

Union County Emergency Services



Nick Vora, Emergency Manager
nvora@union-county.org

1106 K Avenue, La Grande, OR 97850

PHONE (541) 963-1009 • FAX (541) 963-1079

February 7th, 2025

RE: House Bill 2136 Testimony

Chair Tran, Vice Chairs Grayber and Lewis, and Members of the House Emergency Management, General Government and Veterans Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to submit written testimony in support of HB 2136. For the record, my name is Nick Vora, and I am the Emergency Manager for Union County Oregon.

HB2136 would enhance the resilience of all Oregon counties by taking the first steps to establish a baseline of critical infrastructure necessary for basic core emergency sheltering capabilities to exist at the local level during and after disasters. This is critical to ensuring equitable delivery of emergency services statewide. In the summer of 2024 I actively managed and/or assisted evacuation efforts in eight counties, and in almost all instances the adequacy and availability of evacuation shelters was a major concern, especially for people evacuating with large trailers, vehicles, and livestock.

I encourage legislation language that, in addition to what is introduced, offers grant opportunities for infrastructure enhancements, including livestock sheltering and other needs, but requires prioritization of grant funding for critical utility and facility infrastructure since the need for just critical infrastructure will dramatically exceed funding available in the legislation. This legislation will be a valuable start in efforts to close the substantial emergency shelter facility capability gap that exists in many counties across the state.

Below are key ways fairground facilities are of critical importance to a county's – and by association the State's - emergency preparedness.

General Concepts:

- All emergencies start and end at the local level, and resilience, by definition, is the ability of a community to withstand and recover from a disaster.
- To withstand and recover from a disaster, counties need to have plans and facilities in place to not only respond to and manage the incident, but also care for people and their animals that get displaced.
- Facilities at the disposal of local government for use as emergency shelters and emergency incident support vary widely in condition across the state, and several do not have the ability to meet basic emergency needs.
- ***A grant program that prioritizes assisting all counties to establish a baseline of core evacuation facility capabilities is critical for equitable mass care and resilience across the state.***
- HB2136 can serve as the mechanism to prioritize and establish basic critical infrastructure for emergency sheltering at the county level.

Ownership and flexibility

- Fairgrounds are usually controlled by local government and can be quickly repurposed for an emergency function on short or no-notice.

- Unlike schools, armories, or private facilities, fairgrounds that are under county ownership and control are most-likely to be made available for use as a shelter during a local emergency. Investment into private facilities can be permanently lost if the facility is closed, repurposed, or sold. Other facilities such as school campuses are well-suited for emergency uses, but have limited or no availability during much of the year and are not under county control.

Emergency Shelters

- Fairgrounds are some of the few, if not the only, local facilities capable of housing people with companion animals, unlike many traditional shelter sites (e.g. schools). Basic infrastructure investments are critically needed in many areas to allow fair facilities to be able to fully fill the critical mission of evacuation shelter.
- During severe weather events that require counties to open warming, cooling, or air quality shelters, fairgrounds are some of the few, if only locations that local governments have access to for quickly meeting the needs of the community.

Livestock and Pets

- Fairgrounds are commonly the **only** publicly accessible facility (especially under government control) that can hold livestock during emergencies. This is critical not only for holding livestock being evacuated and/or recovered during emergencies, but also for implementing isolation, observation, or quarantine orders during biological emergencies.

Incident Response and Support

- County-owned fairground complexes with the rare combination of large indoor and outdoor spaces, bathrooms, internet, and redundant electrical supply are particularly well-suited for use not only as evacuation sites and points of distribution for supplies, but also for locating incident management teams during critical incidents. Incident management teams require large open spaces, indoor facilities, water supplies and other basic supporting infrastructure that is commonly only found at fair facilities.
- County-owned fair complexes have a very unique ability to provide adequate traffic handling for drive-through clinics and materials handling to serve as delivery, staging, and distribution sites (caches) for equipment and supplies during and following emergencies.

Disaster Economics

- All emergencies start and end at the local level, and recovery planning has to start before a disaster happens to be as successful and efficient as possible. We cannot fully mitigate all disasters and therefore must be prepared to respond to and recover from the inevitable.
- Investment in facilities that will support a comprehensive effort to not only manage the incident, but also care for the community and be a focal point for recovery efforts will help speed and organize the recovery process, and thereby reduce costs to private individuals and all levels of government during and after the incident.

Secondary Benefits

- While planned investments are focused on emergency response and evacuation sheltering, expanded fairground capabilities will also serve as much-needed conference venues, benefiting local economies.
- Private facilities often charge fixed rates regardless of the user, which makes it very difficult for local governments to find facilities to host trainings and emergency preparedness exercises on limited budgets.
- Fairground facilities are often needed to support animal welfare enforcement, as local governments often need locations to temporarily house animals for treatment and evidence processing on abuse and neglect cases. Privately-owned or operated facilities cannot necessarily be relied on to provide this function.

I appreciate your time and the opportunity to submit this testimony.

Sincerely,



Nick Vora
Emergency Manager
Director, Dept. of Emergency Services
Union County, OR