



March 3, 2023

Sen. Jeff Golden, Chair  
Senate Committee on Natural Resources  
900 Court St. NE, S-421  
Salem, OR 97301

**Re: Response to questions from presentation on state/federal government collaboration to reduce the risk of catastrophic wildfire, Jan. 30, 2023**

Dear Chair Golden,

Thank you again for the opportunity to appear before the Senate Committee on Natural Resources on Jan. 30 to speak about the critical work our agencies are doing individually and across jurisdictional boundaries to reduce the risk of catastrophic wildfire in Oregon. The Oregon Department of Forestry, along with our partners at the USDA Forest Service and USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service, have provided answers to your follow-up questions on this topic. All of our agencies would be happy to discuss any of these responses further or appear before the committee again in the future to revisit this topic.

**Are we confident that we are maximizing opportunities for federal grant awards for forest resilience and wildfire reduction and suppression in Oregon? Can we feel confident that dollars aren't falling through the cracks?**

Maximizing the impact of all available funds for forest resilience and wildfire reduction projects is one of the key objectives of the 20-year landscape resiliency strategy that is being collaboratively developed by state and federal agencies, alongside tribes, stakeholders, and local partnerships and collaboratives. Foundational to this development is shared stewardship, which relies upon shared prioritization of work and decision making between the state of Oregon and our federal partners. Upon implementation, the strategy will guide project prioritization and direct federal, state and private funding toward capacity needs, planning, implementation efforts, necessary maintenance of past treatments, and monitoring. By employing a coordinated and strategic approach to restoration and wildfire reduction work, we can effectively leverage funding from a

variety of sources and ensure it is being spent appropriately and responsibly in the right locations to achieve the best possible outcomes for Oregonians.

That said, there remain challenges related to workforce capacity within the forest sector to fully realize the impact of these investments. Specific to ODF and other state agencies, match and administrative capacity to manage grants is a limiting factor, as is boots on the ground capacity to enable implementation. Even if the work is funded by federal grants, state agencies are constrained by position authority and limited services and supplies budgets to support some of the work on the ground.

**What federal/state coordination is planned or underway to scale up and optimize prescribed burning?**

Prescribed fire is an effective way to achieve large-scale fuels reduction and forest restoration treatments, but there are also a number of challenges with use of this tool, including smoke regulations, liability issues, and social license.

Senate Bill 762 contained two provisions to increase the ability to use prescribed fire safely and effectively: cross-boundary burning rulemaking authority and the certified burn manager program. Previously, there was no allowance for a person to conduct a prescribed burn across land ownership boundaries with consent from impacted landowners, which limited the ability to conduct landscape-scale restoration activities. ODF has completed the rulemaking related to this new allowance.

The department has also completed rulemaking to establish the certified burn manager program, in consultation with the Oregon Prescribed Fire Council. This program will educate and train private landowners to conduct prescribed burns safely and effectively on their properties, thus expanding the ability to treat acres in need of fuels reduction.

Across the board, dialogue on how to optimize efficiency and the available tools to reduce wildfire risk to communities is incorporated into the extensive coordination that occurs for prescribed fires.

At the regional level, regular meetings occur among federal and state agencies to discuss emerging funding streams and opportunities to implement wildfire risk reduction work at the appropriate scale. We also regularly engage industry in discussions about the increased capacity needed to implement that work on-the-ground and what's needed to sustainably invest in that capacity. We will continue to work with Tribes and partners at all levels to implement landscape prescribed fire.

**How is selection of sites for forest resiliency and hazardous fuel reduction on federal lands being coordinated with state government's efforts to identify the most wildfire-exposed private lands so that landowners asked to enhance risk reduction on their property can see complementary efforts on adjacent federal lands?**

Coordination to identify priority for forest resiliency and hazardous fuels reduction has been our approach for many years, with notable examples coming through the Governor's Council mitigation team and regular efforts since then.

In the short-term, federal investments in the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law and Inflation Reduction Act are prioritized in key geographies based on analyses completed by state and federal agencies. The 20 year landscape resiliency strategy, as outlined by SB 762, will help inform outyear prioritization for both state and federal investments.

Federal and state agencies, Oregon State University, and a wide range of stakeholders are involved in updating the Quantitative Wildfire Risk Assessment (QWRA) initially released in 2018 to identify wildfire hazard and risk to highly valued resources and assets across public and private lands in Oregon and Washington and inform the identification of landscape treatment priorities.

The team responsible for developing and implementing the 20-year strategy is finalizing the selection of near-term priority geographies across jurisdictions. The identification of these landscapes looks at all lands and identifies where cross-boundary planning and implementation will provide the greatest return on investment. As these landscapes are identified, the state and federal agencies will work with local partnerships and collaboratives to select priority locations for treatments, identify capacity and funding gaps and needs, and provide support to identify potential resources to complete the work.

More localized efforts are also occurring in areas where local partnerships and collaboratives are actively working to coordinate and identify cross-boundary opportunities.

**What aspect or aspects of our collaboration are most in need of improvement?**

Collaboration happens at many scales and in many forms, from on-the-ground project work to establishing shared goals for Oregon's forestlands through shared stewardship. The state and its federal partners have built a solid foundation and initiated additional coordination to implement projects on public and private land. The 20-year strategy will further that progress. Collectively, we need more investment in data collection, sharing, and analysis to build decision support tools that not only interpret the impact of investments in restoration, but help to drive the prioritization and focus of resources for

project implementation, as well as for planning and building community capacity. Over time, increasing local fire adapted community networks (FACs) will only enhance our partnership work while bringing more community voices to the table.

Various mandates govern how each agency operates. We can always be better at understanding and respecting differences in HOW we achieve our common objectives – to reduce wildfire risk and protect communities. It is paramount to develop a shared understanding of how we work towards managing landscapes and provide ongoing, year-round community engagement on how to live with fire. The National Cohesive Wildland Fire Management Strategy provides a framework on how to restore and maintain resilient landscapes, create fire-adapted communities, and provide safe and effective wildfire response.

Local federal and non-federal resources work together whenever possible to contain these fires safely and effectively. Because of these efforts, 98% of wildland fires are contained within 24-hours of the initial response. Dialogue on how we manage the remaining 2% of large, impactful fires and how communities prepare for their inevitable occurrence is where additional collaboration offers the greatest opportunities.

**What, if any, improvements in wildfire suppression policy come out of on-the-ground experience of the last five wildfire seasons?**

Federal policy hasn't changed, but the coordination with partners has only grown stronger in recent years. Through the Pacific Northwest Coordinating Group, for example, wildfire issues are discussed at a strategic level and incidents are prioritized across ownerships. This results in resource allocations to the highest priority places that have the greatest values at risk. However, there is often no silver bullet for protecting communities or high value resources when firefighting resources are in high demand, especially across multiple geographic areas. The coordinating group meets multiple times a day during the fire season to ensure limited resources are in the best locations to be effective and have the highest probability of success.

On the state side, our most significant lesson learned over the last several fire seasons is the importance of our aviation program. Firefighting aircraft significantly increase our ability to keep fires small when combined with our dedicated, skilled firefighters on the ground. ODF greatly appreciates the Legislature's past support and expansion of our firefighting severity program, which gives us the ability to contract with various types of firefighting aircraft that we move around the state based on fire danger throughout fire season.

**What, if any, measures from the Oregon Legislature could enhance productive and beneficial state/federal collaboration?**

The operationalization of shared stewardship through implementation of the 20-year strategy is dependent upon having an appropriate amount of staff and funding for the state agencies involved in this effort. This includes ODF's landscape resiliency and small forestland grant programs, Federal Forest Restoration Program, and programs supporting the 20-year strategy; the Oregon Watershed Enhancement Board's solicitation grant and focused investment partnership programs; and Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife's restoration, habitat, and Good Neighbor Authority programs. Local non-governmental organizations are also essential to planning and implementing projects – they have the knowledge, relationships, capacity, and flexibility to quickly turn grant funds into outcomes. Policy barriers that limit the term (i.e., biennial budgets) or certainty of investments (i.e., informal or short-term agreements) can hamper local capacity to engage. Likewise, match for federal funds can be challenging, especially as state funds are limited and state agency capacity is increasingly stretched by the influx of federal funds. State agencies can effectively pass federal grant funds to local implementers, but that also requires both administrative and technical capacity that is limited in many agencies.

Encouraging the expansion of the wood industry to utilize small diameter wood and biomass products would increase both landscape restoration, risk reduction, and economic opportunities.

**Is there anything else you think our committee should be considering?**

Wildfire knows no boundaries. Strong partnerships and a cross-boundary perspective of risk and need is critical. The areas of highest risk typically span multiple ownerships, with wildfires starting on all ownerships. Addressing this risk can only be achieved through a cohesive approach across all jurisdictions that emphasizes resilient landscapes, fire-adapted communities, and safe and effective wildfire response.

Large fires have historically been a part of Oregon landscapes, and will continue to be. Our challenge is to reduce the magnitude and severity of these fires, given the climate-driven changes we're experiencing and over-abundance of trees and brush on the landscape.

Our collective goal is to minimize the number of devastating, destructive large wildland fires by:

- Removing the excess trees and brush that fuel uncontrollable and catastrophic wildfires;

- Encouraging and supporting communities to do their part in creating defensible space and become fire-adapted communities; and
- Staging and deploying wildfire suppression resources to protect, where feasible, forests and communities threatened by wildfire.

This work can only be achieved through an “all hands, all lands” approach focused on doing the right work in the right place at the right time. This requires us to be thoughtful and deliberate, which is time and resource intensive. Agencies involved in this work need both the understanding from elected officials and the communities they represent that change won’t happen overnight and an ongoing commitment to providing the staffing and funding needed for these efforts to be successful.

Sincerely,

Cal Mukumoto  
Oregon State Forester  
Oregon Department of Forestry

Glenn Casamassa  
Regional Forester  
USDA Forest Service, Region 6

Ron Alvarado  
Oregon State Conservationist  
USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service