

September 21, 2020

Members of the House Committee on Natural Resources:
900 Court St., NE
Salem, OR 97301

Submitted via electronic mail.

Chair Witt and Members of the House Committee on Natural Resources:

Oregon is in the middle of one of the most devastating wildfire seasons on record coupled with the COVID-19 pandemic an even greater emergency exists, creating one of the most challenging health crises in our history. The 2020 wildfires have spanned the entire state affecting the health, safety, and well-being of Oregonians; properties; the economy; and our environment.

I write to you today to request state leadership on comprehensive wildfire policy, addressing forest management, impacts on the environment, and long term impacts to the health of Oregonians. Oregonians have suffered irreparable harm and without action, we know future wildfire seasons could be even more catastrophic.

During these fire events, thousands of Oregonians have been forced to flee their homes as fires circle densely populated urban, suburban, and rural areas alike. One thing is certain, wildfire knows no bounds and regardless of location, socioeconomic status, or party affiliation, no Oregonian is immune from the impacts of wildfire.

Over the past two weeks our state has seen wildfire devastation beyond comprehension: loss of life; livestock; property; forestland; and has created a blanket of smoke over most of our state. Our air quality has continued to rank the worst in the world amid this crisis. Globally, an estimated 4.2 million premature deaths have been linked to outdoor air pollution primarily from heart disease, stroke, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, lung cancer, and acute respiratory infections in children.¹

Unfortunately, while the severity and threat to more populous regions of the state from this wildfire season is unprecedented, the devastation caused by wildfire has become a fact of life for many communities. The increasing severity of wildfire season continues to be escalated by environmental conditions and heavy fuel load. Every year, wildfires destroy Oregon forests, wreaking havoc on delicate ecosystems, the environment, agriculture and forest land, wildlife habitat; polluting our air; and endangering rural communities; costing millions of state, federal, and private dollars to fight.

Without comprehensive forest policy, Oregonians will continue to suffer from the impacts of wildfire.

¹ World Health Organization - Air Pollution - Ambient Air Pollution: Health Impacts
<https://www.who.int/airpollution/ambient/health-impacts/en/>



Oregon must adopt a 360-degree approach to forest management that includes landscape recovery and restoration, ongoing mitigation measures, fire suppression, and efforts to create sustainable fire adaptive communities.

Counties, the local public health authority, and providers of critical services understand that the risks of wildfire are not limited to loss of property and economic devastation, Wildfire puts the lives of Oregonians at risk and causes devastating health impacts.

The road ahead will not be easy but taking this crucial step of forest management reform will ensure Oregon is on the right track to preserve lives, property, our economy, and our environment.

We know that when we all come together, we can get this work done.

AOC is prepared to stand with residents, communities, and the State of Oregon to tackle this ongoing threat to life, health, economic stability, and the natural resources of our great state.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Gina Nikkel". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "G" and "N".

Gina Firman Nikkel, Ph.D.
Executive Director
Association of Oregon Counties

CC:
Governor Kate Brown
Members of Oregon State Legislature
Oregon County Commissioners