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Representative Paul Evans
Chair
House Committee on Veterans and Emergency Preparedness
Oregon State Legislature
900 Court Street
Salem OR 97301

Chair Evans and Members of the House Committee on Veterans and Emergency Preparedness:

Thank you for the opportunity to present in support of HB 3167, relating to Urban Search and Rescue (USAR). In the wake of 9/11 two teams were established and managed by the Office of State Fire Marshall through federal funding. Previously, there were two teams which collectively represented ten different agencies. There was a north team, assembled from agencies north of Salem, and south team, which included Salem and agencies further south. Eugene Springfield Fire (ESF) was a member of the south team. Team members were certified in the necessary disciplines of rope rescue, confined space, trench rescue, structural collapse and search and rescue. Equipment for the teams was a combination of state provided resources and local resources. The blend of certified personnel paired with the right equipment provided a capability to cut, support, access, stabilize and extricate a victim of a natural disaster.

In approximately 2008, funding for the local USAR team was drastically reduced. Funding was then supplemented locally by the Cities of Eugene and Springfield. As funding continued to decrease the remaining federal funds were used for participation in state level training events and equipment maintenance. Once the federal funding ceased, ESF continued to maintain the state equipment and attempted to maintain certifications as on-duty training allowed. Unfortunately, on-duty training reduces the availability, opportunity and scope of drills to keep members current in high risk, low frequency rescue scenarios.

The combination of career progression, retirements and lack of training funds has led to one certified team member remaining in the department. Today, ESF maintains only a rope and confined space rescue capability and associated equipment. The remaining state equipment purchased in 2002 is either retired or at end of life.



Oregon continues to be susceptible to natural disasters. Exercises such as Cascadia Rising highlight Oregon's vulnerability to earthquakes and tsunamis. Just within the southern Willamette Valley large occupancy venues such as Matthew Knight Arena, Autzen Stadium and RiverBend hospital pose a challenge. Additionally, these newer buildings are intermixed with a subset of older buildings built with unreinforced masonry which are more vulnerable to collapse.

However, the threat is not limited to the urban setting. Oregon's aging infrastructure and population growth throughout the state have created a landscape threatened with structural collapse potential. Many of Oregon's southern and coastal communities were erected using these older, unreinforced building techniques. Specifically, the vulnerability to a collapse event became clear during the recent snow storm event. During the storm homes, business, outbuildings and the Thurston High School gym collapsed under the weight of snow. Currently, there are no dedicated assets to address a collapse outside of the Portland area.

ESF recognizes the need to reestablish a collapse capability within the Southern Willamette Valley. ESF is no stranger to providing mutual aid to construction, utility, industrial and animal rescue emergencies outside of our area of responsibility. While the term Urban Search and Rescue can be misleading, this type of resource, similarly to fire resources, can be deployed anywhere in the State of Oregon.

Thank you for your consideration

Submitted electronically.

Chris Heppel
Deputy Chief of Strategic Services

