



March 15, 2021

To: Senate Committee on Natural Resources and Wildfire Recovery

RE: SB 248-1 and SB 287

Dear Chair Golden and Members of the Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony on the critical topic of wildfire preparedness. The 2020 fire season was historic for many reasons: tragic loss of life; overwhelming loss of homes and infrastructure; and the degree to which fire impacted densely populated areas of our state and not just remote regions.

These fires were wind, drought, and climate driven events. The Almeda Fire, which saw the largest loss of homes, was different from what we typically associate with fire season. This fire was non-forest related and spread in an urban setting along I-5. Even the Santiam Canyon Fire and Archie Creek Fire – that burned across multiple forest land ownerships (including extensively on private industrial forestland) – were likely ignited not by remote lightning strikes or careless campfires but rather started with downed powerlines and exploding transformers.

If we are to protect homes, communities, and lives from the effects of fire in the future, Oregon must look to control the things that we can control and invest in strategies that will maximize the impact of our investment. Given this, the evidence is clear that our solutions to wildfire safety and preparedness must start in our communities with a special focus on at-risk populations such as BIPOC and low income communities.

There are many elements of SB 248-1 and SB 287 that seek to achieve the goal of community safety:

- Wildfire risk mapping and a more uniform and rational Wildland Urban Interface map that can help prioritize areas at greatest risk of fire and drive decisions related to land use, defensible space, and more.
- Enhanced and standardized building code requirements statewide that can help harden current and future homes to be more resistant in the face of fire
- Better land use planning to limit the risk of building in places where fire is likely to return
- Increasing the State Fire Marshal's capacity to support defensible space (also known as Home Ignition Zone) work to protect homes and structures from future fires
- A plan for de-energizing power grid infrastructure during extreme weather events and preparing our energy transmission systems to be more resilient in the future
- Public health improvements such as smoke shelters and funding for air filtration systems for those in need

All of the previous bullets highlight the importance of prioritizing action in the built environment where we can harden our homes and communities in the face of fires that are certain to come in the future. Especially when these tools and funding are made available to low-income and BIPOC communities, the state will be investing in the highest return-on-investment activities.

However, some portions of SB 248-1 and SB 287 miss the mark, and would channel scarce resources to controversial or less effective means of protecting communities.

- In SB 248-1, Sections 18-20 outline a program to log forests across ownership categories with the aim of reducing fire activity on the landscape (SB 287 envisions a similar program in Sections 23 and 25). Fire experts have testified before this committee and released countless research papers highlighting the misguided nature of this approach. Attempting to “fire-proof” forests that are ecologically built to thrive with fire is a Sisyphean task that brings with it trade-offs for forest values such as wildlife, clean water, and carbon storage. Experts continually point policy makers to a “home-outward” approach rather than a “forest-inward” one. They recommend this approach both because work near communities has been proven to be more effective at protecting communities than logging far from homes and because it is far more cost effective. Hardening a home to withstand fire by covering gutters and installing a fire safe roof only needs to be done once. After logging or thinning, a forest grows back and treatments are required in subsequent years. SB 248-1 proposes \$20 million of funding for landscape logging and describes this work as a “pilot” project, anticipating even greater future expenditures. This is not sustainable nor desirable and these funds would be better invested in defensible space and home hardening work referenced earlier.
- The resiliency goal in Section 24 of SB 248-1 is misguided and poorly defined. Fuel loads are not a good determinant of forest resiliency and “wildfire risk reduction” should be community focused, not forest focused.

While not expressly included in SB 248-1 and SB 287, oral testimony during the March 15 hearing highlighted a very promising program called the Wildfire Workforce Corps. This program would achieve multiple goals by wrapping workforce training, youth advancement, and home protection into one effort. As highlighted before, the greatest return on investment in keeping communities safe from fire will come from preparing homes and structures to withstand fire. Ensuring proper vegetative management inside the Home Ignition Zone (generally the area no further than 100 feet from the structure) is a critical component of safeguarding homes from fire.

The Wildfire Workforce Corps builds off a successful pilot program putting youth to work in communities to treat the Home Ignition Zone and prepare communities for fire. This program invests in the future wildfire workforce by training young people in the skills needed to effectively protect communities from future fires. We urge the committee to include this critical component in omnibus fire legislation and would further suggest that funding for this program be prioritized over landscape logging far from homes.

Fire is a natural part of Oregon’s landscape and climate change promises that it will be a major part of our future. We stand at a critical moment to reject a century’s worth of misguided and wasteful approaches in favor of a more cost-effective, community-centered approach. As the guru of U.S. Forest Service fire science, Jack Cohen, says: “It’s high time we abandon the tired and disingenuous policies of our century-old all-out war on wildfire and fuel treatments conducted under the guise of protecting communities.”

Every dollar spent logging in the backcountry is a dollar not spent on helping communities adapt to future fires. Let’s get to work.

Sincerely,



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