

Submitter: Dave Selden
On Behalf Of:
Committee: House Committee On Revenue
Measure: HB4097

February 10, 2022
Representative Nancy Nathanson, Chair
Representative Khanh Pham, Vice-Chair
Representative E. Werner Reschke, Vice-Chair
House Committee on Revenue

RE: Volunteer firefighter in support of HB4097 for a safer and more resilient Oregon

Dear Chair Nathanson, Vice-Chairs Pham and Reschke, and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for considering this issue. I am a Firefighter/Engineer in Corbett, Oregon where I have lived and served since 2017 as a member of Corbett Fire District 14. This testimony is my own as a resident of Corbett, and does not necessarily represent the department as a whole.

I moved to Corbett in June 2017. I filled out an application to join Corbett Fire in August of the same year, thinking it'd be a good way to meet people in my new home. My interview was scheduled for September 5th, 2017. On September 2nd, I was driving west on I-84 past Hood River as smoke started rolling over the highway and traffic slowed.

I didn't know it then, but I was witnessing the start of the historic Eagle Creek Fire, an event that would dramatically affect the lives of Oregonians for the next few years, including my own family. Just settling into our new home, we evacuated to Portland for three days while the fire raged. I will never forget the orange glow in the sky at midnight, and the smell of evergreen smoke that to this day quickens my pulse.

For obvious reasons, my interview was delayed. The roughly 30 members of the volunteer department left their workplaces and families, working tirelessly over the next 10 days to protect our small rural community. As the hot winds blew, volunteers from tiny Corbett, Springdale and Aims worked day and night, protecting historic icons such as the lodge at Multnomah Falls, the Vista House, and structures in the small communities nearby.

Miraculously, the winds shifted, and our members returned to their lives ... as mothers and fathers, carpenters and tow truck drivers, farmers and accountants.

Volunteer firefighters define the front lines in the fight against Oregon's increasingly common wildfires. They protect not only their own communities, but communities around the state; I spent 3 out of 4 weeks in July 2021 working on wildfires outside of Corbett Fire District.

July 2021 began with a call to staff the Wrentham Market Fire near the Dalles, in Dufur. Thankfully, it slowed within just a few days, thanks to the quick response from the Oregon Fire Marshall's office, and the generosity of a dozen departments from around the state, mostly volunteer. As we were filling our fuel tanks to return home, another fire sparked just outside The Dalles, and I believe we saved at least a dozen homes – the right resources in the right area at the right time.

I returned home to a pile of unanswered emails and a tired family, eager for some rest.

A week later, I was called to the Bootleg Fire, where I would be for the next two weeks, working long, hot, physically-demanding nights on the nation's largest wildfire, again away from my family, my friends, my work. But Oregon needed us (and a lot more like us) and so we went.

Firefighting is fulfilling work that I enjoy, and am fortunate to have a flexible schedule and understanding family that supports it.

But volunteerism is down across the country – people are busy – and firefighting is time-consuming. We spend hours each week training, and hours – often late in the night – responding to the many emergencies firefighters are asked to respond to: calls for medical aid, vehicle accidents, water rescues, trail emergencies, and yes, fires.

The citizens of Corbett – and I would argue, the larger Oregon population – depend on these uncountable unpaid hours of labor from volunteer firefighters, and anything we can do to incentivize volunteers to join, stay, and help protect Oregon is not an expense – it's an investment. Who will we call to respond to the next Eagle Creek or Bootleg Fire?

Thank you for your time,

Dave Selden