



Testimony of Joseph Vaile, Klamath-Siskiyou Wildlands Center

Senate Committee on Natural Resources and Wildfire Recovery Legislative Hearing on SB 762-1 April 9, 2021

Chair Golden, Vice-Chair Heard, and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of SB 762-1, relating to wildfire risk reduction and mitigation. My name is Joseph Vaile and I am the Climate Director for the Klamath-Siskiyou Wildlands Center (KS Wild) in Ashland Oregon. Other obligations prevented us from testifying in person, but we submit this written testimony for your consideration.

KS Wild is a nonprofit conservation advocacy organization with over 10,000 members and supporters, many of which live in the fire-prone Siskiyou and South Cascade Mountain Ranges. Our organization has expertise in forest conservation, fire ecology, climate adaptation, and community fire preparation. We are deeply engaged in community and collaborative efforts to advance climate smart forest conservation and community fire protection efforts throughout southern Oregon and northern California.

Smoke impacts, fire evacuations, and, tragically, loss of life and property have become annual threats in the communities throughout our region. To respond, our communities are coming together to prepare for this new reality brought on, in part, by climate change. We are writing to support Senate Bill 762-1 which will advance several policy changes to address wildfire mitigation and adaptation strategies. In general, we support the comprehensive approach of this bill to the root causes of community wildfire risk. We are also suggesting some changes and improvement to final bill language:

ELECTRIC SYSTEM PLANS. We support the provisions that require the Public Utility Commission to carry out risk-based wildfire protection and mitigation procedures and standards. Several recent fires were started by power lines. The methods and timing of safety shutoffs that are required should be integrated into these plans, and should be informed by weather events such as the predicted windstorm on Labor Day 2020. The committee should also recognize that decentralizing the electrical grid and supporting renewable energy systems will also mitigate the problem of fire risk resulting from power line in fire prone landscapes. The law must ensure that a public utility develops and operates in compliance with any and all risk-based wildfire protection plan that are filed with the PUC.

DEFENSIBLE SPACE AND SMALL WOODLANDS. One of the most important aspects of community fire safety is working from the home out, and ensuring that defensible space around homes must be a top priority in our state. We support the provisions of the bill for creation of the statewide map of wildfire risk in the areas closest to homes at risk, such as the qualitative risk assessment mapping effort. However, some of the QRA mapping efforts fail to pick up on relatively small fires that start in urban areas such as the Almeda fire, as they look at the potential for large fires moving from undeveloped

landscapes. Yet, one of the most destructive fire in Oregon history – the Almeda fire - had a relatively small footprint and started in a dog park and moved along a Greenway to ultimately destroy nearly 3,000 homes and businesses. The QRA mapping needs to address these urban fires as well. We also support the need for the State Fire Marshal to establish defensible space requirements for risk reduction on lands identified as the wildland-urban interface, but the mapping of the WUI should be focused within a narrow band centered around communities at risk. If the WUI is too large it will create prevent the necessary prioritization of treatments adjacent to the areas of greatest need. Additionally, we support a risk reduction program that emphasizes education and prevention. Many rural residents own small tracks of land that are at risk of fire. To address areas outside of the WUI, we support ODF in establishing a grant program to support small woodland owners in reducing wildfire risk, restoration of landscape resiliency and the reduction of hazardous fuels.

LAND USE AND BUILDING CODES. We need to stop building communities further out into fire country. The Department of Land Conservation and Development needs to identify updates to the statewide land use planning program, local comprehensive plans and zoning codes needed to incorporate risk maps and minimize risk, including the state/local resources necessary for implementation. These must be integrated into Oregon’s land use statues and associated rules. We also support the Department of Consumer and Business Services in adopting wildfire hazard mitigation building code standards for new construction.

HEALTH SYSTEMS FOR SMOKE. Smoke impacts to communities in southern Oregon have been severe in past years, and this is likely to continue in the era of climate change. What’s more, we need to use more prescribed fire for community wildfire protection as well as for ecosystem benefit. But our communities are not adapted to protect residents when such smoke events occur. Our schools don’t have needed filtration systems. House communities are especially vulnerable. We support the Environmental Quality Commission to implement a program to mitigate the environmental and public health impacts of wildfire smoke and the Oregon Health Authority in establishing and implementing a clean air shelter grant program with the Office of Emergency Management as lead. The funding required to ensure that low income communities have the needed home upgrades and air filtration systems must be an essential part of this program. While we support this effort, we remain concerned that this bill will not go far enough in terms of both policy and funding to ensure those most vulnerable to smoke, from both natural and prescribed fire events, are protected from the health impacts.

REDUCTION OF WILDFIRE RISK. While wildfire risk reduction is important, we support prioritizing work around homes and communities. We appreciate the sideboards that have been placed on these projects, but we want to make sure that the funding for these projects does not lead to the removal of mature or old growth trees (those that are most fire resistant) on federal land in the course of any of these projects. It is worth noting that there is ample peer reviewed literature that plantation style forestry increases the rate and spread of wildfire. (see for example Zald, H.J. and Dunn, C. *Severe fire weather and intensive forest management increase fire severity in a multi-ownership landscape*. August 2017, *Ecological Applications* 28(4)). Many of these plantation forests are primarily are densely packed tree farms that create one the most flammable forest types on the landscape.

OREGON WILDFIRE WORKFORCE CORPS. We strongly support the creation a Wildfire Workforce Corps to provide job training and help create fire-adapted communities. In addition to the provisions in this

bill, we want to make sure that there is an inclusive process to ensure equitable enrollment in this program.

CERTIFIED BURN MANAGER PROGRAM. We strongly support the creation of this program within the Department of Forestry will promote prescribed burning as a fuels management tool and community safety tool. While the bill states that Board of Forestry, State Forester and forest protective associations *may* assist in the burning of brush or other flammable material and shall establish by rule a Certified Burn Manager program, we are concerned that this language does not ensure that the state will actually assist in this program. Can this be made clearer to ensure adequate state support for this program? Additionally, the state should assume the liability risks so that local residents and landowners are not prevented from using prescribed fire due to liability concerns. Lastly, the state should consider close coordination and partnership with tribal leadership to integrate tribal knowledge and cultural fire use into burn programs.

WILDFIRE SUPPRESSION. The Oregon Department of Forestry needs to update its fire suppression response. Too often, ODF is far too aggressive with wildfire suppression, and misses opportunities to engage in wildland fire use that would reduce fuels and help restore natural processes. This is especially true on the BLM land where there are many opportunities for fire management. We support the State Forester in adopting rules establishing baseline levels of wildfire protection for lands that are outside of forest protection districts and susceptible to wildfire, but these must be consistent with the National Cohesive Strategy. ODF should better consult and coordinate with federal agencies, private stakeholders and other state agencies to ensure adequate wildfire response capacity, but also the appropriate response which can often be wildland fire use. Lastly, we support the Board of Forestry in establishing criteria for identifying and classifying the wildland-urban interface, however that should be a narrow band around communities at risk and not expansive WUI area that include millions of acres as has been proposed in the past.

Summary. Thank you for the opportunity to comment on this critically important effort to protect communities from fire and advance climate adaptation strategies. We want to emphasize the need to prioritize work around homes and communities and to quickly address the climate change impacts that we have been experiencing in rural parts of Oregon for over a decade. We also want to ask that you do this in a fair and equitable manner that addresses the needs of the most vulnerable populations first.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Joseph Vaile". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Joseph Vaile, Climate Director
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