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DATE: November 17, 2021
TO: House Interim Special Committee on Wildfire Recovery
RE: Update on Holiday Farm Fire Housing

Dear Chairman Clem and Committee Members:

Thank you for the opportunity to provide my input on the recovery status from the Holiday Farm Fire, which began on Labor Day, 2020, and burned a total of 177,000 acres in the McKenzie River Valley, destroying over 400 structures, and displacing thousands of Lane County residents.

As I have noted in previous testimony, the Holiday Farm Fire impacted a region of Lane County that has no cities. It is entirely unincorporated communities, and for this reason, Lane County has been the point on a myriad of recovery efforts.

First I want to express my thanks to the Committee for quickly passing HB 2272 for Lane County during the long session. That measure did exactly what we hoped it would; bringing an Oregon property owner back to the table with FEMA to negotiate a temporary housing site which is now home to some 16 families who are back upriver. It was a wonderful display of local, state, and federal cooperation to finalize a public private partnership that truly helped people whose lives were disrupted by the fire.

Second, I want to recognize the Department of Land Conservation and Development for quickly standing up transitional housing rules that were instrumental in allowing Lane County to permit the FEMA site, as well as other temporary housing options for wildfire survivors. We continue to work with the Department to ensure that Blue River can become an unincorporated community. With that title, community wastewater, and more dense housing opportunities will be opened. It will be at that point that the resources for actual housing that the Department of Housing and Community Services has will be more applicable.

If there is one thing I can emphasize to the Committee, it is this: current land use laws in rural Oregon, typically where wildfires occur, make disaster and work force housing hard to site. Moreover, they make affordable housing almost impossible. And as long as that is true, rural schools cannot increase their student population nor grow their student population which can be a death knell for those schools. I'd urge the Committee to do a deeper dive into this issue. While I understand and honor the concept of preserving rural lands, what we saw in the Holiday Farm Fire region was a large amount of living situations that were technically illegal. These folks were families that were the workforce for the region and fed into the school district, and did contribute to the overall sense of the upriver community. To recreate that community, we must bring these people back in a way that does not result in illegal living situations.

SUBMITTED ELECTRONICALLY