

March 18, 2021

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TO: House Committee on Veterans and Emergency Management
Oregon State Legislature

RE: Testimony on HB 3308

Chair Evans, Vice-Chairs Lewis and Meek, and Committee Members:

Thank you for the opportunity to submit written testimony on HB 3308 on behalf of the Tualatin Valley Fire and Rescue (TVF&R) Board of Directors* and in my role as the TVF&R Fire Chief/Chief Executive Officer. I would have liked to provide it “face to face” and hope you will accept my apology for not being able to do so.

TVF&R protects over 450,000 residents in a 390+ square mile area that ranges from densely suburban to agricultural to remotely rural and forested. The service area covers 11 cities and unincorporated areas in Washington, Clackamas, Yamhill and Multnomah counties, and there are numerous wildland/urban interface areas throughout. TVF&R’s primary role in wildfire response is to protect lives and structures—a role exercised in September 2020 during the fire on Chehalem Mountain/Bald Peak, a textbook example of a wildland/urban interface (WUI) zone. This was the largest wildfire within our borders and travelled without regard for boundaries across acres of private and public land, displacing 500 citizens. Thanks to the quick actions of its residents and brave firefighters, weather changes, and luck the fire was stopped before homes or lives were lost.

In as much as possible, we also respond to conflagrations statewide and across the West with firefighters, apparatus, and incident commanders. We have witnessed the devastating loss of homes and lives, heard our neighbors’ stories, and felt their pain. Increasingly, me and my peers must risk our responders’ lives to save people and their property in predictable, wildfire prone areas. As Fire Chiefs, we are not the experts that can recognize changes in fuel loads and the environment, and we have limited say on the location of developments and prevention improvements. **We can, however, recognize the need to step up and switch up our prevention and mitigation capabilities collectively or face devastating loss of life and property in the same places, all over the state, year after year.**

Oregon will continue to have devastating loss and risk to responders’ lives if structures are not defensible and are built/rebuilt to outdated codes. The provisions in HB 3308 requiring local governments to establish minimum defensible space requirements to best practices WUI codes, and to provide funding to assist those efforts, will help communities become resilient and hopefully reduce and contain fires that do crop up. What property owners and communities can do before a fire strikes will determine if responders can save their structures. However, relying solely on each jurisdiction to take action in silos will not set Oregon up for meaningful success statewide.

Fire runs fast and blind. It does not recognize or stop for jurisdictional boundaries or the lives in the homes, business and communities within its path. Hence, the need for the provisions in HB 3308 that require the State Fire Marshal to establish minimum defensible space requirements for wildfire risk reduction to best practices WUI codes and the proposed task force to identify gaps and necessary updates in the State Building Code specific to wildfire risks.

Oregon will continue to have devastating loss and risk responders' lives if we don't identify the most at-risk areas across the state and apply that information before, during and after wildfire season. One of the most critical provisions in HB 3308 is to require wildfire risk mapping and determine WUI boundaries statewide.

Wildfire happens all over the state and the information needed is common throughout all jurisdictions. Most all jurisdictions in Oregon need the mapping data to develop and prioritize targeted risk reduction and preparedness initiatives for at-risk communities. All levels of government need updated and in-depth data to inform policy, program and resource allocation decisions around land use and management, development and reconstruction, and strategic investments.

Wildfires are fought with resources from all around the state. Local jurisdictions are quickly overwhelmed when fighting a growing wildfire and incoming responders need access to mapping resources to acclimate and understand the area they are charged to protect.

Oregon can stem the devastating loss of life, homes, and communities due to wildfire by stepping up and switching up its prevention and mitigation capabilities. I urge no further hesitation in enacting the critical provisions outlined in HB 3308. We know that these actions will universally reduce the risk of large and destructive wildfires across the state.

Respectfully,



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*The TVF&R Board authorized submittal of this testimony but has not taken a formal position on HB 3308.