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Senate Committee on Natural Resources and Wildfire Response

Testimony in support of SB 762: Relating to Wildfire

Submitted by: Jim Desmond, Oregon State Director

Chair Golden, and Members of the Committee:

As the State Director of The Nature Conservancy in Oregon, I'm pleased to write in strong support of SB 762.

The Nature Conservancy (TNC) is a science-based, non-partisan organization committed to conserving the lands and waters on which all life depends. In Oregon, TNC has over 80,000 supporters and members in every county. Based in communities around the state, we manage lands and waters in varied ecosystems and partner with ranchers, farmers, fishers, timber and environmental interests on some of the most challenging conservation issues facing people and nature.

TNC scientists and conservation practitioners based in Ashland, Klamath Falls, Bend, and Baker City, lead restoration efforts to increase landscape resilience, reduce wildfire risk to communities, and sustain the many benefits these ecosystems provide to nature and people. We focus on the ecology and restoration of Oregon's dry forests – as landowners, forest stewards, and fire managers. We lead training and workforce capacity development, and plan and implement large-scale, prescribed fire projects in partnership with local, state, federal, and tribal partners on thousands of acres each year. It is through this lens that we provide our strong support for SB 762.

Oregon is experiencing more intense fire seasons driven by longer, hotter, and drier summers. Our forests and rangelands, and the communities in and around them, are becoming more vulnerable to severe wildfire and smoke impacts. Frontline communities, including Black, Indigenous and other People of Color communities, bear a disproportionate share of the impacts from severe wildfire and smoke, and our response to this challenge must elevate their voices to ensure our solutions are inclusive, equitable, and just. Sustaining our ecosystems and reducing risks to people and property will require solutions that prepare landscapes and communities to be safer and more resilient in the face of future fires. Significant policy reform and increased investment are needed to change the trajectory.

Fortunately, after years of study and collaborative discussion, there is a clear path ahead. Oregon needs a multi-faceted approach; one that employs the appropriate set of tools and policy changes to move toward more resilient landscapes, fire-adapted communities, and safe and effective wildfire response. This broad-based approach, built on tested practices and the best-available science, is critical from an ecological perspective, as well as an economic and social one.

We believe the policies contained within SB 762 meet that challenge. We'd like to call your particular attention to the following sections of the legislation, which offer foundational structure to the bill:

- **Statewide Map of Wildfire Risk** – The proposal in SB 762 to update Oregon's wildfire risk maps puts data to the forefront by creating a consistent definition of the Wildland Urban Interface (WUI) and consistent application of wildfire hazard classes. This science-based, comprehensive, statewide approach to mapping would provide a clear data-driven foundation to inform deliberations on many other policies also contained in this bill.
- **Reduction of Wildfire Risk** – SB 762 strikes an important balance in prioritizing landscape resilience treatments in areas of highest wildfire risk. It sets appropriate ecological sideboards while increasing on-the-ground treatments guided by the best-available science to improve resilience and restore fire prone ecosystems. Increasing investments in the dry forests and rangelands of southwest, central and eastern Oregon where scientists, land stewards, and fire practitioners work alongside community-based forest collaboratives and natural resource managers, would restore fire-dependent ecosystems, reduce the very real risk of wildfire transmission from forests to communities, and complement other fire preparedness and adaptation measures. We must increase the quality, pace, and scale of these efforts.
- **Prescribed Fire** – While fire is often only thought of as a problem, we also know that fire is an important part of the solution. Fire is an essential element of many of Oregon's cherished landscapes, and indigenous peoples have utilized fire to manage fire-adapted forests since time immemorial. However, to increase the use of prescribed fire to restore fire-dependent ecosystems and reduce future wildfire severity we must address key barriers to its implementation. Allowing for cross-boundary burns between agreeing landowners would facilitate more efficient prescribed fire implementation across property ownership boundaries. And launching the state's Certified Burn Manager Program would address the need for increased capacity of those who plan and implement prescribed burns. Together, they would make prescribed fire operations safer for practitioners, more cost-effective, and less impactful on the forest.
- **Fire Adapted Communities** – While we work to mitigate the impacts of extreme fire seasons, we must also support communities to adapt to and live more compatibly in fire-prone environments and be prepared to withstand and bounce back from future wildfires. SB 762 provides meaningful and necessary policy updates to Defensible Space, Building Codes, Health Systems for Smoke, Impacts on Vulnerable Populations, Land Use Planning and Emergency Response and Disaster Recovery that will ensure our communities are better protected, prepared and able to manage the fires that do come.

The time for action is now. We can't afford to let another fire season pass before we get started on this important work. The comprehensive legislation within SB 762 would take urgent, proactive steps to support healthy, resilient ecosystems and livable communities for generations to come. The provisions in each section provide meaningful opportunities for stakeholder input as these policies are implemented, and ensure Oregon remains engaged in the work of wildfire readiness and resilience.

We thank Governor Brown, Chair Golden, and the members of this Committee for your leadership and steadfast dedication to this critical issue and urge you to move this bill forward this session.