

Testimony as Prepared for Sarah Bittleman, Deputy Chief of Staff and Policy Director for U.S. Senator Ron Wyden, Before the Oregon Senate Committee on Natural Resources on January 30, 2023

Chairman Golden, Vice Chairman Girod, and members of the Committee, thank you very much for allowing me to speak with the Committee members this morning. My name is Sarah Bittleman, and I am the Deputy Chief of Staff and Policy Director for U.S. Senator Ron Wyden.

My colleague in the U.S. Senate from Senator Merkley's office and I were asked to address the Committee on three subjects: 1) securing congressional appropriations for Oregon related to wildfire; 2) ensuring federal agencies are staffed and supported accordingly to efficiently and effectively deliver forest health and wildfire reduction programs; and 3) provide any further insights we can on recent federal funding and mitigation, fuel reduction/resiliency, and coordination strategies.

Before we discuss federal efforts to reduce wildfire risk in Oregon, I want to acknowledge the terrible loss Senator Girod suffered when his family home was burned by the Beachie Creek fire. His loss and the loss of lives in that fire are hard to understand and hard from which to recover. Firsthand knowledge, painfully acquired, about the terrible destructive abilities of nature is a valuable touch stone for all of us moving forward.

Let me start at the 50,000 foot level.

(1) Securing congressional appropriations for Oregon.

Senator Merkley is Chair of the Interior subcommittee of the U.S. Senate Committee on Appropriations that allocates funding to the U.S. Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management for forest and range health and wildfire risk mitigation. As such, my colleague Lucas will discuss Senator Merkley's work on the appropriations committee in a few moments. I will also defer many of the coordinating questions to the very capable and knowledgeable state and federal agency staff here today.

Senator Wyden is a senior member of the U.S. Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources that considers federal wildfire mitigation legislation and oversees land management agencies in administering the authorities and resources provided to reduce wildfire risk. By working closely together, Senators Wyden and

Merkley have been successful in securing funding and authorities intended to reduce wildfire risk to communities across Oregon.

Let's review some of those authorities:

- First, The Wyden Authority. Many years ago Senator Wyden recognized what a false construct it was to think that fire or other natural disasters recognize the borders between federal, state and/or private lands. As such, he passed legislation that others dubbed "The Wyden Authority" that allows for cross-jurisdictional spending for wildfire risk and watershed management across state, private and federal lands. I have to defer, again, to the state and federal agencies for how and where they are using this authority, among others, for hazardous fuels reduction in Oregon.
- Second, there is the Good Neighbor Authority, which builds on this idea by allowing the Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management to collaborate with states, counties, and federally recognized Indian tribes to plan and execute cross-jurisdictional projects to reduce hazardous fuels and restore or improve forest, rangeland, and watershed health.
- Third, the wildfire funding fix that, to all but the initiated, sounds like the most boring bureaucratic insider-baseball sort of legislating can be summed up like this: without it the Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management would still be raiding money from hazardous fuels reduction programs meant to avoid the fires of the future in order to fight the fires of today.
 - By passing this piece of legislation, the senators have put the federal agencies in a position to be MUCH better partners to the state in wildfire risk mitigation, as well as forest management overall.
- And lastly, I would be remiss not to mention the Secure Rural Schools and Community Self Determination Act authored by Senator Wyden. Meant to stabilize county budgets, this legislation also has provided millions over the last 20 years for counties to pursue their own wildfire risk mitigation projects that counties have embraced to varying degrees.

(2) On ensuring federal agencies are staffed and supported accordingly to efficiently deliver forest health and fuel reduction programs.

I will defer to the agency staff here today on the details of this question, but I would add that Senators Wyden and Merkley have demonstrated repeated and ongoing success in delivering the authorities and resources that allow federal land management agencies to efficiently administer forest health and fuels reduction programs - some of those authorities I just reviewed a moment ago.

(3) Which brings us to the last question posed by this panel for us today: Further insights on recent federal funding and mitigation (fuel reduction/resiliency) coordination strategies.

Let me start with the most recent law passed and work backwards from there.

The Inflation Reduction Act

The recently passed Inflation Reduction Act makes \$5 billion in additional funding available to the Forest Service for fuels and forest health treatments to protect communities from wildfire; for competitive grants to non-Federal forest landowners; for the agency's State and Private Forestry programs; and includes \$100 million for administrative costs to implement the law's provisions.

Some examples of where this money will go:

- \$2.15 billion for spending on programs to improve forest conditions on the national forests and grasslands. This provision includes funding for hazardous fuels reduction, vegetation and watershed management, protecting old growth forests, and timely processing of environmental reviews under the National Environmental Policy Act.
- \$550 million for competitive grants to non-Federal forest landowners, mostly under the Cooperative Forestry Assistance Act of 1978, to help sustain healthy and resilient working forests. The funding prioritizes underserved and small forest landowners in carrying out climate mitigation and forest resilience efforts.
- \$2.2 billion available for the Forest Service's State and Private Forestry programs for the Forest Service's Urban and Community Forestry Program to assist programs to plant trees and related activities. The provision prioritizes projects that benefit underserved populations and areas. It also provides funding for competitive grants to States through the Forest Legacy Program to acquire land and interests in land for conservation.

How much of the Inflation Reduction Act funding will go to Oregon remains to be determined, but rest assured that Senator Wyden will be watchdogging this distribution to ensure that our state gets our fair share. However, the newly designated Mt. Hood National Forest and Klamath River Basin project areas will receive additional funding over the next ten years. This funding will come from the Inflation Reduction Act.

Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act)

Senator Merkley and Senator Wyden fought for several provisions that were included in the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law passed in 2021. There is nearly \$6 billion for hazardous fuels treatments and fire preparedness in Oregon and nationwide, including \$500 million for prescribed fire.

Just a little over a week ago, Senators Wyden and Merkley announced that this investment will provide over \$40 million in new funding in Fiscal Year 2023 for key high-risk landscapes in Oregon—including \$4,500,000 for the Mount Hood National Forest, \$35,400,000 for the Klamath River Basin, and additional funding for the Deschutes National Forest—to expand efforts to reduce the risk of catastrophic wildfire.

The Deschutes National Forest was designated as a critical landscape previously and is expected to receive over \$40 million in investment over the next five years.

It also included much-needed provisions that will convert a record number of temporary firefighter positions to permanent positions and increased firefighter pay by as much as \$20,000 per year.

It includes grants to help private forest owners, Tribal communities, state forestry agencies and other at-risk communities plan for and reduce wildfire risk by launching the Community Wildfire Defense Program with support from the National Association of State Foresters, Intertribal Timber Council, and others.

And it developed the Wildland Fire Mitigation and Management Commission to recommend strategies and policies to prevent, suppress, and recover from wildfires.

The Bipartisan Infrastructure Law also included Senators Wyden and Merkley's Disaster Safe Power Grid Act that makes \$5 billion available in Oregon and nationwide for rural electric utilities to put power lines underground and better prepare electricity infrastructure for high winds that could spark fires.

Future Legislative Priorities

Moving forward, Senator Wyden will remain engaged with Oregonians at his yearly county-by-county town halls and at other events throughout the state.

After hearing from folks on the ground after the Labor Day fires in 2020, he introduced his prescribed fire bill, which was designed to get more prescribed fires

completed in the wetter and colder winter months. Part of this bill was included in the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law. Senator Wyden will continue to work to secure the remaining portions of his bill that did not pass and would establish large funds at the Department of the Interior and the Forest Service to complete controlled burns and to train up a workforce and have yet to pass. Ideas like this and more are always welcome as we all work together to optimize the management of the forests in Oregon.

Again, I thank the Committee for their time today, and I will remain available for questions.