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Senate Committee on Wildfire Reduction and Recovery
Oregon Farm Bureau Testimony on SB 1536
February 5, 2020

Chair Golden, and members of the Committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on SB 1536. By way of background, the Oregon Farm Bureau (OFB) is the state's largest agricultural trade association, representing nearly 7,000 farm and ranch families across the state, many of whom are active contributors to rural fire protection districts and rangeland fire protection associations. As longtime stewards of the land, Oregon's farmers and ranchers know firsthand the devastating impacts wildfire can have on rural communities and the importance of proper land management to prevent fire from spreading on public and private lands. As such, OFB greatly appreciates the efforts undertaken by the Governor's Council on Wildfire Response and this legislature's commitment to addressing wildfire mitigation and recovery in a meaningful way.

While we agree in principle with many of the avenues the Council took in this bill, there are concepts within SB 1536 that need further discussion, such as the land use, defensible space, and building codes sections. Moreover, there are highly important and practical solutions missing in SB 1536 that are needed to adequately address wildfire mitigation and response, especially in terms of protection of land in rural areas of the state. As such, OFB requests that this bill be put on hold until 2021, so that this conversation can continue in the interim.

See below for a more detailed discussion of our comments and concerns with certain sections of the bill:

Sections 8 - 14 need a further conversation: As strong supporters of the land use system, OFB understands that our comprehensive land use planning system can be a vital tool in creating wildfire adapted communities. However, the land use, defensible space, and building code provisions of this bill are not viable solutions. First, addressing wildfire is a unique and highly complicated issue; a one-size-fits-all approach will not adequately protect our communities and will not be workable for our local governments to implement. Therefore, any solution needs to be regionally tailored to meet the varied geographic needs of Oregon's diverse counties. Second, the statewide map can be a helpful tool in this conversation, but the creation of the map should be tasked with Oregon Department of

Forestry and not the Department of Land Conservation and Development. ODF has the expertise needed to be the lead on the creation of this map. Once the map is created, collaboration from DLCD, the counties, and stakeholders should occur to have a meaningful conversation about possible changes to the land use system.

Sections 20-28 are a step in the right direction, but missing key details: In principle, OFB generally agrees with the concepts outlined in Sections 20 – 28, but believe there are highly important concepts missing from many of these sections:

Treatment of Lands – OFB supports the state encouraging the active treatment and management of land in Oregon. Therefore, we are not opposed to the treatment section of this bill. However, we would like to point out that grazing by livestock on public and private lands is proven to be a highly economical and effective method of fuel load reduction, which can be a key tool in wildfire prevention.

Protection of Lands – OFB agrees that all lands in Oregon should have some level of fire protection. We agree that “no protection” is not a sufficient standard anymore. With that said, it is highly important that the baseline discussed in Section 23 be regionally tailored. A single statewide baseline that does not consider regional differences will not work for Oregon. Second, it is important that federal lands be included in the baseline. As such, Section 23 (1) should have language that includes federal agencies and it should be made clear that the baseline can be different depending on the region. Moreover, we have a process in place of Rangeland Protection Associations and Rural Fire Protection Districts to set baseline levels of protection that is working. No provision of this bill should change that existing process.

Moreover, although we support the provisions of subsection (2). The outstanding question is who is considered a “jurisdiction.” It is not clear whether volunteer fire departments are considered jurisdictions. From our perspective, the definition of jurisdiction is important. There should be discretion at the county level to define "jurisdiction" in a way that is most helpful to their county. We would hope that these rules would be workable, regionally tailored, and decided by the local people tasked with fighting fires.

Funding Study & Council – OFB fully recognizes the complexity of funding wildfire response and understand the desire of the State to undertake this funding study. OFB hopes that any study will consider the on the ground reality of fire funding, and take into consideration the highly valuable in-kind contributions of private landowners, who actively manage their land to reduce fuel loads. Moreover, we will continue to advocate for any funds remaining in the hands of our local communities, as wildfire protection is a grassroots response in many rural areas of the state. OFB believes the continuation of the Wildfire Council will help oversee the funding study and will provide a balanced forum to discuss the results of the study.

Joint Partnerships – A majority of lands east of the Cascades is under the jurisdictional control of the federal government. When fires happen on federal land, there are often inadequate or no efforts to fight fire. Despite starting and growing stronger on federal lands, the burden of

stopping those fires and mitigating their effects fall upon state and local fire protection districts across the state. Unless federal agencies actively engage in treatment and fighting fires on federal land, efforts on private and state land will be in vain. The work of the Council and this legislature must call for a commitment from the federal government to join our state's efforts in wildfire reduction and recovery. We believe this is reflected in the Joint Partnerships language of the bill, but the expectations on the federal government need to be clearer in the language of the bill.

Again, OFB is very appreciative of the Governor's, Wildfire Council's, and this Committee's commitment to addressing wildfire response in Oregon. Unfortunately, we do not believe that many sections of this bill are ready to move forward this session and the important nature of this issue warrants further conversation. We must be ready for this upcoming fire season, but more importantly we must be thoughtful and correct in how we address protecting Oregon from wildfire.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide comment. Please do not hesitate to contact us with any questions or concerns.

Contact:

Samantha Bayer, Oregon Farm Bureau, samantha@oregonfb.org