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December 8, 2020

House Special Committee on Wildfire Committee
Hearing of December 9, 2022 – Reflections on 2020 Wildfire Recovery
Invited Written Testimony

Dear Chair Evans and Members of the Committee,

I remain grateful for your efforts during this interim period. Your leadership and oversight of the recovery process will result in better outcomes for the thousands of Oregonians impacted by the 2020 wildfires. The experience of the past two years has taught us much here in Lane County and clearly the same is true for Oregon as a whole. It's imperative that we act on all that we've learned to ensure that recoveries from future disasters happen rapidly and smoothly, and that we can effectively finalize the remaining work of 2020 wildfire recovery. We are committed locally to ensuring that this is the case.

As you prepare for the 2023 legislative session, we offer these thoughts based on all that we've learned thus far from the Holiday Farm Fire recovery process.

Legislative Oversight

The legislative oversight provided by this committee has been essential, and with years of recovery work ahead of us, we feel strongly that legislative oversight of response and recovery continue whether through this Special Committee or via the Committee on Veterans and Emergency Preparedness.

State Lead Agency

We now coordinate with more than ten state agencies supporting recovery and our experience is unique agency priorities and approaches to recovery exist from agency to agency. We would like to see one agency empowered to lead the recovery effort, providing clear priorities and clear lines of authority. Absent this leadership, we have observed frequent misalignments between local recovery efforts and many state agencies involved in recovery, resulting in inefficiencies and suboptimal implementation of recovery efforts. We ask the legislature to remain involved, providing guidance as state agencies grow and response and recovery efforts are evolving within ODF, OSFM, ODHS, OHA, OHCS, and ODEM. This alphabet soup is in-efficient, and confusing to the public.

Recovery Review

We are happy to see the Oregon Department of Emergency Management conducting an assessment of recovery lessons learned to date, and we agree it's

important that these assessments involve the full spectrum of recovery partners. Given the complexity of recovery, we need the experience and insight from multiple perspectives if we are to understand and learn from the current state of recovery. This can be achieved by involving representatives from fire-impacted counties and cities. It's also essential that the lessons are applied swiftly, to directly inform course corrections to the current recovery efforts.

CDBG Action Plan

As we look to the year ahead, we anticipate the arrival of Community Development Block Grant – Disaster Recovery (CDBG-DR) funds. As you know, each fire-affected community has a unique set of recovery needs and while we made every effort to provide feedback to OHCS, the CDBG-DR Action Plan, as adopted, is ill designed to meet the type and scale of needs in the McKenzie River Valley. It is our hope that the CDBG-DR Action Plan is amended as soon as possible so it better aligns with the unique recovery needs of each fire-affected community, including Lane County. That amendment should be initiated by OHCS for US HUD review soon and needs to better apportion the revenue earmarked for infrastructure and economic revitalization needs.

Dedicated Funding for Emergency Management

The Labor Day 2020 wildfires underscored the need for world class emergency management capacity in Oregon. The two summers since have served to underscore that urgency as “heat domes” and widespread smoke made breathing a hazardous activity across wide swathes of Oregon, while other historically large wildfires felt like “close calls” in the wake of the Labor Day fires. Preparing for, responding to, and recovering from disasters must be a core competency that we master at both the state and county levels. In 2021, the Legislature elevated the Office of Emergency Management to department status and doubled its staffing to 93 FTE. These were good first steps, but the job remains unfinished.

Currently, at both state and local levels, Oregon's Emergency Management is largely funded with FEMA pass-through funds. Base funding is just \$6.1M in Emergency Management Performance Grant funds in FY 22, split among a growing number of cities and counties. The addition of new jurisdictions to the program means that every jurisdiction takes a cut. For example, Lane County will see an 11% reduction in EMPG funding in FY 23. Given the growing frequency of natural disasters driven by warming temperatures, Oregon needs a dedicated funding source that can build and stabilize County emergency management capacity, including those entities that are required to be in place under ORS 401.

Other states have been hard hit repeatedly by natural disasters and have built high quality emergency management response and recovery capacities that we in Oregon now need to replicate. We encourage the legislature to consider the successful model employed in Florida through passage of [93-128, Laws of Florida](#), shortly after the impact of Hurricane Andrew. This bill clarified emergency management at the local level, established a surcharge on insurance

products sold in the state, and dedicated the proceeds to the newly created Emergency Management, Preparedness, and Assistance Trust Fund. The trust fund allocations provided for integrated state and county emergency management operations, funding for state and county staff, the purchase essential equipment, costs of integrated training, and a source for cost recovery associated with events that don't trigger federal declarations such as the Cedar Creek Fire here in Lane County that triggered an evacuation of the Highway 58 corridor east of the Eugene-Springfield metro. Other states obviously hold more learnings for us here in Oregon, but the key lesson from Florida is the creation of a new revenue source and the clarity provided for the state-to-local emergency management interface and resourcing.

Disaster Recovery Authority Work Group

Finally, we offer our reflections on the legislative concept released by the Disaster Recovery Authority Work Group in November:

1. We strongly support the recommendation to fund local Mitigation and Recovery Managers. These positions are fundamental to a coordinated recovery effort, and they need to have a dedicated source of funding, including a reserve to support recovery from incidents that don't trigger a federal emergency declaration.
2. We strongly support a reserve to fund the 25% non-federal match required for federal Hazard Mitigation projects. Given the increasing risks posed by natural hazards, it's essential that Oregon continue to secure federal mitigation grants and many crucial local projects are simply not feasible without this kind of state investment.
3. We strongly support the establishment of a centralized recovery function that is accountable to the Governor.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide written testimony, and thank you for your continued support of effective, locally-driven disaster recovery in Oregon.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Heather Buch". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "H" and "B".

Heather Buch, Commissioner
East Lane District
Lane County Board of County Commissioners