

March 1, 2023

House Committee on Business & Labor

Steve Nielsen Testimony in Support of HB 3242 and 3243

Chair Holvey and Members of the Committee,

My name is Steve Nielsen and I would like to lend my support of House Bill 3242 and 3243. Thousands of Oregonians were mistreated by greedy insurance companies who refused to cover their customers who suffered losses due to the devastating Santiam Canyon wildfires in 2020. Insurers took advantage of Oregon's current laws, which protect their interests over that of their insureds. This legislation will raise the standards insurance companies must adhere to in response to emergencies and related consumer losses.

I live in Gates with my wife and three sons. We have been in Oregon since 1989, much of that time in the Santiam Canyon. Our neighborhood self-evacuated around 10:30pm on Labor Day evening when fire quickly erupted on Potato Hill to our south and west. We were all prepared in advance due to the east wind forecast and were relieved to get out safely. We remain heartbroken for the five Canyon residents who lost their lives and for their families.

When folks were finally allowed back to assess their property, the personal losses, along with the devastation to the surrounding landscape, were hard to grasp. The beautiful Santiam Canyon was changed for a lifetime, and people are still working to rebuild their lives.

Our home survived, but many of our neighbors lost everything. The fire burned our property, like trees and fences, but our home was not livable due to the severe smoke damage. Our insurance company, Allstate, refused to do needed repairs such as attic insulation replacement, inside painting and sealing cabinets and floors. They also initially refused to clean and/or replace certain contents before reversing course. We dealt with seven different adjusters, many of whom were largely unsympathetic and lacked a sense of urgency.

In addition to denial of needed repairs to our home, Allstate did not help us find temporary living arrangements and they never reimbursed a great deal of additional living expenses. We lived in five different locations in the valley while we continued to struggle with our insurance company. Many people in the Canyon lived in trailers next to their old foundations for over a year.

Allstate's mode of operation is delay, deny, defend. Everything is a "negotiation" and a struggle. It seems their strategy is to wear down insureds in stress and hope they just settle for anything they can get. We refused to settle. We finally hired legal help to give us the muscle we needed to fight the "good hands" people. It brought a great deal of relief not having to deal with Allstate directly any further and was comforting to have an expert looking out for our best interests. It should not have come to that, however. Oregon's current laws make it too easy for insurance companies to mistreat consumers.

As I stated earlier, current laws lack accountability measures to hold insurance companies in check. We simply wanted our home to be restored to pre-loss condition. It was a major struggle. I believe HB 3242 and 3243 will help level the playing field for insurance consumers who depend on their insurance companies in times of crisis. We are counting on you to hold them accountable. Thank you.