

March 25, 2025

House Committee On Emergency Management, General Government, and Veterans

Testimony on HB 3349 and 3350: Establishes the Rangeland Protection Association Fund, allows ODF and RFPAs to

Submitted by: Kyle Smith, Director of Government Relations

Chair Tran, Co-Chairs Grayber and Lewis, and Members of the Committee:

The Nature Conservancy is pleased to offer support for House Bill 3349 (-1 amendment) and House Bill 3350, which together will create the Rangeland Protection Association Fund, allow Rangeland Fire Protection Associations (RFPAs) to purchase firefighting equipment from the Oregon Department of Forestry, and allocate \$1 million from the state's general fund to RFPAs for equipment, training, and other firefighting needs.

The Nature Conservancy (TNC) is a science-based, non-partisan organization committed to conserving the lands and waters on which all life depends. In Oregon, TNC has over 80,000 supporters and members in every county. Based in communities around the state, we manage lands and waters in varied ecosystems and partner with ranchers, farmers, fishers, timber and environmental interests on some of the most challenging conservation issues facing people and nature.

The 2024 fire season was one of the worst on record, with over 1.9 million acres burned and six megafires over 100,000 acres. Much of 2024's catastrophic impacts occurred east of the Cascades with fires consuming 1.7 million acres of some of Oregon's most sensitive sagebrush sea ecosystems—a rich, diverse mix including sagebrush, bunchgrasses and wildflowers. Together these native plants sustain hundreds of animal species from burrowing owls and pygmy rabbits to mule deer, pronghorn and mountain lions. Many, like the iconic greater sage-grouse, can survive nowhere else.

These fires also had catastrophic consequences for ranchers and farmers who lost cattle, fences, structures, and grazing land which will take years to recover. Rangeland Fire Protection Associations provide the frontline of defense against wildfire and represent a crucial component of Oregon's wildfire response system. Together HB3349 and HB3350 will provide more resources for these all-volunteer firefighting teams and allow greater response efficacy in the face of increasing wildfire impacts.

In concert with OSU Extension Service, USDA's Agricultural Research Service, and other dedicated partners, TNC is working to address the impacts of rangeland wildfire through cutting edge research and planning. Through fuels mapping, integrating important wildlife habitat with Potential Operational Delineations (PODs), and other planning and preparedness strategies, we are working to protect Oregon's remaining sagebrush sea ecosystems. Increasing resources to RFPAs is an important piece of the puzzle in curbing the impacts of increased wildfire in the state's delicate rangeland ecosystems. We urge your support for HB3349 and HB3350.