



February 08, 2021

To: Oregon Legislature and Governor’s Office

RE: **Funding needs for 2021 Legislative Session; Submission of State Action EO 15-18 Report**

Dear Governor, Senators, Representatives and relevant staff:

Oregon’s Outback or High Desert is home to millions of acres of sagebrush spanning roughly 1/3 of the State across 8 counties (many being larger than entire eastern states). Far from population centers and political power bases, this unique ecosystem is critical to rural communities, economies, wildfire resilience (and associated carbon sequestration), and conservation of hundreds of wildlife species. This includes the Greater sage-grouse, an indicator of Oregon’s rangeland health that is facing renewed pressure for listing under the federal Endangered Species Act (ESA).

In late 2015, collaborative efforts of the [Sage-Grouse Conservation \(SageCon\) Partnership](#)--a diverse collection of rural, urban, private landowner, business sector, government and non-government entities--produced the [Oregon Sage-Grouse Action Plan](#) with strong bi-partisan support. Governor Brown signed [Executive Order 15-18](#) adopting and directing its implementation. This work was recognized nationally as key pieces in averting the need for an ESA listing west-wide in 2015.

The State Action Plan remains underfunded and under-implemented, to the detriment of people, communities, wildlife, and ecological health. The sagebrush ecosystem remains one of America’s most imperiled, and the rural communities in this landscape often feel similarly threatened. Needs relevant to wildfire risk, invasive annual grasses, economic development and conservation have continued to grow, whereas state investment since 2015 has not. **The undersigned diverse partners urge the 2021 Oregon Legislature to take the following actions** (elaborated upon further below) **as part of any comprehensive wildfire or other legislation related to the key threats of rangeland wildfire, invasive annual grasses, and capacity to address habitat and rural community resilience.**

1	<b>At least \$1 million for rangeland wildfire / invasive annual grass risk reduction (Governor’s 2020 Wildfire Mitigation Committee’s recommendation).</b>
2	<b>\$400,000 in Soil &amp; Water Conservation District capacity support to implement Oregon’s Candidate Conservation Agreements with Assurances (CCAA) program.</b>
3	<b>Advance the Governor’s Recommended Budget for ODF funds needed to support Oregon’s Rangeland Fire Protection Association (RFPA) program.</b>
4	<b>Restore capacity for Oregon Department of Agriculture’s Noxious Weed Program.</b>

While forest fires dominate the headlines, most people don't know that rangeland wildfire burns far more acreage annually across the West. Invasive annual grasses are the driver of this rangeland fire problem. In Oregon, we face a massive invasives and wildfire threat AND we have a local Rangeland Fire Protection Association (RFPA) system that is the envy of many places around the West. Because of the invasive annual

grass problem, the notion of welcoming fire back into the sagebrush ecosystem is much different than in Oregon’s dry forests. Supporting RFPA capacity to keep fires small and away from key habitat while also addressing the underlying causal factors of invasives and habitat resilience are both critical.

Tied to this is incentives for voluntary action on private lands. Private landowner engagement is one reason Oregon stands out amongst western states. As this is the 5-year mark since 2015 ESA determination for sage-grouse, and as conversations are being resumed around a renewed ESA listing review, supporting this private land work is increasingly relevant for landowners, the farm / ranch sector, conservation outcomes and the State’s interests as a whole. Unfortunately, state and local capacity to both implement and monitor work as well as incent landowner engagement has suffered and needs attention.

**RFPAs, Invasive Annual Grass work, and local capacity all need the Legislature’s attention and funding as part of any Wildfire bill or package that comes out of this legislative session.** The following information elaborates on the correspondingly-numbered priority funding requests listed above.

1	<b>At least \$1 million for rangeland wildfire and invasives.</b> The diverse, bi-partisan interests on the 2020 Wildfire Mitigation Committee recommended this new funding through ODF as competitive grants (using Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board) for invasive annual grass-related rangeland fire risk reduction capacity and implementation. The 2020 session broke down despite support for this recommendation. The 2021 Legislature should create this recommended investment.
2	<b>\$400K for CCAA Program.</b> Hundreds of letters of intent remain unprocessed related to voluntary landowner enrollment in the CCAA program, which produces benefits in the form of habitat, landowner operations, and federal regulatory certainty. In addition, the plans that SWCD’s have put in place with willing landowners come with monitoring and maintenance commitments that remain under-funded.
3	<b>RFPA Program Support.</b> This program consists of volunteer landowners who partner with state and federal fire operations staff, producing bargain outcomes for the State relative to other options. Technology and equipment are constantly changing, and needs for liability insurance, training and collaborative program delivery persist to meet increasing demands to expand coverage. Adopting the Governor’s Recommended Budget for RFPAs is a minimum necessary action.
4	<b>ODA’s Noxious Weed Program.</b> Program capacity has suffered greatly due to COVID-period staff reorganization. Noxious weeds spread exponentially, so the lost effort resulting from starved capacity means a compounded level of invasion. During the 2018-19 funding cycle (prior to COVID impacts) grants associated with this program put over \$1 million into on-the-ground projects and jobs within Oregon’s sage-grouse habitat alone. ODA’s capacity needs to be restored.

The above budget requests are critical to the success of Oregon’s Action Plan as well as the health and well-being of rural communities, wildlife conservation, and effective collaboration in the face of conflict and controversy. While these requests flag current needs, this is not the first time the legislature has engaged in State Action Plan investment. Through this letter, the SageCon Partnership also submits the following [State Action EO 15-18 Report](#), which summarizes state investment and Plan implementation actions undertaken

by executive branch agencies from 2015-2020. Further, the [SageCon Partnership Dashboard](#) provides an overview of the status and trends of sagebrush rangeland condition, sage-grouse populations, and collaborative conservation efforts in Oregon.

On behalf of the following partners, thank you for your consideration (see signature page that follows).

Respectfully,

<b>Portland Audubon</b> (Bob Sallinger)	<b>Association of Oregon Counties</b> (Lauren Smith)	<b>High Desert RFPA</b> (President Kevin Leehmann)	<b>Oregon Cattlemen's Association</b> (Tom Sharp)
<b>Oregon Natural Desert Association</b> (Mark Salvo)	<b>Baker County</b> (Commissioner Mark Bennett)	<b>Warner Valley RFPA</b> (President John O'Keeffe)	<b>Oregon Association of Conservation Districts</b> (Jan Lee)
<b>Willamette Partnership</b> (Sara O'Brien)	<b>Lake County</b> (Commissioner Barry Shullanberger)	<b>Fields/Andrews RFPA</b> (President Cody Hendricks)	<b>Malheur SWCD</b> (Linda Rowe)
<b>Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership</b> (Michael O'Casey)	<b>Harney County</b> (County Judge Pete Runnels)	<b>Blue Mountain RFPA</b> (President Steve Maher)	<b>Harney SWCD</b> (Shannon Brubaker)
<b>East Cascades Audubon Society</b> (Stu Garrett)	<b>Beaty Butte Wild Horse Training Facility</b> (Ken Kestner)	<b>Brothers-Hampton RFPA</b> (Teresa Stephens)	<b>Miler Ranch, LLC</b> (Carol Dunten)
		<b>Lone Pine RFPA</b> (President Ron Whiting)	<b>Roaring Springs Ranch</b> (Stacy Davies)