



Green Oregon Alliance  
3141 E. Burnside Street  
Portland, Oregon 97215

**Re: Testimony on SB 509**

My name is Ralph Bloemers, I am the Director of Fire Safe Communities for Go Alliance. I have worked on forests, wildfire, land use and development, and with scientific experts for over 20 years. Over the last five years, I worked with a National Geographic and PBS film team to understand the challenges we face with extreme wildfire and communicate to people what we can do to prepare and ensure our homes and communities are safe.

We visited the Insurance Institute for Business & Home Safety facility in South Carolina and the United States Forest Service's Missoula Fire Lab. We filmed scientists and engineers testing how well a fire prepared home survives extreme conditions (**see Exhibit 1**). In 2022, we released *Elemental*, *Reimagine Wildfire* ([ElementalFilm.com](http://ElementalFilm.com)), which presents over 4 decades of experiments, expert knowledge, and first hand experience on the West's most destructive wildfires. In making the film, we visited with firefighters, first responders and fire survivors on the Camp Fire (Paradise), Woolsey fire (Malibu), Marshall Fire (Boulder & Superior Colorado), Santiam Fire (Gates, Mill City and Lyons), Dixie Fire (Greenville), Alameda (Talent & Phoenix) and more.

We learned how these gnarly, extreme and destructive fires burned through these communities, and saw the devastating impact on the communities. The patterns of destruction confirmed what the researchers told us:

- 2/3 of all homes nationwide burn in grasslands and shrublands, not forests. In California, [over 80% of the homes that are lost burn in grasslands or shrublands](#).

- 90% of homes are ignited by burning embers, and those embers are generated by fine materials - duff, litter, grasses, forbs, shrubs.

- in many of those fires, investigators have found totally consumed homes surrounded by green trees and vegetation (**see Exhibit 2**).

- around 3% of fires cause over 95% of the losses, these extreme fires escape control and no amount of vegetation management before they burn will change how they burn or make them easier to control (**see Exhibit 3 & 4**).

In 2020, and 2021, we saw the limits of fire suppression and vegetation management, and incredible loss to our communities. We have known for some time that it is not viable to try to control vegetation over vast landscapes over space and time, and the experts are telling us that it will not have any positive effect in extreme conditions (Dr. Jack Cohen Primer). The highest risk is posed by managed tree plantations, which are uniform, near perfect fuel beds, and those cover nearly 6,800,000 acres of land in Oregon. We can expect this kind of high risk forest management to continue in and around Oregon's communities.

Besides, if we continue to tell people the problem is in the forests, and that the problem can be solved by more forest management - how can we expect them to do the things they need to prepare their homes and communities?

And, if we continue to tell people we just need more firefighting resources and more suppression, they will expect firefighters to come and put wet stuff on the red stuff even in extreme conditions - and they won't be motivated to do their part. Instead they will see losses as a failure of emergency response, or a lack of suppression.

The firefighters and first responders in Paradise told our team that they would have needed EVERY fire truck from all of California in Paradise in less than one hour to have a CHANCE of saving 1/3 of the homes that were lost. They need 5-6 engines per home. That is never going to happen. In Sisters, 5-6 engines and tenders is what they have available - enough for one home. In many small towns in Oregon they have even less.

This is why I deeply appreciate that SB 509 legislation is part of re-defining the challenge that wildfire poses to our communities and the solutions to it — ***as a home ignition problem that can be solved, primarily, by focusing on the home, the defensible space and community around it.***

I appreciate that you are centering the Office of State Fire Marshall in overseeing this problem - as they are the experts in how we can keep homes and communities from burning down. By centering our efforts and investment in and around homes and communities, we will support Oregonians to reduce losses as we see more fire in the future.

I encourage the committee to consider adopting the term “Wildfire Prepared Home” instead of the term “home hardening”. This is the term that IBHS is using and [they are developing a certification program along with it](#). The experts at IBHS have found much of what we need to do to reduce the risk to our house is a weekend project - remove flammable shrubs, plants, bark mulch, etc. within the first 5-6 feet from the house, cover vents or put 1/8 mesh screen and clean your gutters.

The term hardened suggests people have to hire a contractor to do the work, and while in some cases they might (e.g. wood roof), there is a lot each owner can do to self-insure and they can do it right away. They can even enlist their elemental or high-school kid in the effort.

We all know, regardless of our political affiliation or beliefs, that our government has limits on what it can do. Yes, we need legislation to help set the stage, and we need resources to help our most vulnerable populations and community. But most important we need all Oregonians to participate in the program. That takes compelling education that make the wildfire prepared home part of Oregon's culture, that makes it something we all do before fire season comes. Doing so will help our firefighters do all that can during extreme conditions, reduce immeasurable losses and keep our communities safe. Thanks for being part of the transition and shift we need to make to live with more fire on the land.

Sincerely,



Ralph Bloemers  
Director, Fire Safe Communities  
Go Alliance

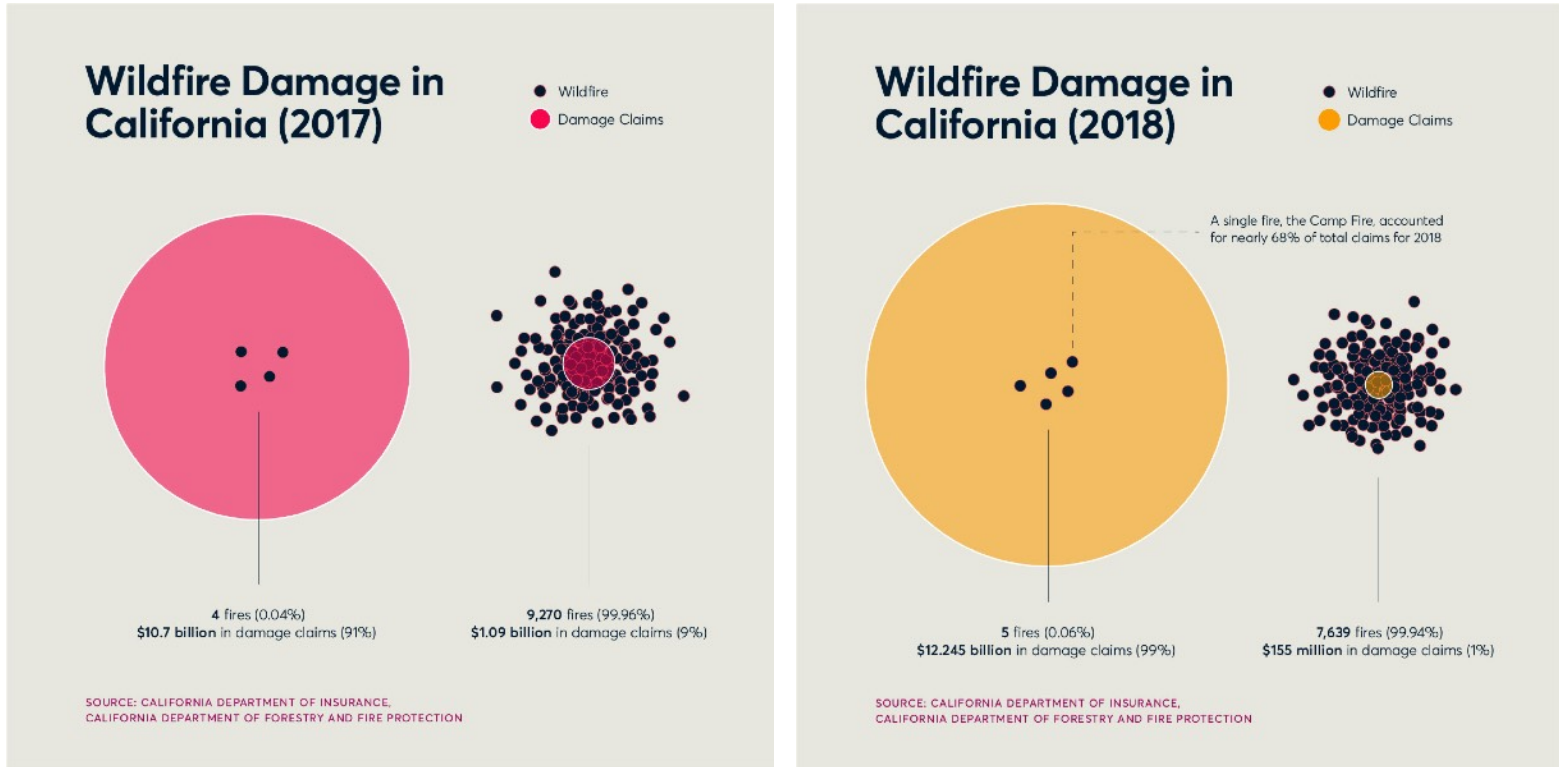
Exhibit 1 - IBHS Facility, South Carolina - The wildfire-prepared side did not ignite and burn.



Exhibit 2 - Gates, Oregon - Santiam Canyon - October 2020. Green trees surrounding total destruction. Firefighters reported that bark mulch adjacent to homes continued to ignited homes for days after flame front moved through the area.

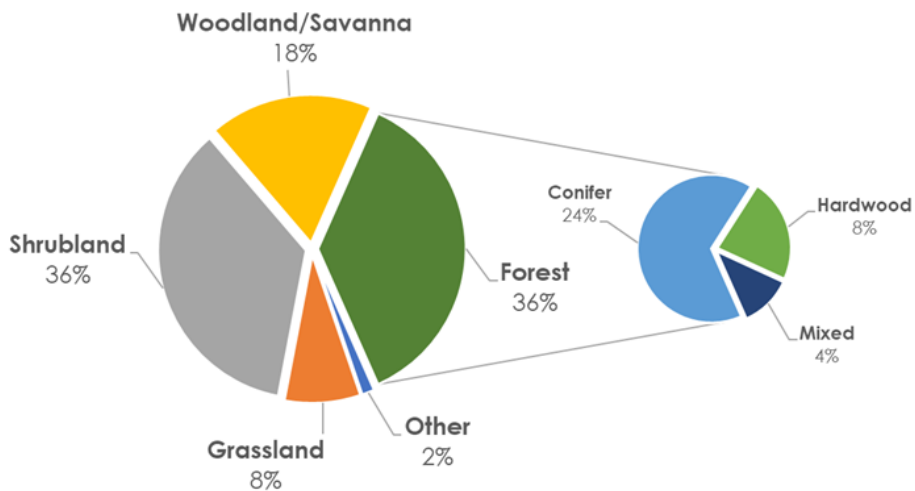


### Exhibit 3 - Wildfire Damage in California - Number of Fires, Percent of Damage Claims



### Exhibit 4 - Total Burned Acreage by Vegetation Type

#### Total Burned Acreage in California (2020) by Vegetation Type



CALVEG dataset crosswalked with the California Wildlife Habitat Relationship classification system used to determine vegetation types within wildfire perimeters (obtained from the National Interagency Fire Center, Sept. 8, 2020). Habitat types then clustered into broader groupings (forest, grassland, etc). Contact Bryant Baker, Los Padres ForestWatch for more information: bryant@lpfw.org.