Wheeler County last year, the four-person Sheriff's Office was so overwhelmed by the impacts of recreation that the Sheriff and his three deputies resigned.

There's clearly a funding crisis that no doubt requires legislative assistance. A coalition has been formed that consists of representatives from Sheriff's Offices, search and rescue groups, the tourism industry, outdoor recreation groups, businesses and small government. All with a vested interest in outdoor recreation and safety.

I am extremely encouraged by the formation of this coalition and can already see how important this collaboration will be to properly address the issues surrounding recreational safety. This collaborative group will work together and present the legislature with some specific recommendations. I'm optimistic that we will find some solutions to positively impact the immediate issues before us as well as developing a thoughtful and collaborative response to issues that will continue to arise in the future.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'M. English', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Matt English
Sheriff
Hood River County