

Thank you Chair Golden, Vice-Chair Girod and members of the Committee for the opportunity to participate in today's discussion.

My name is Lucas Smith and I am Senator Merkley's Policy Advisor for appropriations and natural resources

Two years ago, Senator Merkley assumed the Chairmanship of the Appropriations Subcommittee that funds the U.S. Forest Service and Department of Interior. A major focus of his chairmanship has been on reducing wildfire risk and threats in Oregon and across the West. Working with Senator Wyden and a coalition of Western members of Congress, Senator Merkley was able to secure historic and unprecedented funding for reducing wildfire risk in the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law and the Inflation Reduction Act that the other panelists have discussed in great detail and that my colleague Sara will discuss in detail in a moment.

Senator Merkley believes firmly in the power of collaboration to improve forest health and reduce wildfire risk. In the 2018 Farm Bill, Senator Merkley, along with a bipartisan group of Senators, reauthorized the Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program to allow collaboratives that were expiring to extend their life and increase the authorized funding level.

In his first year as Chairman of the Interior Subcommittee, Senator Merkley doubled the size of this popular program, which allowed the Forest Service to fund all five collaboratives in Oregon. This will represent a \$117 million investment over the lifespan of the collaboratives to seriously reduce fire risk and build up local economies in Oregon.

He also restored funding to a lapsed program that assists smaller collaboratives, known as the Collaborative Capacity and Landscape Stewardship program.

An important part of ensuring that collaboration works is to make sure that federal agencies have the right tools and the capacity to use those tools. Over the last two years, Senator Merkley's appropriations bills have directed the Forest Service to implement important budget reforms, raised the minimum wildland firefighter pay to \$15 per hour, provided additional funds to convert seasonal wildland firefighter positions into permanent positions, and expanded Good Neighbor Authority to include the BLM. Senator Merkley also introduced bipartisan legislation last Congress to expand the Civilian Conservation Center program to help build a workforce pipeline for the U.S. Forest Service to address its staffing needs.

Supporting recovery from the 2020 Labor Day fires has also been a priority for Senator Merkley, and he worked through several larger disaster relief bills to secure \$262 million specifically to restore damaged federal lands and infrastructure in Oregon. This is in addition to \$442 million that the state also received via CDBG-DR for more general recovery needs.

At the same time, Congress has enacted historic legislation which has provided billions of new funding to reduce wildfire risk and combat climate chaos. Senators Merkley and Wyden have worked together to push the Forest Service and Department of Interior to use the funds provided through these bills to institute 5 and 10-year investments in particularly high-risk areas.

Senator Merkley is eager to work with everyone here to help ensure that Oregon can make the best use of these funding opportunities, to work on reducing the likelihood of catastrophic wildfire by dedicating funds to fuels reduction and forest collaboratives, and to help community recovery and forest restoration efforts when wildfires do occur.

Thank you.