



February 8, 2022

Senate Committee on Natural Resources and Wildfire Recovery
Oregon State Capitol
900 Court Street NE
Salem, OR 97301

Re: Opposition to Senate Bill 1573 as written

To: Chair Golden, Vice-Chair Kennemer, and members of the committee,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on SB 1573. For 36 years, Central Oregon LandWatch (COLW) has been working to create well-planned cities and protect wild, open spaces across the region. Leveraging our legal expertise, policy analysis, and experience with Oregon's land-use planning system, we work to protect the land and water that sustains our communities and ecosystems, and to guide development where it makes the most sense. For COLW, that means closely monitoring initiatives that impact our response wildfire and the health of our forests.

Central Oregon LandWatch (COLW) supports the appropriation of \$50 million from the General Fund to the State Forestry Department—we want to see our communities protected from wildfire as climate change brings hotter, drier conditions that increase fire activity. **However, COLW cannot support SB 1573 as it's currently written.** A blanket statement for thinning on all public lands across ten counties is a wasteful use of resources that does not best allocate this funding to protect lives and homes. The language of SB 1573 should specifically direct thinning to small, dense tree stands within the established WUI, as this best protects Oregon communities.

COLW believes that if the goal is to protect our communities from large scale fire events, the State Forestry Department should use its funding to thin only in the WUI, and more specifically around developed structures and homes located in the WUI. Studies that address how communities are impacted during wildfire events point to funneling resources into “Community Protection Buffers,” which focus on home hardening and defensible space within a quarter-mile of valuable infrastructure—not in the backcountry far from communities.¹ COLW sees this as a better use of resources because home materials, design, and maintenance in relation to home surroundings are main factors in residential losses in studied fires; therefore, focusing on the home ignition zones and the immediate surrounding area would better protect Oregon lives and valuable infrastructure.² As such, COLW cannot support SB 1573 unless it makes the important distinctions of limiting thinning to small, dense trees in areas immediately adjacent to communities.

¹ Scott, JH, MP Thompson, JW Gilbertson-Day. 2016. Examining alternative fuel management; Syphard, AD, TJ Brennan, JE Keeley. 2014. The role of defensible space for residential structure protection during wildfires; Testimony of Dr. Michael J. Medler, Past President of The Association for Fire Ecology, founding editor of the journal Fire Ecology, Professor, Department of Environmental Studies, Western Washington University, March 15th public hearing for SB 248-1 and SB 287

² Calkin, D.E., J.D. Cohen, M.A. Finney, M.P. Thompson. 2014. How risk management can prevent future wildfire disasters in the wildland-urban interface. Proc. Nat. Acad. Sci. 111: 746-751; Testimony of Celia Parry, March 15th public hearing for SB 248-1 and SB 287.



Further, COLW believes limiting thinning to the WUI is economically practical because recent studies undermine the efficiency and value of backcountry logging to minimize catastrophic fire events.³ Fuels themselves are not the greatest contributing factor to large disturbance event fires.⁴ Rather, wind and drought impacted by climate change, and the materials of homes in communities in the path of fires, are the major contributing causes—and thinning the backcountry does not reduce these factors.⁵ In fact, several very large, high impact fires in the Oregon Cascades over the past few decades occurred during “compound extreme” weather events, where dry air and strong winds facilitated fire severity, not fuel loads.⁶ Additionally, a 2016 study looked at the fire history in both protected (less logging) and non-protected (higher logging) lands, and found that non-protected (higher logging) areas burned more severely: “burn severity tended to be higher in areas with lower levels of protection status (more intense management)...thus, we rejected the prevailing forest management view that areas with higher protection levels burn most severely during wildfires.”⁷ Even when thinning and treatments are conducted, a study looking at NW wildfires between 2005-2013 found that only 1% of areas treated for fuel reduction encountered actual wildfire, thus putting the utility of these treatments into question since we cannot predict where fire will occur.⁸

With all of these facts presented, COLW believes funding WUI treatments, where we know we have better success protecting communities and structures from wildfire, is a better use of funding than the proposed, broad stroke funding of any and all thinning on public lands. COLW hopes to see SB 1573 explicitly limit the State Forestry Department funding to thin only small, dense trees within the WUI; and must oppose the bill in its current form.

Respectfully,

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³ Law, BE, T Hudiburg, S Luyssaert. 2013. Thinning effects on forest productivity: Consequences of preserving old forests and mitigating impacts of fire and drought; Mitchell, SR, ME Harmon, KEB O’Connell. 2009. Forest fuel reduction alters fire severity and long-term carbon storage in three Pacific Northwest ecosystems

⁴ Working from the Home Outward: Lessons from California for Federal Wildfire Policy, May 5, 2021; Compiled by Douglas Bevington, PhD Forest Program Director, Environment Now

⁵ Id.

⁶ Compound Extremes Drive the Western Oregon Wildfires of September 2020; Abatzoglou, Rupp, O’Neill Sadegh; 22 March 2021; Volume 48, Issue 8; Geophysical Research Letters, Advanced Earth and Space Science

⁷ Does increased forest protection correspond to higher fire severity in frequent-fire forests of the western United States?; 26 Oct 2016, Hanson, DellaSala; EcoSphere Vol. 7, Issue 10

⁸ Schoennagel et al. 2017. Adapt to wildfire in western North American forests as climate changes; Barnett et al. 2016. Beyond fuel treatment effectiveness: characterizing interactions between fire and treatments in the US