

AFTER THE FIRE

RECOVER. REBUILD. REIMAGINE.™

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February 10, 2022

Representative Pam Marsh
900 Court St. NE, H-474
Salem, Oregon 97301

RE: Support of Retention and Permanence of Wildfire Recovery Ombudsman Position

Dear Representative Marsh:

On behalf of the board and staff of After the Fire USA, I am writing to implore the State of Oregon to retain the position of Wildfire Recovery Ombudsman (WRO) for a minimum of three (3) years post-disaster and consider a permanent FTE should Oregon experience another season of megafires. Having an experienced WRO helps current wildfire affected communities navigate the heavy lift post-disaster long-term. We have every reason to believe Oregon, like much of the American West, will experience several megafires over the next decade.

As a leading national voice in wildfire recovery, I can state with full confidence that Oregon is a model for other states.

Oregon has impressed us greatly with the cohesive response to the devastating megafires of 2020 and the long-term recovery process, which is only at the beginning 18 months on. As you are aware, recovery and rebuilding can take as little as five years and as many as 20 years – or never. Rural communities are particularly vulnerable to wildfires as well as gross inequities in recovery due to low capacity to access federal resources.

We regularly point to Oregon as a leader, innovator, and model for institutionalizing two (2) Best Practices for Wildfire Recovery and Resiliency: Regional Solutions (2014) and Wildfire Recovery Ombudsman (2020).

Regional Solutions was implemented in 2014, long before the 2020 megafires, but we have witnessed the incredible impact of flattening the barriers to access and information. The dedication and talent of the staff and leadership of those housed at Regional Solutions is commendable and what we view as a Best Practice.

The appointment of a Wildfire Recovery Ombudsman (WRO) position has facilitated more collaboration and de-siloing than in any other fire-affected area we've worked in over the past four years – 18 total wildfires across three states. The WRO has proven effective for the short-term recovery period, but only now (~18 months post-disaster) is Oregon entering into the mid and long-term recovery. Long-term post-disaster assistance is often absent in this field, leaving less well-resourced people and communities far behind more connected and wealthier areas. This inequity can be ameliorated via public sector support and innovation.

595 5th STREET WEST, SONOMA, CA 95476 707.938.7217

ATF3R is an initiative of Rebuild Northbay Foundation, a registered nonprofit (501c3 & 501c4). We help communities navigate wildfires across the American West. We collaborate with public officials (regional, state and federal), private sector, nonprofit community, and support community led and designed recovery. Visit our web site at www.afterthefireusa.org.

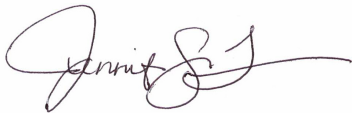
We applaud the leadership in Oregon for the appointment of Michael Morter as the Wildfire Recovery Ombudsman. Since the beginning, Michael has been an effective advocate and communicator for recovery and the traumatic first year post-disaster. He has been an excellent Oregonian and utilized our nonprofit's free services to communities while ensuring local leaders are central in the process. Michael Morter has repeatedly stood strong for Oregonians and has been a tremendous advocate in our determination of allocating national connections and resources to wildfire communities.

We are writing in hopes the State of Oregon will continue the WRO position and not dissolve it as planned in March of 2022 and retain Michael Morter in that position. Mr. Morter has been a critical ally, and more importantly, has had a significant impact on recovery after wildfire for communities in Oregon, such as the Santiam Fire, primarily affecting Marion County, and Jackson County's Alameda Fire -- two very different post-disaster communities, each with their own complexities, vulnerabilities, and tremendous local talent. Michael Morter has built trusted relationships, and the knowledge he has gained over the past 18 months render his role critical for long-term recovery and position Oregon as a national leader in how to respond in this Era of Megafires.

Please seriously consider keeping Michael Morter in his position as state Wildfire Recovery Ombudsman and fund this position for a minimum of three (3) years post-disaster.

Thank you for your time and attention. It is an honor to serve and work in Oregon.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "Jennifer Gray Thompson", with a stylized flourish extending to the right.

Jennifer Gray Thompson
CEO & Founder

CC:

Kate Brown, Governor of Oregon

Paul Evans, Representative, Chair of the House Special Committee on Wildfire Recovery

Rick Lewis, Representative, Vice-Chair of the House Special Committee on Wildfire Recovery

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