



March 29, 2023

TO: Chair Dembrow and Chair Pham and members of the Joint Committee on Ways and Means Subcommittee on Natural Resources

FROM: South Willamette Solutions (Oakridge Air & Southern Willamette Forest Collaborative)

SUBJECT: Funding needed for Oregon Department of Environmental Quality smoke management and wildfire response

Dear Co-Chairs and Committee,

We are disappointed to see that the Governor's recommended budget does not continue critical wildfire response and smoke mitigation programs for Oregon Department of Environmental Quality (ODEQ). We strongly support adding ODEQ wildfire programs and staff, previously funded through SB 762, to the legislative budget. These are important programs that help communities address the growing impacts of wildfire smoke and to become fire-adapted.

The City of Oakridge and community stakeholders have worked together the past two decades to improve air quality and meet the Environmental Protection Agency PM2.5 standards. Wildfire smoke is now the largest PM2.5 source in Oakridge-Westfir, impacting the health and wellbeing of the community which is also a designated Smoke Sensitive Receptor Area (SSRA). The effects of climate change are anticipated to continue this trend. ODEQ community grants helped Oakridge create mitigation programs to address the local need, similar to needs of other rural communities throughout the State.

South Willamette Solutions, a nonprofit based in Oakridge, Oregon, implements the Oakridge Air and the Southern Willamette Forest Collaborative (SWFC) programs. The ODEQ wildfire smoke assistance helped SWS create the Oakridge Community Response [Smoke Safety Plan](#) (SSP), which aims to protect the health of residents and visitors of Oakridge and Westfir.

The primary goal of the SSP is to assist with an exemption from the 1-hour smoke intrusion threshold to accomplish critical prescribed fire treatments in the wildland-urban interface. The secondary goal is to convene a local group of stakeholders collectively known as the Oakridge Air partners to provide year-round smoke messaging and mitigations to protect smoke-vulnerable populations. The outcome and deliverables of this project include a shared community outreach platform, key messages, and coordination for how to disseminate information regarding prescribed fire, smoke, and public health impacts. The CRP has not only streamlined interagency coordination but also formalized a MOU with the Oakridge School District, which established a cleaner air space with backup generators when needed.

ODEQ implementation funds provided capacity to utilize the CRP during the 2021 and 2022 prescribed fire seasons and the 2021 Middle Fork Complex and 2022 Cedar Creek Fire. During the Cedar Creek Fire extended extreme smoke response, Oakridge Air partners provided daily smoke updates to the community through social media and texts in partnership with Lane Regional Air Protection Agency. Oakridge Air also attended Cedar Creek Fire incident command team cooperator meetings and co-presented at community public meetings. Furthermore, the partnership enabled Oakridge Air to distribute over 1000 Oregon Health Authority purifiers to the community and respond to the Oakridge School District's need for support by adding purple air monitors and coordinating the delivery and pickup of industrial purifiers.

The ODEQ community grant funding has been instrumental in helping SWFC reduce the wildfire risk for 34 acres of hazardous fuels reduction within the Oakridge SSRA without relying on prescribed burning. Moreover, during the Cedar Creek Fire evacuation of Oakridge-Westfir on September 9, 2022, the Oakridge Air and SWFC team helped turn the cleaner air spaces into transportation evacuation sites for the public, which would not have been possible without the relationship built through the CRP.

We strongly believe that ODEQ has a critical role in mitigating the impact of wildfire smoke within the state and assisting communities in reducing the risk of wildfires in WUI. Therefore, we urge you to continue to support ODEQ wildfire smoke staffing and community assistance programs, which provide valuable collaboration and resources to communities such as ours.

Regards,



Sarah Altemus-Pope  
Executive Director, South Willamette Solutions  
Coordinator, Southern Willamette Forest Collaborative

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