

Oregon House and Senate Special Committee on Wildfire Recovery

Thank you for reaching out to those affected by wildfires last year. I evacuated my home in Blue River on September 7, 2021 from the Holiday Farm Fire. My house survived with smoke damage and spoiled food in the refrigerator and freezer. Three outbuildings were destroyed and firewood fences and landscaping burned. I was very lucky compared to many of my neighbors.

I was able to return, on 9/11, within the level 3 evacuation area to assist in preparations to restore water to the Blue River Water District. I was able to stay east of the fire area and met with other local people helping provide relief support.

In coordination with the Oregon Department of Forestry Incident Management Team managing the fire, I worked with another local resident, serving as a Liaison Officer, to form and facilitate the various relief groups and organizations in to a group we called the Upper McKenzie River Cooperators (UMRC). Our goal was to share information regarding needs and activities in order to increase efficiency and effectiveness of all our efforts. The small group soon grew to include up to 40 people at our daily meetings representing agencies, businesses and community members. As emergency operations shifted to more official groups, meetings became less frequent until ceasing in December. The UMRC met as a small group 2/9/2021 to do an After Action Review and discuss needs for future meetings and how we could share our successes and lessons learned.

A number of topics pertinent to this hearing were discussed.

Evacuation notice was last minute or non-existent for many people. It was an unprecedented fire event, still the subject of evacuation notification is critical and needs to be addressed before the next disaster. Also noted was that disaster preparedness is discussed and emphasized to public and agencies but organizations to implement and support with personnel and equipment are woefully underfunded. Of greatest concern was not having backup emergency radio communication. Fire and Law Enforcement personnel did have communication but that system was not available to volunteers who were doing important work in the area. The same was the case with fuel. The only public source of fuel had no power and their pump system required internet to operate. Volunteers drove 55 miles to the nearest gas and many people collected and shared cans of gas every trip. Donations of food, water and clothing came by the truck and container load, without a place for them to go or people to unload and distribute them. That was one of the first successes of the UMRC to share that need and all hands went to accomplish setting up a Relief Center that is still in operation.

In the extended response period, after access up Highway 126 was restored, communication remained an issue. A volunteer group brought wireless hot spot internet service from Bend over several mountain tops to locations in McKenzie Bridge and Blue River. That is no longer available in Blue River with winter conditions. I finally got CenturyLink land line service on Feb. 12 but still have no internet service. Of concern since the fire and continuing today is the lack of housing for employees of businesses in the area. The demand for use of the rivers, trails and other visitor opportunities continues but without housing, businesses can't support it without employees. On the rebuilding side, people are frustrated with slow and cumbersome county permit processes to rebuild their homes.

I do hope there are more meetings gathering input from impacted communities. There are so many more concerns to address. As a facilitator for the Upper McKenzie River Cooperators, I am impressed by the caring and concern that shows this community can and will take care of each other. We expect more communication will result in development of infrastructure that fits this communities needs and desires. This fire has caused great destruction. One thing it cannot destroy is this communities spirit.

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