

March 10, 2021
House Committee on Business & Labor
Steve Nielsen Testimony in Support of HB 3272

Chair Holvey and Members of the Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide input today. My name is Steve Nielsen and I am here to speak in support of House Bill 3272. Thousands of Oregonians have been mistreated by greedy insurance companies refusing to indemnify their insureds who suffered losses due to the devastating September wildfires. Insurers are taking advantage of Oregon's current laws, which protect their interests over that of their insureds. House Bill 3272 will raise the standards insurance companies must adhere to in response to emergencies and related consumer losses.

I live in Gates with my wife and three sons. We have been in Oregon since 1989, much of that time in the Santiam Canyon. Our neighborhood self-evacuated around 10:30pm on Labor Day evening when fire quickly erupted on Potato Hill to our south and west. We were all prepared in advance due to the east wind forecast and were relieved to get out safely. We remain heartbroken for the five Canyon residents who lost their lives and for their families.

When folks were finally allowed back to assess their property, the personal losses, along with the devastation to the surrounding landscape, were hard to grasp. The beautiful Santiam Canyon has been changed for a lifetime, and it will take years for people to rebuild their lives.

Our home survived, but many of our neighbors lost everything. The fire burned our property, like trees and fences, and our home is still not livable due to the severe smoke damage. Our insurance company, Allstate, has refused to do needed repairs such as attic insulation replacement, inside painting and sealing cabinets and floors. They also initially refused to clean and/or replace certain contents before reversing course. We dealt with seven different adjusters, many of whom were largely unsympathetic and lacked a sense of urgency.

In addition to denial of needed repairs to our home, Allstate did not help us find temporary living arrangements and they still have not reimbursed a great deal of additional living expenses. To date, we have lived in five different locations, including our current rental home in the valley. Many people in the Canyon are living in trailers next to their old foundations to this day.

Allstate's mode of operation is delay, deny, defend. Everything is a "negotiation" and a struggle. It seems their strategy is to wear down insureds in stress and hope they just settle for anything they can get. We refused to settle. We hired legal help a few months ago and are working to settle this dispute by those means. It brought a great deal of relief not having to deal with Allstate directly any further and is comforting to have an expert looking out for our best interests. It should not have come to this, however. Oregon's current laws make it too easy for insurance companies to mistreat consumers.

As I stated earlier, current laws lack accountability measures to hold insurance companies in check. We simply wish for our home to be restored to pre-loss condition. It has been a major struggle. I believe HB 3272 will help level the playing field for insurance consumers who depend on their insurance companies in times of crisis. We are counting on you to hold them accountable. Thank you.