

Hood River County Sheriff's Office



Matthew T. English, Sheriff

To: Members of the Veterans and Emergency Preparedness Committee
Attn: Representative Paul Evans, Chair

From: Sheriff Matt English

Re: Support for HB 4152 – Wildfire Grant Funding for Multnomah and Hood River County

The Columbia River Gorge is a hot bed of outdoor recreation. The USFS's National Visitor Usage Monitoring shows that annually, there are over 2.1 million individual visits to the Columbia River Gorge National Scenic area, which includes the forested areas in Multnomah and Hood River County along I-84.

One of the inherent results of all of the visitation and usage is search and rescue. With so many people on the trails annually, it is all too common for people to be lost or injured.

The Sheriff's of Oregon are tasked with providing search and rescue services to their respective counties. The majority of the personnel that are navigating through the woods and trails are volunteers. Although they are well trained and generally well equipped, the training and equipment is tailored around the typical conditions our volunteers encounter in our respective regions.

In September of 2017, the Eagle Creek Fire created massive devastation in the Columbia River Gorge and was extremely chaotic at the onset. During the first 18 hours of the event, our office, assisted by many of our local, state and federal partners, facilitated the rescue of over 170 people that were trapped and threatened by the fire on the Eagle Creek Trail.

In the aftermath, nearly 49,000 acres burned, resulting in the closure of all of the trails in the burned area along I-84. Despite widespread media coverage and continued efforts to keep people out of the area, the USFS has recorded nearly 17,000 attempts to gain entry into the closed areas. As we speak, USFS crews are working to repair and reopen the trails in the gorge, allowing the public to regain access to the beloved outdoor Mecca that the gorge provides, resulting in a much needed boost to the heavily affected tourist economy that relies on visitors to the area.

As trails reopen, a natural result will be calls to our search and rescue divisions to enter these areas and assist visitors that have gotten into often dire predicaments. Although we prepare for these regularly occurring events, our personnel are neither trained nor properly equipped to enter these burn affected areas, which create new hazards and landscapes that differ from the gorge trails that our volunteers have trained and responded to for countless years.

HB 4152 will provide funding to obtain specialized equipment and training for our first responders and volunteers that will have to enter these burn affected areas. Experts tell us that we will see the effects of the fire and encounter the hazards that come along with it, for years to come.

In Hood River County, our Search and Rescue calls for service put us in the top fifth in the state. At Eagle Creek alone, not including the dozens of surrounding trails, we see nearly 20 search and rescue missions

per year. Historically, our program has been funded by federal secure rural schools dollars and donations. SRS has not been renewed so currently, our only source of revenue is donations.

We have to provide as many advantages to our SAR personnel who selflessly risk their safety to rescue others, as we can. HB 4152 will help us ensure our people have the safety gear and awareness they so badly need in the wake of the devastation caused by the Eagle Creek Fire.

I ask the committee to move this important safety bill forward and again appreciate the opportunity to submit testimony for your consideration.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'M. English', with a long, sweeping flourish extending to the right.

Matt English
Sheriff
Hood River County