

Testimony of Timothy Ingalsbee, Ph.D.  
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Before a Hearing on "Forest Resilience and Management for Wildfire"  
Oregon Senate Committee on Natural Resources and Wildfire Recovery  
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Hello Chairman Golden, Vice-Chair Heard, and members of the committee, thank you for this opportunity to share our views on SB-248.

For the record: My name is Timothy Ingalsbee. I'm the executive director of Firefighters United for Safety, Ethics, and Ecology (FUSEE). We are a nonprofit organization of current, former, and retired wildland firefighters, fire scientists, managers, educators, and practitioners.

We believe that safety of firefighters and the public is the number one priority for fire policy, but professional and environmental ethics are the heart of our mission, and ecology is the bottom line.

The fact is that much of the land needs more fire. Fire maintains the ecological integrity of fire-adapted forests, shrublands, and grasslands, regenerates fire-dependent species, and rejuvenates habitats for a wide diversity of native species. But due to decades of overaggressive fire suppression and exclusion, many of these fire-adapted ecosystems and habitats have been degraded.

Research by Dr. Michael Medler of Western Washington University (and a graduate of the University of Oregon) has calculated that the annual fire deficit in Oregon averages nearly a quarter million acres. And that deficit accumulates each year so that over the last 40 years it has grown to approximately 10 million acres that have missed at least one regenerative fire event.

The annual and accumulated fire deficit cannot be fully compensated by "mechanical treatments." The scale of land that has missed one or more of its fire cycles is too vast--we simply do not have enough money for machines to do that work. Mechanical treatments are both expensive and impractical for use in many remote wildland areas where the terrain is too rugged or steep, and machines are not even technically feasible. And while mechanical treatments can modify some structural aspects of accumulated fuel loads, only fire produces the thermal effects that biological processes depend upon.

Fire is the least expensive, most efficient, and most practical tool for reducing the small-diameter surface fuels--the mats of dead needles and downed limbs, grasses, shrubs, and saplings--that are the primary fuel layer propelling today's fast-spreading wildfires. Fire treatments specifically target those hazardous fuels, work in places that machines cannot reach, cost a fraction of the price of mechanical treatments, and simultaneously reduce fuels and restore ecosystems.

As last year's Labor Day Firestorms revealed in incidents like the Holiday Farm Fire, much of the land that needs fuels reduction and restoration work has been degraded by the legacy of industrial forestry that has made clearcut timber plantations more flammable than native forests. Messed up forests are yielding messed up fires.

So, much of the land needs more fire, but the right kinds of fire in the right times, places, and conditions. We need to keep fire in the forest, but keep it out of our communities. That's why FUSEE supports adding the Wildfire Workforce Corps to SB-248.

Wildland firefighters know that we should be working with fire, not fighting against all fires, in order to restore and maintain fire-adapted forest ecosystems. But our options and opportunities to use prescribed fire and manage wildfire are limited while we have so many homes and communities that are susceptible to ignition during a wildfire. There is a lot of work needed to make homes and communities more ignition-resistant and prepared for fire, and that fire preparation work is located right next to homes within the Home Ignition Zone (HIZ), and along a quarter-mile buffer on the immediate outskirts of communities in the Wildland/Urban Interface (WUI).

The HIZ and WUI is a relatively small area with a fixed target compared to the larger landscape. As Dr. Medler testified before this committee, in Oregon we're talking about a little more than 100,000 acres in the WUI needs fuels treatments to reduce the risks of wildfire igniting homes, versus treatments across millions of acres in remote wildlands that will take billions of dollars and many years to complete, and will not improve safety or security for homes and communities.

It should be clear by now that we cannot prevent nor can firefighters put out all wildfires. But with the proper focus and funding and use of the best science, we can prevent homes from igniting during wildfires. We have the tools, technology, and knowledge to fireproof homes, but we cannot fireproof forests. The sooner we start reducing home ignitability working from the home outward rather than backcountry forests inward, the safer Oregonians will be. And the safer that Oregonians can be in their own homes and communities, the safer wildland firefighters will be by having the option to work with fire in the backcountry.

Again, the reality is that we just don't have enough money or machines to fix the forest landscape in any reasonable time scale soon when the climate-driven wildfire crisis demands urgent and effective action right now. Members of the committee, I know that the safety and security of your constituents is your highest concern and top priority. That view is also shared by wildland firefighters who need homeowners and rural residents to be partners in community fire preparation.

The good news is that community fire preparedness is absolutely achievable right away with programs like the Wildfire Workforce Corps helping elderly and disabled folks, poor people, communities of color--people in rural communities who are most at risk and most vulnerable to wildfires, but may lack the capacity to do this critical work of reducing home ignitability by themselves.

The sooner we prepare communities for fire, the sooner we can restore forests with fire. It's not a matter of doing one or the other--both must happen--but wildfire safety necessarily begins at home. The Wildfire Workforce Corps would be a huge asset in community fire preparation, and FUSEE urges you to make sure it is a part of SB-248.

Thank you for your time.

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