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To: [HWREC Exhibits](#)
Subject: Wildfire Committee Testimony
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Chair Clem, Chair Golden, and Members of the Committees,

First, let me say thank you for the chance to provide this written testimony, to this committee, on behalf of my community and the McKenzie Valley in the aftermath of the devastating Holiday Farm Fire that took place Sept. 7th and Sept. 8th, 2020. I know you have all heard and read many stories regarding the fires over the Labor Day holiday, and our devastation is neither unique nor the most widespread. I will share just a brief piece of my story from that night to give some insight. The night of the fire I helped manage evacuees at the first evacuation site, the McKenzie River Community School, when the original orders came out for people to move down river from the origin point of the fire. My niece is a volunteer firefighter and when she left from the Blue River Fire Station at just before 8pm the night of Sept. 7th, it was supposed to be “just another brush fire” and I told her I loved her and to be safe, like I always did, and that was the last time I saw my niece for almost 3 days. We lost stable communication with her for almost 36 hours and had to depend on a scanner radio app to hear the progress of the fire once radio communications had been somewhat reestablished. At 11:38pm Sept 7th, 2020 I received a call that would set in motion the events that changed mine and others lives forever.....On the other end of my phone I was being told we were about to be level 3 and that we needed to get ready to move and move quick, the fire had spotted in front of itself and there was now a fire right on top of us and moving in quick. I looked across from my store and saw an orange glow that was as surreal as it was ominous and knew we had extraordinarily little time. There were approximately 50-100 people gathered in Blue River proper, because when things go sideways, and the lights go out we gather so we can help each other get through it and be close when we are needed. I am thankful so many people had gathered that night in front of my store and in the middle of town, cause when I received that call, I started yelling and telling everyone get out and go now. We are Level 3, and as I started sounding the alarm every responder, within I’m not sure how many miles, came blazing into the middle of Blue River and started the ALL-CALL LEVEL 3 AND GET OUT NOW YOU NEED LEAVE NOW BEKONS ON LOUD SPEAKERS, and going door to door for the places they couldn’t get anyone to respond from the sirens and bullhorns. At this point communications had started to go down in the upper river area, and no one was aware that landline notifications, cell notifications, and other emergency alerts were not reaching everyone that they should have been reaching. As Chief Bucich, McKenzie Fire and Rescue, stated the hardest part is even in the best case scenario there would be people missed in the alerts because they turned off phones or didn’t have a regular phone connected to a landline etc.

I come to you today as both a survivor of the Holiday Farm Fire, the unofficial mayor of Blue River, and as an advocate for the communities along the McKenzie River Corridor. We consider ourselves a 60-mile main street and this fire touched approximately 23 miles, 176,000 acres of that 60-mile main street and devastated many lives along the way. One of the most concentrated areas of damage was the community my family’s business was in and where the home I had resided in for the last 29 years was also located. The community of Blue River Proper, was leveled in a matter of a few minutes during the first few hours of what would become the worst disaster our area has ever endured. Blue River has barely been a spot on a map for the better part of the last 50 years, and this

fire all but wiped us completely from that map. I, along with other dedicated community members, have fought hard over the years to keep Blue River barely viable and now we will have to fight insurmountable odds to regain any footing and try to bring it back better and stronger than it was.

Lane County has historically been difficult to engage in the building process pre-fire, and they gave us many assurances that post fire we would be taken care of and not face hurdle after hurdle in the rebuilding process. Those reassurances become less and less daily. Every day we are told there is a new report we must get, a new survey that is required, floodplain/floodway regulation changes that were enacted that may make it impossible for some people to even rebuild, riparian requirements that will also make some people's properties deemed not buildable, people being held up in the permit process to the point they are having to store their already purchased homes until they can weed through the mountain of extra paperwork, ODOT clean up that keeps telling people it's coming or in some cases that it's started on their properties and people have seen no one, and the list goes on.

I have community members being told the need to prove their 3500 sq ft., built in 2012 home was a live-able dwelling before they can have a permit issued, people being required to have floodplain surveys in areas that 25 years ago were removed from the floodplain cause 50 years ago the dams were put in mitigating the flood hazards at all in the area, people having to have geotechnical reports on properties that even the Geotech surveyor says he knows it's a requirement but it shouldn't be required in some areas based on land survey data etc., and the list goes on for these types of things too.

The McKenzie has no incorporated cities, no municipal governments, and no representation at the table in Lane County Government that is working solely to ensure our survival as communities. This fire has suddenly provided us with resources that our county tax dollars have supported within the urban growth boundary and city limits for years, but were never offered to us because it was too far for the resources to travel etc. Our County Commissioner, Heather Buch, is doing what she can, but she serves all of eastern Lane County and the majority of her district includes areas that need far less county support, are not as far from the city centers and services as most of the McKenzie, and a predominant number of them have services that are funded through their own city municipalities and just shouldn't require as much from the county coffers. We are the main area in Lane County that was affected by the Holiday Farm Fire and yet this tragedy is being used to shore up programs and resources that will be used in the greater Lane County area for years to come and not fully concentrating on just getting the McKenzie back to its pre-fire brilliance and helping it rebuild so it can sustain into the future.

The entire corridor is facing challenges that will be far reaching and lingering for many years, and without help from people bigger than ourselves we will not recover from this fire. We know we chose to live in the forest, we know we chose to live in a rural area, and we are aware that along with that choice there will always be some challenges. We however pay the same county taxes as our urban counterparts and tend to receive extremely limited services for those dollars. The County has promised to hire extra help to get us through the permit process, yet we have residents still waiting extended periods of time to complete processes to start rebuilds. I have one property owner who was told to come get his packet of paperwork because it was going to be at least 4 more weeks before they could even look at it and they did not want to lose it, so he would need to resubmit it. So now he will end up at the back of the already long line when he was probably closer to front of it.

I am also a Director of the Blue River Water District, that was severely damaged in the fires.

We lost parts of our main well, our pump house, all our historical records, and most of the redundant information regarding our water system because we never planned for EVERY structure to be lost in the community. The Blue River Water System is going to need help getting back to full workable order, Blue River Proper is in need of help gaining exceptions through legislation to gain the ability to form a sanitary district to make our lots more buildable due to size requirements for septic/drain-field placements.

Our entire area needs a stable communications infrastructure restored so people can telecommute for work and school, we need to be able to accommodate travelers who need broadband internet access while they are in our area, cell phone communications that were at times abysmal pre-fire have been cut-off for days post fire simply because the systems aren't being monitored by the companies who own them, and when people living up here cannot manage to get a life saving call out to 911 we have a problem.

We are facing a corridor that will be clear cut in the effort to mitigate hazards for the next 50 years. The contract that has been made between the state and FEMA made no exceptions for the scenic byway designation we have and has not fully taken into consideration any of the old growth timbers that make the corridor the iconic McKenzie. We all understand the need to mitigate hazards for drivers and homeowners, but we've had long time arborist who have said point blank the tree cutting is being done as a quick fix not a mindful harvest of the dead/burned trees. We need the trees to maintain our valuable watershed, tourism, scenic highway to the extent it can be, and fish/wildlife habitats. Taking the time to mindfully cut would serve both the purpose of maintaining what residents want, as well as the hazard mitigation that FEMA/ODOT require and expect. The fire literally took everything from most of us and now the tree cutting is taking what little we had left.

Every area affected by fires this summer are facing so many challenges and we know you have so many things to consider and to recommend, please understand we are all facing these challenges with very little guidance and wading in uncharted territory so for many of us we're not sure what to ask or what to say. Most of us speak from the heart and just tell it like it is, and that's not always the best way to get things done when we're dealing with the folks in the capitols of our government, but when you and your neighbors have lost everything you've ever known sometimes you just have to say it like it is and hope it comes out right.

Thank you all for taking the time to listen, read, and hear the testimonies from all the communities around the state.

Sincerely,
Melanie Stanley
Unofficial Mayor Blue River, Oregon
29 year resident Blue River, Oregon

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