



H.Q.S. Wallington

46585 Goodpasture rd Vida OR 97488

House Special Committee on Wildfire Recovery

900 Court Street NE,
Room 453,
Salem OR 97301

Wednesday, February 24, 2021

Dear Special Committee,

My name is Captain Robert Weeks, and I live in Vida. The road I live on was hit very badly by the Holiday Farm fire, September 8th, 2020. We were fortunate in having our house survive the fire, although roughly 50% of the acreage and a barn, was burned.

We received no warning of any impending danger. The cell phone coverage at our property and others was of poor quality. Cell phones at that time with Verizon did not work within the home. Additionally we received no warning on the Century link land line. Had it not been for a sheriff's patrol car and a bull horn announcement at 2.15AM, it is highly likely we would not have been able to escape being trapped by the fire.

Comment 1 - investigate improvement of cell phone and alerting services throughout the McKenzie valley area.

During the hours that followed our evacuation we met with neighbors from Blue River who told us of their sighting of a tree falling on power lines at Blue River. We were horrified to learn that a fire in Blue river around 9PM the previous evening should be so intense and uncontrolled that within 6 hours we were having to evacuate. Blue River is approximately 22 miles to the east of Vida. The area is a combination of managed commercial timberland and national forest. There would appear to have been less than adequate preventive fire blocks in 22 miles of mixed homes and woodland. For some time, environmental concerns and goal 5 for the state have impacted logging activities and forest management. For the wildlife this may have been good news, but people died in this fire, which is unacceptable to any of us.

Comment 2 - review if the regulatory process played a role in creating conditions likely to further the rapid spread of fire. Could fire breaks have averted the extent of spread?

Following the evacuation, information was at first not easy to obtain. In calling the operations center, it was established that within the first critical hours, no incident command was set up. There was a loosely organized control center, but not an incident command. Further questioning revealed that staffing levels were far too low to meet the needs of fighting such a significant fire. Initial levels seemed to be less than 100 staff to fight a fire spread over more than 20 miles. There had been numerous non specific weather reports showing that the

conditions were ripe for the spread of fire coming up in the area. Firefighters did sterling work in combatting an immense fire, but the manpower was too little initially. There were reports that mutual aid with other States had depleted the pool of firefighters locally.

Comment 3 - investigate the role played by emergency services mutual aid agreements in restricting initial response.

The preliminary reports showed that the fire was triggered by a tree falling across a power line. Although this may be the proximate cause, it is not the whole story. Power is distributed throughout the McKenzie Valley by means of wires on poles. Those wires are largely uninsulated wires with the capacity to start fires. The utility companies spend a great deal of money each year tree trimming to avoid issues to the extent possible from falling trees and branches. The approach of power lines being placed underground has been dismissed as prohibitively expensive by at least one of the local utilities. In the post fire period many miles of power lines have been replaced by exactly the same system that has just caused such havoc. Lane Electric has replaced its part of the service system on Goodpasture road with underground service. The cost of the fires has been borne by homeowners and insurers, there have also been costs for counties, the utilities and others. Bare wire transmission systems and trees are not a good mix. In an event such as an oil spill, or other pollution, even if accidental, there is the principal that the originator is responsible. Many homeowners have lost valued items which can never be replaced, Retirees, in some cases, are too old to rebuild and have had their lives shattered. A risk assessment appears to have been made by utilities erecting the same system of poles and wires that the risks are acceptable. Conditions are potentially primed for a repeat of the fires that have just occurred, some years down the road, when the trees have again grown up sufficiently.

Comment 4 - Conduct an independent risk assessment to review the feasibility of underground wires in lieu of live wires on poles, and risks to the community from pole borne systems.

Utility companies, after the fire, have been cutting down trees both burned and unburned which are within approximately 100 feet of the power lines. The cutting has compounded with trees burned, to completely alter the landscape around the McKenzie Valley. In many cases, felled trees have been left lying on the ground in a haphazard way. The visual impact of this adds to the apparent devastation that meets the eye in the valley. The costs to homeowners of removing the felled trees, or parts of them, can be very significant. The trees and limbs strewn on the ground will be there for many years as potential fuel in the understory. There is no direct independent oversight of the work being done, and no impact assessment. The counties resources are strained, it is far from clear that they would have any say over this work. There appears to be little restriction on the manner of cutting and the acceptability of practices. The McKenzie is not an industrial zone for utilities, but depends on utilities crucially.

Comment 5 - conduct a review of the manner in which extensive cutting of trees has been performed and the costs which homeowners have in some cases been subjected to as an outfall of utility operations.

During the initial stages of the Holiday Farm fire some homeowners elected to stay behind against the advice of Police and firefighters. The reasons for that are diverse, but lack of insurance may have been one of the drivers. In one case, a homeowner died, trapped by a fire on a dead end road. There was no apparent escape route as the road became blocked by burning trees, this reportedly impeded the ability of firefighters to reach the victim.

Comment 6 - review dead end roads in the fire zones for emergency escape routes which may exist but are not readily available or possibly routes where an escape route may be possible in the aftermath of the fire (vacant lots making a bridge possible).

The population of the McKenzie Valley is spread over a long distance, there are many homes hidden among the hills and trees. There is also a bigger population than may be suspected, but there are few platforms for representing the interests of the valley and supporting the ability of the county mechanisms to function.

Comment 7 - investigate improving engagement with valley residents to obtain their views and opinions in rebuilding the valley.

It would be remiss not to mention some of the things that went right as a more balanced view. Our local fire department in Leaburg acted with great courage and sensitivity towards peoples fears and anger. The Lane County Sheriffs department worked really well managing many many people at Walterville. They passed on the information they had, and they acted with diplomacy under great pressure. The loggers, many of them local men, worked hard to help clear roads. EWEB restored miles of lines to thousands of people, their crews working long hours in adverse conditions. County crews worked tirelessly - and continue to do so as the fire aftermath will remain for some time. Lane County planning department has shown above average devotion to duty helping many home owners begin to rebuild their homes. There is one individual who has facilitated much, our County Commissioner Heather Buch. Her help and guidance at a time of immense pressure, will be remembered for years to come. She proved to be the right person at the right time, and rose to the difficult challenge when called upon.

Sincerely

Captain Robert F. Weeks