



April 9, 2021

Senate Committee on Natural Resources and Wildfire Response
RE: Testimony in support of SB 762

Chair Golden and Members of the Committee:

Sustainable Northwest offers our strong support for SB 762, which offers a comprehensive approach to improved wildfire preparedness, mitigation, and resiliency that will enhance Oregon's community, economic, and environmental well-being in the face of increasing wildfire trends.

Wildfires are getting worse in the West because of climate change and a legacy of fire suppression and inadequate forest management. Every year since 2000, an average of 71,300 wildfires burned an average of 6.9 million acres. This figure is more than double the average annual acreage burned in the 1990s. Consequently, suppression costs have tripled in the last 30 years, costing taxpayers billions of dollars each year to simply maintain the status quo. The uncharacteristic wildfires we see today are burning more severely and longer than in historical conditions. As a result, they are changing forest conditions, limiting recovery, impacting wildlife habitat, harming drinking watersheds, and posing threats to communities and assets that are increasingly more difficult to manage and protect.

These trends are consistent in Oregon. From 1992 to 2001 Oregon wildfires burned an average of 200,000 acres per year. From 2012 to 2020, the average skyrocketed to 650,000 acres burned per year. Beyond the impacts to public health and safety, infrastructure, and natural resources, worsening wildfire trends have profound ramifications for suppression costs and exposure to Oregon's limited general fund. Since 2015, the Oregon Department of Forestry has spent \$438 million on large fire costs alone, and \$1.73 billion have been spent fighting fire across all ownerships in Oregon.

We cannot stop wildfire from happening; however, we can make more effective decisions to reduce risk to life, property, and our natural resources. Tribes in the Pacific Northwest have led the way in strategic fuel treatments that incorporate ecological and cultural outcomes, and scientific research has taught us much about the behavior of wildfire. Given the scale of need, we should be selective about forest management and prioritize treatments based on greatest public value. Ecologically sound thinning and prescribed fire can help firefighters safely respond to wildfire events, protect drinking watersheds, maintain wildlife habitat, enhance climate resilience, and ensure continued public recreation access.

While forest restoration provides diverse benefits and is an important part of wildfire management, comprehensive wildfire preparedness and protection also requires significant investments in and adjacent to communities and critical infrastructure. Lives and property will be saved by creating defensible space around homes, hardening buildings with non-flammable materials, and establishing fire breaks and evacuation routes. We should also plan for future fires through building code and land use updates. Investments in community wildfire preparedness also produce significant savings in the long run by preventing property damages and assisting fire response. Fires in the wildland urban interface cost twice as much to suppress as in the forest, and homes in compliance with fire-smart building codes are significantly more likely to survive a wildfire event than those that have not.

SB 762 is informed by scientific consensus, expert fire manager opinions, and best practices. We are particularly supportive of the following provisions of the legislation:

Mapping and Planning

The bill will develop a comprehensive statewide map of wildfire risk, including layers identifying the wildland urban interface, risk classifications, and vulnerable populations. Furthermore, the bill will update Oregon's outdated, inefficient, and unfunded process to determine wildfire risk classifications to inform state and local policy-making on land use planning, community protection, and building.

Forest Restoration and Resiliency

The bill establishes forest restoration selection and prioritization criteria to inform investment of state and federal funds in increased cross-boundary wildfire and forest management. It details performance measures for increased investment in wildfire mitigation to protect public values, and removes barriers to use of prescribed fire on public and private lands. Developing a transparent and prioritized strategy to selectively manage forests is essential to reduce wildfire risk in high hazard areas, preserve public safety, protect drinking watersheds, and support forest resiliency and wildlife habitat.

Fire Adapted Communities

Oregon is the only western state that has not yet adopted the International Wildland Urban Interface Code for defensible space recommendations. The bill would finally adopt these best practices in Oregon, while customizing standards and enforcement for defensible space to complement existing county and community wildfire and land use plans. It would also require that existing state building code options to use ignition resistant materials are mandatory in high wildfire risk areas for new construction.

Public Engagement and Collaboration

The bill includes multiple levels of review and public input to ensure that counties and local municipalities are closely consulted with in the adoption of new planning processes, codes, and rules. In addition to these public processes, the bill establishes a Wildfire Programs Advisory Council to monitor implementation of wildfire programs and provide recommendations for future policy-making.

Wildfire affects us all and we have waited far too long change our approach to better prepare for its inevitable return. Comprehensive state policy reform founded on scientific consensus, best practices, public engagement, and commensurate investments are essential to respond to the trends and threats affecting our way of life. Doing so can allow us to move from a large-scale problem to a solution that creates jobs, protects homes and lives, and keeps our forests healthy and functioning.

For these reasons, we thank the legislature for its leadership and extensive work on this pressing matter, and urge you to support and pass SB 762.

Sincerely,

Greg Block
President
Sustainable Northwest