

Dear Senate Committee on Natural Resources and Wildfire Recovery re Senate Bill 762

Wildfire policy must be rooted in 21st century science and the conditions of today. Our communities deserve better than business as usual. We cannot rely on approaches that seldom worked in the past and that we have no assurance will work in the changing climate.

The fires of 2020 that caused damage throughout Oregon were fueled by weather events, worsened by climate change. These fires were not caused by lack of forest management. Strong easterly winds and ongoing drought brought on these fires, and a century of fire suppression and industrial forest management made them more severe.

The fires caused a humanitarian crisis, and aid should be focused on communities. The government response must focus on supporting community resiliency first and foremost rather than squander time and resources logging land miles away from homes. Effective wildfire preparedness includes making homes more fire resistant, creating defensible space around structures, and creating smoke shelters and other resources that support our most vulnerable community members in wildfire seasons to come.

Since wildfire is primarily driven by weather conditions (i.e. drought, wind, etc), we can expect more wildfire as climate change continues to heat up the planet. The real problem is not that forests burn, but that too many fires are burning in times, places, and conditions that are adversely affecting human communities. We will not be able to stop wildfire in forests, but we can keep our communities safe from the flames.

Thinning/logging forests is not effective at reducing wildfire severity. Thinning or "fuels reduction" projects are often proposed to reduce fire risks, but the best available science suggests that thinning forests far away from where people live is ineffective at preventing conflicts between people and wildfire. Rather than invest in this wasteful approach, we should focus on "fuels reduction activities" (e.g. thinning) where it is most effective: directly adjacent to communities, especially within 60-100 feet of structures and not in remote backcountry areas far away from communities.

Industrial logging actually makes fires worse. Timber plantations and heavily thinned forests are less resilient to climate change and more prone to uncharacteristically severe wildfire. Scientists have found that native, old-growth forests with complex forest structures are the most resilient to fire, whereas forests that have been degraded by decades of clearcut logging are more prone to unnaturally severe wildfire.

Focusing on logging misdirects resources from community resiliency. The limited state resources available should be focused on rebuilding our communities to be more fire-resilient. These funds should not go to more ineffective and destructive commercial logging in the backcountry.

Research shows that installing fire-resistant roofing, rain gutter guards, and ember proof vents, combined with maintaining "defensible space" within 60-100 ft of homes, are the best ways to protect homes from wildfire. The state should create a financial assistance program to help elderly, disabled, and low income homeowners and renters pay for this important work

To help Oregonians become more resilient to the impacts of wildfire smoke we can invest in public smoke shelters and advanced air filtration systems, and educate vulnerable populations about the risks of smoke and how to minimize exposure.

Working with, not against fire: Instead of aggressively suppressing all fires on the landscape, firefighters should concentrate their efforts on wildfires that pose direct risks to homes and communities.

Thank You
Cheryl Bruner