



To: **Members of the House Committee on Climate, Energy, and Environment**

From: **Chief Brian Stewart**
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Oregon Fire Chiefs Association & SDAO Fire Districts

Chief Ben Stange
Polk County Fire District No. 1
Oregon Fire Chiefs Association & SDAO Fire Districts

Date: **April 2, 2025**

Re: **HB 3940 - Testimony in Support**

Chair Lively, Vice – Chairs Gamba and Levy, and members of the committee.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony on the Oregon wildfire funding legislation. This testimony is submitted by the **Oregon Fire Chiefs Association**, the **Oregon State Fire Fighter Council**, the **Oregon Volunteer Firefighters Association**, the **Oregon Fire District Directors Association**, the **Oregon Fire Marshals Association**, and the **Fire and EMS Chapter of SDAO**. Representatives of each of these groups participated in the Oregon wildfire funding workgroup and many participated in the subcommittee on landowner rates and forestland classification. We write today in support of HB 3940 with the Dash 1 amendment.

As part of the Fire 35, we had the privilege to serve on the Oregon Wildfire Funding workgroup over the last 10 months. Kudos to the ODF and OSFM leadership and the facilitators – they did a great job of keeping us on track, supporting us, and moving the group forward. Additionally, the ex-officios and workgroup members provided the discussion and background necessary to fulfill the 2024 budget note requirements.

While there were no easy solutions, the workgroup was able to recommend six funding solutions, four here, and two in other bills. Each was vetted by individuals representing diverse perspectives such as landowners, public health, fire service, ranchers, environmental protection, tribes, and insurance. The workgroup was also diligent in vetting the dozens of concepts that it did not recommend. While each solution has its own challenges, they provide means to invest in Oregon's safety, economic security, and livability for today and for the future.

Additionally, per the 2024 budget note, the workgroup, and a subcommittee, reviewed adjustments to ODF's rate structure and how to reduce the impacts of forestland classification on rural fire protection districts. The ODF funding process is complex and required much collaboration and calculation to determine the fee structure found in the Dash 1 amendment. It is impressive that HB 3940 offers a solution that addresses ODF's funding needs, aligns with the budgets of its rate payers, and removes certain constraints on the taxing authority of

rural fire protection districts. This fee structure, which recognizes the rural fire protection district (RFPD) solution in Sections 20-22 of the bill, meets the workgroup's principle of considering "equitable, affordable and sustainable contributions from payees into the system, including in-kind contributions".

The revised fee structure and changes to the RFPD statute address the impacts of forestland classification on RFPDs. Below is an explanation of why these changes to the RFPD statute are crucial for ensuring long-term, sustainable, and equitable funding for fire districts.

Statute allows forestland classified lands, within the existing, voter-approved RFPD boundaries, to pay partial or no tax. But these properties still receive full service from rural fire protection districts as they are within the voter approved boundaries of the districts. These lands can be large stands of timber or small parcels with any vegetation capable of carrying fire across them - even properties surrounded by buildings and fire hydrants. This exemption was established in 1969, a time when Oregon was more rural and wildfire acreage had not yet doubled every decade, as it has over the past thirty years. Moreover, it was provided when Oregon's population was half of what it is today and does not reflect current service demands.

To provide adequate service of any type, it is necessary that properties are taxed for services even its people on those properties – residents with a house or people recreating on vacant lots – do not use those services by choice or need. For example, people that do not have kids pay school taxes, same with lands for people who do not use libraries, parks, and law enforcement. A fire district may run on a small percentage of properties in its boundaries a year. But the collective property taxes across the district are needed to pay for the operations of the fire district – whether its training volunteers, saving to buy a new fire engine, or any other activity. HB 3940 -1 brings certain unimproved lands back into paying property taxes and increases the number of acres that are taxed for improved lots.

Whether a fire starts in the forest or in the built environment, we know that Oregonians face threats across the landscape. The Oregon Department of Forestry and structural fire agencies work tremendously together during the wildfire season – each bringing their personnel and unique resources – to keep fires small and protect the public. I am confident that our strong partnership and interoperability would continue around the year, but ODF does not staff suppression positions year-round. As these parcels are within voter-approved boundaries of the fire district, when we get called, we go. Much like fire districts do not typically provide bulldozers or aircraft, ODF does not provide the services that RFPDs provide.

These properties receive all services from RFPDs, 24/7, 365 days a year, including: EMS, structure fires, hazardous materials, technical rescue, and water rescue. Whether there is a structure on the property, or it is unimproved, there is human activity which cause RFPDs to respond to these lands for entrapments, horses stuck in creeks, cardiac arrests, traumatic injuries, escaped fires, and many other types of incident types. Given the changes in Oregon's population, fire threat, and recreational and commercial use of unimproved lots, it is no longer sensical to exempt lands from rural fire protection districts. The changes in the proposed bill focus on areas where RFPDs most commonly respond, aiming to generate appropriate revenue and enhance equity among all property owners within the voter-approved boundaries of RFPDs.

The workgroup's shared principles state that solutions should "reflect shared responsibility and benefits among all Oregonians and visitors to the state" and should "aim to maintain high standards of service (meeting missions for protecting life, property and natural resources)". HB 3490 with the Dash 1 amendment meets these standards. Thank you for the opportunity to provide input and we encourage you to pass HB 3940 with the Dash 1 amendment.