

Testimony for House Special Committee on Wildfire Recovery. 2/15/2021.

My name is Margaret Beilharz. The Upper McKenzie River Valley has been my home for 60 years. When the Holiday Farm Wildfire started, I immediately evacuated for the required 2 weeks. My home was not damaged by the wildfire because it is ¼ mile east of the fire's edge. There are about 100 other unburned homes in the upper McKenzie valley between the east edge of the fire and the Willamette National Forest. Thirty miles west of my house almost everything was burned. We were all thankful to have houses to return to, but our lives have been changed forever because the fire burned the homes of our friends, the scenic highway, and the infrastructure which brings us electricity, phone, and internet.

- 1) Highway Infrastructure: The McKenzie Highway parallels the river within a mile, for over 80 miles. For resident of the upper valley, the 50 mile drive to the Springfield/Eugene "full service" area is an essential part of life and safety. Knowing that the future holds more fires, landslides and earthquakes, the condition and routing of the highways and bridges needs to be considered.
 - a. Immediately after the fire ODOT undertook significant amounts of tree clean-up. There was a lot of confusion on how residents could get to town. At first the highway was entirely closed; then it was open twice a day with escorts, and for the last 4 months, it is open with delays. It is a narrow corridor, full of burned houses, vehicles, poles, trees etc, which has made cleanup challenging to say the least. Hopefully ODOT will conduct a review of what worked well, and what can be improved in this phase to improve future disaster response.
 - b. Hazard Tree Removal – this is an ongoing issue, with a lot of confusion. The "hazard" trees within some distance of the highway are being cut and removed to keep the highway safe, however it seems excessive. The policy of cutting any tree within 150% - or even 200% of the tree height – (meaning that any 100' tall tree within 150' of the highway will be removed; and any 200 foot tall tree within 300' will be removed) is excessive. Review of the Hazard Tree Removal process is needed for Scenic Highways.
 - c. Emergency Route Planning – The McKenzie highway is on the north side of the river for the 40 miles between McKenzie Bridge and Walterville. For about 30 of these miles there is no alternate route to use should the north-side highway be closed by landslide or earthquake. Although there are many private roads on the south side of the river, they do not tie-together to provide an alternate route. Use of the McKenzie Highway is increasing rapidly as the populations of the Willamette Valley and Central Oregon grow. An alternate route should be developed on the south side of the river for emergency use.

- 2) Emergency Safe-Zones - When the fire closed the highway, the people who could not leave went to the Community Track as the most “fire-safe zone” where a helicopter could reach them the next day. Disaster response planning should include identification of known safe-zones where emergency responders will be directed to in rural areas.
- 3) Electricity infrastructure Planning: Lane County and Lane Electric Coop did an excellent job in restoring electricity to the upper McKenzie valley, in spite of the main BPA transmission lines being burned up. By adding a large generator, and tying into local hydropower dams, they were able to restore electricity to many residents within a week of evacuation ending. The ability to be locally energy independent was a major factor in restoring safety and the first step towards normality in the upper McKenzie valley. The Committee could spend some time looking at how to maintain and increase local autonomous electrical areas, so when one part of the system goes down, it does not affect everyone.
- 4) Communications infrastructure: Communications are vital to provide safety and recovery. Even with millions of dollars of federally funded Rural Broadband assistance, the phone and internet systems in the upper McKenzie valley were susceptible to failure. All of the cell and landline services were destroyed by the fire. Restoring telephone service rapidly is critical for the safety of the residents, and for rebuilding. Over 25% of the residents here are over 65 years old. Many only use phone rather than internet. Anybody here has the right to have a reliable 911 service. Landlines systems are more reliable when the electricity is out because a corded phone is plugged in. (Yes some of us still have them) but having both cell phone and line service is important.

Cell-phone service: Before the fire there was one Verizon cell tower on Mt. Hagen near Blue River, which served the 500 people who live in the 10 miles to the east. (However, due to the distance and ridgeline geography, another 150 people in the upper valley could not receive that signal.) The one cell tower has always been relatively “fragile” and quits working several times a year under normal conditions. The fire burned the tower, and the surrounding forest. This critical piece of communications infrastructure was not rebuilt for about 6 weeks after the fire.

Landline phone service: -Centurylink provided most of the landline phone and internet services to the 150 people on the “fringe” of the valley. Spectrum provided these services to properties along the highway. These two providers took over five months to restore landline service. Why is restoration taking so long? Why weren’t they required to have more crews on the ground to get service restored? The PUC has received many complaints about the length of time that Spectrum and Century link have taken to restore basic landline telephone service. PUC could help by being more transparent and apply more pressure. Many residents cannot or choose not to use cell phones. Landlines are needed.

Internet - The State of Oregon must take steps to bring in whatever resources necessary to restore reliable internet service after any disaster. Internet service is essential for children’s

education, processing transactions at the gas station and store, do banking, deal with insurance claims, and let family know their status over the internet. Work-at-home jobs are often dependent on reliable internet service. (We aren't even asking for "fast" service.) FEMA brought in a temporary internet tower for about 6 weeks. It transmitted to about 40 feet away. Verizon and other corporate carriers also brought in emergency local towers, but they took them away after about 3 months because Spectrum and Centurylink "promised" to get their systems restored.

Several non-profit and small local for-profit groups installed an Emergency Internet system based on ground-relayed wireless from Bend. They set up "Emergency Internet Boxes" at about 10 locations where the parking lots are large enough for the public to use the connection while in their car. This was not intended to be in place for 5 months or to operate when snow fell on the receiving dishes in the Cascade mountains between here and Bend. This service was invaluable and life-saving. The fact that PUC does not have regulatory control of internet providers is causing financial and personal hardship and must be addressed. OEM needs to improve its ability to restore communications systems under many scenarios.

- 5) Disaster Relief Centers: Donations of food and clothing began arriving from the general public within a week of the fire, even before the Evacuation orders were lifted. The only quasi-public building large enough for these donations was Upper McKenzie Community Center (UMCC) which is owned by a private non-profit organization. So the UMCC building has served as a Relief Center (or Respite Center) for the last five months. As such it provided emergency food, clothing, tents, batteries, pet food etc. The public bulletin board there became the way to look for help, leave notes for friends, and get fire reports, since there was no phone or internet. The parking lot became the place for morning meetings of local residents. The community was fortunate that residents 60 years ago built the Community Center with donated materials and volunteer labor. The State should support the Counties in identifying what buildings will be used in times of emergencies; and direct financial aid to upgrade these buildings to be fully qualified Red-Cross Shelters. This is especially true in unincorporated areas, where large buildings are fewer, and difficult to sustain financially.