

The Honorable Senator Jeff Golden
Senate Committee on Natural Resources and Wildfire Recovery
State Capitol
Salem, OR 97310

March 15, 2021

Thank you, Chair Golden, Vice-Chair Heard, and members of the committee for the opportunity to submit testimony on SB 248-1. My name is Brennan Garrelts and I am a forester for Lone Rock Resources based out of Roseburg, Oregon. Over the course of my nearly 20-year forestry career, in which I have worked both for the Bureau of Land Management and Private Working Forestland Owners, I have spent over 15-seasons as a wildland firefighter combatting wildfires. As a part of my work duties today I manage Lone Rock's Fire Prevention and Suppression program which has worked side-by-side with ODF and association firefighters as a part of Oregon's Complete and Coordinated firefighting force on all of the major fires in SW Oregon since 2013.

Lone Rock's ownership of forestland is diverse and far-spread across SW Oregon, as such when a fire starts we more often than not have land that is threatened near-by. Suffice it to say with this sort of fire-risk my company and our employees work tirelessly both during fire season to extinguish fires and in the off-season to keep our lands fire resilient so that if a fire starts it can be caught and extinguished quickly and safely.

In regards to SB 248-1, I want to start by saying that I sincerely appreciate the work that is being done here to help bring Oregon in-line with the current threat and conditions we face today. Because of our unique landownership pattern, Lone Rock is intimately tied to over two dozen rural communities throughout southwest Oregon and we recognize the urgency needed to address wildfire risk and impacts for the safety and security of all Oregonians, especially rural communities. Those on the Governor's wildfire council as well as ODF should also be commended for their diligent work. Simply put, Thank you.

I am pleased to see that SB 248-1 addresses many topics which are needed to secure and safeguard rural communities. I also have some questions and concerns that I request that you consider and address.

In Section 31 of the bill regarding Wildland-Urban Interface (WUI) Fire Protection, this definition of WUI gives me pause as it exceeds the existing FEMA definition of WUI. As I interpret this definition WUI is now defined as any location where a residence exists no matter how remote or singular said residence may be. I also worry that the proposed definition, may have unintended consequences on Oregon's land-use laws. In order to gain alignment with federal standards and potential funding opportunities, I recommend sticking with the FEMA definition of WUI.

In Section 30 of the bill regarding Wildfire Response Capacity, I am curious what the perceived problem is that this bill seeks to fix? Much of what is described already takes place at the district level in a highly professional and successful manner. I'm concerned that this language will have far reaching unintended consequences that will undo an existing structure and process that has been and continues to be successful in Oregon. In my professional opinion, the initial sniff test of the proposed model sets Oregon on a slippery slope towards the extremely expensive CAL FIRE model, which has annually shown to be less successful and far more costly annual than Oregon's current Complete and Coordinated Fire-Fighting System.

In Section 23 regarding Resiliency goals; I very much like the concept of a resiliency goal but the current scope and scale is far too limiting to achieve measurable results across the state. I bring this concern forward from my 10-years' experience as a federal forester.

Additionally, in Section 24 line 17, the bill states that it is policy of this state to reduce wildfire suppression cost. In the wildfire setting cost containment is challenging and more often than not driven by factors irrelevant to landscape resiliency. I believe a more appropriate and attainable goal of forest resiliency should be focused on reducing acres burned, not cost, from uncontrolled wildfire.

Moving to Section 18, concerning Reduction of Wildfire Danger. I want to start by saying that I sincerely appreciate the focus on active management to create resilient landscapes, this is a vital and sorely needed activity across the state. My primary concern in this section is centered on the limited scope and scale of commercial thinning activities in sub-section 3. Specifically, commercial thinning is a vital tool to restoring resiliency and helps leverage the overall cost of the project to the Oregon Tax payer. The listed restrictions on commercial thinning are more restrictive than the Northwest Forest Plan and the BLM's Resource Management Plans. These restrictions are setting this work and Oregonians up for failure and exorbitant projects costs. Additionally, the timeline required in Section 20 for ODF to complete this project is unrealistic. As a practicing forester and former federal employee, I can assure you that you are setting ODF up for failure with this timeline. I recommend setting this timeline to 6-years upon the passage of this bill.

My final comment is relating to Section 13 concerning Health Systems for Smoke. In general, I fully support means to protect communities from intrusive and harmful wildfire smoke. Over the past 10-years land managers have worked diligently with ODF and other agencies to modulate air quality concerns to allow for more prescribed burning to create fire resilient landscapes across Oregon. Smoke from prescribed burning is highly regulated and driven by best available science to ensure land managers do not create unhealthy smoke intrusions during prescribed fire operations. I caution this committee to perform the necessary due-diligence concerning the language contained within this bill to ensure that these rules do not inadvertently damage our ability to create resilient landscapes by use of prescribed fire.

Thank you for your consideration.

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