



## Eugene Water & Electric Board

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February 26, 2021

### **Joint Special Committee on Wildfire Recovery Public Hearing**

#### **Comments on behalf of Eugene Water & Electric Board and Pure Water Partners**

Comments by: Karl Morgenstern, Watershed Restoration Program Manager, Eugene Water & Electric Board (EWEB). Currently leading the Watershed Recovery Task Force/Lane County Emergency Operations.

In the past 20 years we've been working to elevate protection of the McKenzie Watershed as development pressure, climate change, cyanotoxins and other threats pose risk to drinking water quality. Our investments are based on the idea that source water protection is more impactful and less expensive than treatment and restoration of a degraded watershed. As most of the McKenzie watershed is in private ownership, we have relied on a collaborative partnership model that emphasizes voluntary participation in programs that protect drinking water quality. In the face of devastation witnessed last fall, and knowing the long road to recovery ahead of us, we can see the value of relationship building and multi-agency partnerships all the more clearly.

Prior to the fire, EWEB and its partners built the Pure Water Partners or PWP to incentivize private landowners to protect healthy riparian forests while restoring degraded areas. We were able to quickly pivot the PWP model to support our 90 or so PWP landowners and others impacted by the fire with burn assessments and erosion control work to stabilize their properties through the winter. Because the programs infrastructure was already in place, we could get boots on the ground quickly until more State and Federal resources were available to help. Our emergency response efforts have tapered off and we now focusing on revegetation efforts of severely burned riparian and floodplain areas this winter/spring while seeking funding for longer term watershed restoration.

There were many lessons from this disaster, but I will share three areas EWEB feels may be of particular interest to this Committee from a policy or program perspective. These involve support for watershed coalitions, need for alert systems to reduce future risk to lives and property, and financial incentives to rebuild for resiliency and riparian health.

First, we know that the health of the watershed is innately tied to the health and recovery of our upriver communities. We have an opportunity to leverage collaboratives like the PWP to increase resiliency of these communities to future disasters by investing in long-term watershed stewardship, while supporting local jobs and self-sufficiency. Support for these innovative partnerships builds relationships and local capacity among those that are first to respond when disaster strikes and are in it for the long haul. We appreciate the most recent OWEB and ODF grants that we will apply and leverage against other dollars to support fuels treatment and revegetation of severely burned riparian areas. Larger and more flexible funding streams would allow us to spend more time doing the necessary work on the ground with less

administrative overhead and target those dollars to risk-based priorities without the restrictions often associated with federal grants.

Second, we are grateful that our elected officials see the value for retaining DOGAMI as they play a key role in understanding debris flow risks and assisting with LiDAR analysis. We see a new opportunity to build off DOGAMI's expertise and Oregon's Shake Alert system for an expanded multi-hazard early warning system. This would be a first alert system for earthquake, wildfire, landslide and flood risk, backed by high speed fiber communications, that can save lives and property as well as determine where additional mitigation measures are needed to reduce post-fire public safety risks. There is currently a FEMA funding proposal in the works but any opportunity to jumpstart this effort is appreciated.

Third, we have a once in a generation opportunity for people to rebuild stronger, smarter and with resiliency in mind. EWEB is looking to provide incentives and financial support to encourage landowners to move their homes back away from rivers and out of floodways – not just for riparian health but reduced flood risk. There is a need to upgrade septic systems that were built 40-50 years ago and we need funding approaches that facilitate better stewardship of riparian properties as people rebuild. Choices for where and how to rebuild will shape watershed health for the next 50-75 years. EWEB encourages legislators to review existing State and federally funded programs with an eye towards supporting smarter rebuilding that reduces homeowner risks to future disasters while benefiting watershed health.

We understand the breadth and scale of the different recovery needs and thank you for your consideration and support.