

Testimony of Mike Beasley
Retired Interagency Forest Fire Chief for the U.S. Forest Service and Bureau of Land
Management, and former Deputy Fire Management Officer for the National Park Service
Before a Hearing on “Forest Resilience and Management for Wildfire”
Oregon Senate Committee on Natural Resources and Wildfire Recovery
March 15, 2021

“Chair Golden, Vice-Chair Heard, and Members of the Committee,

For the record, my name is Mike Beasley and I am a retired Fire Management Officer, having had the honor to represent land management agencies under both the Departments of Interior and Agriculture at various times throughout my thirty-year career as a wildland firefighter.

During that time, I was often called to protect homes and communities from approaching wildfires. Establishing and funding the Wildfire Workforce Corps through its addition to SB-248 will help prevent the outcomes we saw this past summer around the State. The Wildfire Workforce Corps will conduct work that optimizes 1) fuel reduction, 2) youth workforce development, and 3) community fire safety.

After working on crews as a frontline firefighter, including being on a hotshot crew, I spent much of my career in fuels management, meaning I planned and implemented projects to protect homes and infrastructure well before a fire’s arrival. That work was all done close in to the values at risk, not miles away. Sometimes burning, sometimes using mechanical means, I directed others in those labor-intensive activities. It consists of work mostly outdoors in heat on steep slopes, bending, cutting, dragging and stacking dead and down forest fuels – brush, limbs, logs, and so on.

At Yosemite National Park, and at other posts during my career, fuel treatments implemented in and around communities paid off. Many sites benefitted from fuel reduction around structures, prescribed burning and management of nearby lightning-caused fires. The Wildfire Workforce Corps would be engaged in many of the same activities; activities that helped reduce losses from subsequent large fires that burned into Yosemite, like the Rim Fire in 2013 and the Ferguson Fire in 2018.

I have supervised California Conservation Corp crews, Boy Scouts, Fire Safe Councils, homeowner groups, and all manner of other volunteers simply snipping, cutting, raking and stacking the fuels around homes and communities with minimal training and equipment. It is amazing what youthful enthusiasm can produce when it is directed appropriately.

The work done by the Wildfire Workforce Corps will promote efficiency in reducing the most important fuels, particularly in underserved communities. The Corps will also provide youth and veteran workforce development for much needed jobs. This employment is especially important as Oregon recovers from COVID-19 job losses. Every year during fire season, requests for twenty-person firefighting handcrews go unheeded. Both private and government resources are stripped bare. The Corps will provide training for members to go on to better paid fire management jobs that will help fill that void.

In 2018 my best friends lost their home in the Carr Fire. Just a few weeks ago, two-and-a-half years after the fire living in a rental, I helped them move into their new home. They were fortunate. They had insurance. Their whole family and the Redding community suffers from PTSD. Some have left and will never come back. At this time in our Nation's history, there has never been a greater need for unity and community cohesion. Addition of the Wildfire Workforce Corps to SB-248 will move us in that direction by providing meaningful work and community engagement through public/private partnerships that promote community fire safety. Thank you for your time and I'd be happy to answer any questions."