

**Re: Testimony on SB 509**

My name is Serena Barton and I have lived in rural southern Oregon my whole life. I have a Bachelor's of Science degree in Environmental Studies: Social Science and Policy from Southern Oregon University and have an in-depth knowledge and background in fire science and forest management issues. I have lived for the past 13 years with my husband and children on a 60+ acre property with an ecologically diverse ecosystem of plants and animals we coexist with. We harvest a diversity of products from our land, while prioritizing retaining the life-sustaining ecological functions and species on and around our land. We are part of a larger network of woodland owners guided by shared principles and philosophy.

I am also writing in behalf of Deer Creek Valley Natural Resources Conservation Association, a 40-year 501(c)3 non-profit organization based in the rural Illinois Valley with a mission *to promote and protect environments and species that sustain the web of life and human communities*. We represent a rural community living on the frontlines of the impacts of global crises created, in large part, from historic and current destructive forest management practices. We have decades of work invested in implementing sustainable solutions that address a myriad of issues, particularly around innovative and ecologically sensitive community fire safety approaches and responsible resource utilization practices.

While there are many positive aspects of SB 509 in terms of providing much needed assistance to homeowners to make their homes and structures less flammable in the event of a fire, **we cannot support this bill with the current language that appears to mandate and penalize property owners for noncompliance with undefined and controversial defensible space requirements**. Please remove the mandate and enforcement language, particularly in Section 10 of the bill, and instead move forward with a voluntary and incentive, education-based approach informed by credible science and data.

The following are important issues of concern:

- Creating “defensible space” around structures is a vague and often arbitrary set of procedures with a wide range of variation depending on who is defining it. Often, what would be required to be in compliance with the typical defensible space requirements is to do a significant amount of logging and overstory canopy removal to meet arbitrary tree and branch spacing targets.
- There are many harmful impacts of logging trees, especially larger overstory trees. **Mandating this logging and drastic vegetation removal around structures is highly likely to actually increase the fire danger surrounding our homes and put our homes and families at greater risk in the event of a fire.**
  - Fewer trees = less shade, less moisture, hotter temperatures, greater microclimate extremes, and more wind. Opening the canopy leads to more sun reaching the ground, heating up surface fuels and promoting grasses and shrub-response that **increases fire hazards**. Removing trees and vegetation also removes important wind buffers, which is a crucial factor given the nature of increasing wind-driven extreme fire events such as the Alameda and Slater Fires of 2020.
- The **ecological impacts** of logging and mechanical vegetation removal can be extreme and should not be mandatory. Living rurally, our quality of life and property values are directly related to the ecological values on our property. We value the wildlife and the diversity of wildlife habitats on our land, and we take pride in being able to protect those species and their homes. Mandating the removal of habitat on our land is harmful and invasive in many ways. We

also value healthy soil and do our best to not compact or destroy important fungal networks. Beauty, and the joy of living in nature, are important values that would be heavily impacted by mandating ecologically destructive practices that we would be forced to see and experience every time we look out our windows or walk out our doors. Instead of our homes being nestled by beauty and abundant wildlife, we would be surrounded by stumps and the pain of being forced to sever our relationship with these living trees, plants, and animals. We are intimately connected with the land we live on and should not be forced by the government to violate this connection and responsibility we have to the land, our children, and future generations. We have invested our lives into being able to leave this beautiful land as a legacy for our children.

- **Carbon impacts:** there will be **significant carbon emissions** from this statewide program, not only from the initial implementation, but also from the **extremely costly maintenance** that would be required to maintain these unnaturally sterile conditions. It is unclear who will foot this bill for the indefinite future. In opening the canopy and removing microclimate buffers around our homes, our costs for heating and cooling our homes will go up exponentially and lead to exacerbated macro climate impacts and **worsening drought and water shortages**.
- **Extinction:** we are in a global extinction crisis and we and our homes dwell within an incredibly rare and unique bioregion with crucial strongholds for threatened species, scores of rare and endemic species, and irreplaceable genetic diversity. Mandating this program would exacerbate the current extinction crises and have significant negative impacts.
- **Habitat fragmentation:** We live in a checkerboarded land ownership and while our public lands are crucial connectivity corridors for a huge number of species, private lands are also a vital piece of the puzzle to maintaining connectivity within and between our watersheds. We know it is possible to achieve home fire safety goals, while not compromising ecological values. This bill does not allow these noble objectives to be mutually attainable.
- **Authorizing involuntary inspections on private property is an infringement of our rights and values as Americans and would set a dangerous precedent for the indefinite future.** Rather, providing voluntary consultations and funding assistance to accomplish the unique goals of individual landowners would allow for the necessary flexibility, nuance, and freedom of personal choice that should be retained by landowners.

Thank you for making an effort to provide assistance to homeowners to make their homes and structures less flammable. Making our homes “ember proof” is one of the most crucial steps we can take to be protected in the event of a wildfire and is based on solid data and evidence. However, the efficacy of “fuel reduction” efforts in keeping us safe from wildfire is far more nuanced and complex. Requiring and enforcing a one-size-fits-all approach will not achieve the desired outcomes and has already led to further division and conflict within our communities. To mandate practices that are scientifically controversial, ecologically destructive, and that have a high potential to unintentionally *increase* the fire danger around our homes is extremely concerning. Please remove the mandatory and enforcement language in the bill and work with our communities in a supportive and collaborative way. We appreciate that we all want to protect our communities and are hopeful about the potential for unity around finding solutions. We are eager to work together in a positive and respectful way.

Sincerely,

Serena Barton, President

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