



Statement of Gary Burke, Chairman, Board of Trustees
Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation
February 5, 2018, 3 P.M., Hearing Room F
Senate Committee on Environment and Natural Resources
Oregon State Capitol

Good afternoon. My name is Gary Burke. I am the Chairman of the Board of Trustees of the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation.

The Umatilla Tribes are greatly concerned about Climate Change. We support actions to confront it, head-on, without fear or confusion, or further delay.

We support legislation to reduce greenhouse gases and to encourage use of non-fossil fuels, like the Clean Energy Jobs Bill. We support investment in cleaner energy, “greener” energy, in a fair and just manner that takes into account any people and communities affected by the transition.

Tribal people—my people—are closely tied to the land, to the waters. We always have been, we always will be. The air, the land, the waters—they provide us with our First Foods, on which we depend. Those Foods depend on us, in turn, to take care of them, so they will continue to be here year after year—forever.

Each passing year we witness more Climate Change impacts. “Global Warming” is too simple a phrase, and sometimes misleading. What has been clear, and obvious, are the severe, extreme weather events associated with a changing climate.

Last summer we—like much of our region—spent weeks breathing thick smoke from raging wildfires. In 2015 nearly all returning adult Snake River sockeye salmon died from high water temperatures. This year we are again facing drastically reduced snowpacks that could lead to dangerous drought conditions this summer. The ocean—where our treasured Northwest salmon grow to maturity—contains larger dead zones and more-acidic water than ever before.

Climate Change and extreme weather events threaten the health and well-being of our people and our communities, Indian and non-Indian alike. They create more risks to our local businesses and economies. Our vital local agricultural economy, for example, already operates on very thin margins. Climate Change impacts could drive it over the edge.

We support Environmental Justice as a guiding principle in refining this bill and in designing state Climate Change policies. The Umatilla Tribes agree with Oregon’s Environmental Justice Task Force created by the Legislature.

Environmental Justice, they said, means “equal protection from environmental and health hazards.” It includes “meaningful . . . participation in decisions that affect the environment in which [we] live, work, learn, practice spirituality and play.”

Minority communities must be included in public processes such as this. We also agree with the Task Force that we should not be disproportionately affected by “environmental impacts.” Those impacts include Climate Change, which has already begun to impact our First Foods and therefore our cultural practices that depend on them.

Tribal needs and values are worthy of recognition. They have served us well since time immemorial—for thousands of years, where we took care of our First Foods, “managed” our “resources,” and did so without jeopardizing the future.

The Clean Energy Jobs Bill is an important step in shaping our future. Progress has been made as the bill has been modified. We appreciate efforts to include input from Oregon businesses and rural communities, and to recognize the unique risks and vulnerabilities to communities east of the Cascades. We also suggest that protecting and improving the marine environment should be an explicit goal of carbon reduction efforts.

The Umatilla Tribes have already begun to invest in renewable energy, including wind generation, with our own wind turbine at Tamástslikt Cultural Institute. We’ve installed charging stations at our resort complex. For us, it’s a start.

On a state-wide basis, this legislation is a good start. Doing nothing is not an option. Doing nothing will not protect us from the inevitable changes to come. Human beings—not “nature”—created the problem; human beings must solve it.

The Umatilla Tribes support the Bill’s measures to reduce the risks of Climate Change to our health, our traditions, our culture, our local livelihoods, and our economic security. We are not afraid of the future. But we cannot ignore our responsibility to shape it.

We must act to limit carbon emissions that threaten our tribal First Foods and our way of life. We must act to reduce the threat to so much of what we all value and enjoy—the threat to the legacy our children will inherit.