



OREGON STATE SHERIFFS' ASSOCIATION
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To: Members of the House Veterans and Emergency Management Committee

From: Sheriff Matt English
Hood River County Sheriff's Office
On behalf of the Oregon State Sheriffs' Association
matt.english@co.hood-river.or.us

Date: February 4, 2021

Re: Support for HB 2593 – Voluntary Search and Rescue Card Program

Chair Evans and members of the committee,

For the record, my name is Matt English. I am the Hood River County Sheriff and I am here today on behalf of the Oregon State Sheriffs' Association in support of HB 2593. I want to thank Chair Evans and Vice-Chair Lewis for sponsoring this measure and appreciate the opportunity to testify before the committee today.

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.

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 have previously received and annual Congressional reauthorization has become inconsistent in recent years.

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. In 2019, Oregon Emergency Management reported the highest numbers to date, in excess of 1300 missions statewide. Despite the pandemic and stay at home orders, 2020 still saw SAR missions eclipse 1100, with over 99% of those rescued, residing out of county.

The devastating wildfires our state experienced last fall add yet another layer of complexity for our SAR teams across the state. Burn area response requires additional training and equipment, while increasing hazards to recreators and area residents. We saw this firsthand last month with a fatal landslide in the

Columbia River Gorge, due in part to the 2017 Eagle Creek Fire. Our fire affected counties will have to contend with increased risk of landslide and flooding for years to come, further exacerbating limited search and rescue resources.

Many small counties are reaching a breaking point where the demand for services is exceeding the resources, we have available to us. Several Sheriffs, myself included, worry about our 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.

There's clearly a funding crisis that no doubt requires legislative assistance. The coalition that came together around this concept in 2018 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 continued commitment of this coalition and can already see how important this collaboration will be to properly address the issues surrounding recreational safety moving forward. This collaborative group will continue to work and help ensure the voluntary program that this legislation establishes is viable and has a meaningful impact going forward.

Respectfully,



Matt English
Sheriff
Hood River County