



Oregon

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"STEWARDSHIP IN FORESTRY"

February 21, 2014

Honorable Arnie Roblan, Chair
Senate Committee on Rural Communities and Economic Development
347 State Capitol
Salem, OR 97301

Dear Chair Roblan and Members of the Committee:

Oregon fire seasons typically bring a number of joint-jurisdiction fires, involving a mix of land ownerships and a sharing of responsibility among public agencies with different goals, mandates and approaches. Several such fires in 2012, most notably Barry Point, outside of Lakeview, highlighted the challenges inherent in such fires, and the need for improved communication and coordination on several fronts.

After-action reviews, combined with clear expressions of concern from landowners and legislators, led the Oregon Department of Forestry (ODF) to convene an external 2012 Large-Fire Review Committee. We committed to sharing the committee's specific recommendations, and to using them to improve existing policies and processes and to create new ones as necessary.

This group included landowner representatives, legislators, local government representatives, key agency staff and subject-matter experts in large fires. The committee has provided its report to us: the State Forester, responsible for fire protection, and the state's Chief Operating Officer, responsible for risk management. The committee's recommendations, and the specific commitments we have made to addressing them, will guide our work in the coming weeks and months. We are pleased to share the report with you, and grateful for the work of our committee members.

The recommendations focus on improving Oregon's complete and coordinated fire protection system, with an emphasis on stronger communication and coordination among agencies and with landowners—particularly those with smaller holdings—before, during and after fires.

Although our epic 2013 fire season delayed this review, it also gave us an opportunity to apply lessons learned from 2012. These changes, particularly involving interagency communication and coordination, helped us deal successfully with the difficulties that the 2013 season posed. We will continue to address the review committee's concerns as the 2014 fire season approaches.

Fire seasons in recent years have played out against a backdrop of management policies that have compounded the severity of fires on federal lands, transferring significant risk to adjoining private lands. Ongoing drought has exacerbated this challenge. Differing fire and fuels management approaches—and the need for ODF to clearly represent the state’s and landowners’ interests in joint-jurisdiction fires—emerged as key themes of the 2012 review.

Our commitments include communicating with federal fire managers that every acre has value, that protection of private landowners’ interests must be integral to suppression plans, and that landowners have much to bring to the table in terms of local knowledge and resource values. The committee’s report also gives voice to needs for better information connections with smaller landowners on resources available for post-fire recovery. Here, too, we have made specific commitments, through ODF’s Fire Protection, Private Forests and Public Affairs programs, to meet these needs.

The review extended as well to Barry Point landowners’ experience in pursuing tort claims through the Department of Administrative Services (DAS). Representatives from the DAS Risk Management Department participated in the review, explaining the claims review process and hearing landowner concerns and frustrations directly. By June 1, DAS will provide a document outlining the overall claims process, for review with ODF, for distribution to small landowners, and for use as a basis for improvement. In addition, DAS will work toward improvements in communications during and after claims review.

We appreciate the frank discussions that characterized the 2012 review. Throughout the resulting report, we have included sections that specifically articulate our commitments to addressing the issues raised. We are currently developing a document that will describe our planned actions in further detail.

This process affirmed two principles that have been foundational as our fire protection system, now entering its second century, has evolved. First: Landowners are essential to our success. They are our customers and our partners. We cannot succeed without support rooted in mutual understanding and respect. Second: We are committed to continuous improvement. The 2012 fire season review, and our responses to it, will make our system stronger.

Thank you for your interest in this process, and for the opportunity to share the 2012 fire season review with you. Please don’t hesitate to get in touch if you have questions, comments or suggestions.

Sincerely,



Doug Decker
Oregon State Forester



Michael Jordan
Chief Operating Officer
Director, Department of Administrative Services

Cc: Representative Mike McLane
Representative Gail Whitsett
2012 Large Fire Review Committee