ODF Budget Testimony
by Samantha Krop
May 19th 2021

Thank you co-Chairs Taylor and Reardon, and Committee members. My name is Samantha Krop, and I work with the Forest Waters Coalition, a network of conservation organizations and grassroots groups working to secure stronger protections for the forests & waterways that our communities rely on.

Community Wildfire Protection:
If there was ever a question before, after this year's wildfire season Oregonians across the board agree that community wildfire protection should be our greatest priority. However, in the aftermath of last year's fires and as we re-commit to this important effort, it is imperative that we use these funds to support activities that work to keep communities safe from wildfire, not the same tired practices that have failed in the past.

We know that fires are driven by extreme weather conditions and fuel load is not always a key factor, especially on the westside temperate rainforests. Wildfire events are mainly a product of dryness, wind and heat. Research inspired by decades of failed attempts to thin forests in anticipation of burns have demonstrated that only 1% of the time do forests thinned for wildfire prevention ever encounter a fire (Schoennagel, et al 2017). This means that the vast majority of thinning treatments are ineffective at influencing fire behavior. And yet, year after year, the Oregon Department of Forestry spends its fire prevention funds on fuels reduction deep in the backcountry.

The total number of acres that ODF currently intends to thin in the name of fire prevention would are projected to cost a total of $4 billion. Maps of these plans show that these proposed acres do not line up very much with the areas that burned in 2020,

or with population centers that are vulnerable to fire. Even if treated, in 20 years, those same acres will grow back with young brush and small, fire-vulnerable trees, and these acres will need to be treated again - at another exorbitant cost to the public.

This year's fires could not have been prevented by more logging. Using logging as the first and most funded approach to fire prevention is simply ineffectual, and it is dishonest to suggest that it will keep communities safe from fire. Every cent that funds logging instead of community safety is a cent re-directed from the activities that work to protect fire-vulnerable communities.

The most important things we can do toward wildfire safety are to build our homes & communities smarter, safer and ignition-resistant (Working from the Home Outward Report). Limited fire recovery and safety funds should be focused on using fire-proof materials for home construction, retrofitting existing homes and creating defensible space around structures. These are the practices that work for fire prevention—not thinning in the backcountry, far away from communities.

Carbon Cost of Wildfire

Despite their impressive smoke plumes, studies show that wildfires have relatively little impact on forest carbon stocks. When trees are killed, most of the carbon still remains in the forest and even these dead trees take centuries to decompose. In a wildfire event, only a small portion of the total forest carbon is emitted to the atmosphere—what amounts to less than 10% of the total ecosystem carbon (Campbell et al. 2012; Law & Waring 2015).

In contrast, thinning usually removes 30-50% of tree biomass, and emits most of the harvested carbon back into the atmosphere. In fact, harvest-related emissions in the Oregon, Washington and California average about 5 times fire emissions (Hudiburg et al. 2019). From a standpoint of both climate and forest health, the very worst thing you could do after a fire is to come in and log.

Package 160 for Forest Climate Change Mitigation & Adaptation

I wholeheartedly support this package, yet ask that more funding be allocated to this important work. As it stands, this package is direly underfunded. The Department of Forestry needs additional capacity in order to fully implement the Governor's executive order on climate change — otherwise known as the Oregon Climate Action Plan (OCAP).The agency is nowhere near where it needs to be to meet its legal requirements to mitigate climate change and adapt to its impacts.

The Oregon Department of Forestry could become a national leader in climate-smart forestry, yet they continue to fall behind our neighbors in climate-smart and watershed wise forest practices.

Please ensure that sufficient funding is committed to ensuring ODF transitions to climate smart forest practices and contributes to the regional and global effort to reduce carbon emissions and safeguard against the impacts of climate change. The agency requires multiple additional full time staff in order to fully realize its potential in this effort.

Package 172 - Diversity, Equity, & Inclusion

In addition to addressing the growing challenge of climate change, the agency must also evolve to meet pressing societal needs around diversity, equity, and inclusion.
I echo the agency's request to create the Environmental Justice Coordinator, Sustainability Coordinator, and Liaison to Tribal Governments Coordinator.

While ODF's budget prioritizes only half-time positions for the Environmental Justice and Sustainability Coordinators, I believe these positions should be full-time in order. Full time positions dedicated to this critical work are needed to meet the needs of the agency and fully implement OCAP.

Final thoughts:

We need new, 21st century approaches to the era of 21st century wildfires and climate change. Rather than pouring money into more logging far in the forested backcountry, we should be funding efforts like home hardening & community-focused defense.Far more effective strategies for saving lives and property include investing in educational and outreach efforts around the need for home hardening, defensible space and evacuation planning, especially for disadvantaged communities.

There are lots of demands for resources and the limited resources available should be used to do what is effective to protect our communities from future wildfire, and ensure our forests are playing their globally significant role in addressing the climate crisis.

Resources:

- Campbell, J., M.E. Harmon, S.R. Mitchell. 2012. Can fuel-reduction treatments really increase forest carbon storage in the western US by reducing future fire emissions? Front. Ecol. Env. Doi:10.1890/110057

- Hudiburg, T.W, B.E. Law, W.R. Moomaw, M.E. Harmon, J.E. Stenzel. 2019. Meeting GHG reduction targets requires accounting for all forest sector emissions. Env. Res. Lett. 14: 095005.

- Schoennagel, K. Balch, H. Brenkert-Smith, P. Dennison, B.J. Harvey, M.A. Krawchuk, N. Mietkiewicz, P. Morgan, M.A. Moritz, R. Rasker, M.G. Turner, C. Whitlock, Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences May 2017, 114 (18) 4582-4590; DOI: 10.1073/pnas.1617464114.

- Report, Working From the Home Outward,"