

HB 3349 and HB3350

Chair Tran, Members of the Committee

I am John O’Keeffe, I ranch in Adel, Lake County Oregon, I have been president of the Warner Valley Rangeland Fire Protection Association since 2011. I currently serve on the Oregon Wildfire Programs Advisory Council; I represented industry on the recently completed USDA Wildland Fire Mitigation and Management Commission. I have been heavily involved in the wildfire discussion for the last few years.

The last several fire seasons have shown us that we must be ready to fight fire. Oregon’s Rangeland Fire Protection Associations (RFPAs) have been a big part of this effort. RFPAs have a mutual assistance agreement with the government agencies, BLM, ODF and in some cases USFS to provide unpaid mutual assistance during the initial attack. The funding model for RFPAs for the most part supports this level of engagement.

In brief, this funding model, agencies transfer retired government firefighting equipment to RFPAs. RFPAs assess voluntary dues to the private landowners in their area. Grants, when awarded, allow the RFPAs to augment their income.

Equipment taken on late in its service life requires additional maintenance, voluntary dues only go so far. Grants are specific, targeted and not always available regardless of need. There are more needs than there are grants (true under pre-DOGE).

In years when the fire activity is above average, government resources are tapped out, RFPAs take up the slack, and engage in extended attack, the funding model that serves us for initial attack falls short when it comes to extended attack. RFPA members will not stand by and watch their neighbors and their own places burn. When funding runs out, members purchase fuel and other necessities out of ranch operating funds, and stay on extended attack, sometimes they get paid back, sometimes they don’t. I have seen this, I have done this.

RFPAs are a very efficient fire fighting force, they train on their own time, they fight fire all day for the cost of the fuel it took to get them to the fire (and they live close to the fire). Fire money spent through RFPAs goes a long way. There are many instances where RFPA involvement was instrumental in stopping a fire, Sometimes the RFPAs are there on their own, sometimes they are working with agency partners, RFPAs have made a difference many times. Anyone who has served on an RFPA knows of times when they made a difference, I know I do, Warner Valley RFPA put out a spot fire 2 miles in front of the Crane fire in 2020. RFPAs engage in many fires every year, some of these fires would have gone big and cost millions of dollars, the savings are large and real.

Clearly, we need additional ways to support RFPAs. RFPAs are doing this without a tax base, RFPAs have to purchase personal protective equipment, and other safety equipment out of minimal budgets. We need ways to enhance funding for the RFPAs. HB3349 does this, HB3350 does this, please support these bills and help us to help ourselves and help Oregon get through this wildfire crisis.

Thank you for your consideration.

