

ANALYSIS

Item 4: Department of Emergency Management Rowena Debris Management

Analyst: Steve Robbins

Request: Allocate \$2,500,000 General Fund from the special purpose appropriation made to the Emergency Board for the state's natural disaster prevention, preparedness, response and recovery, to the Department of Emergency Management, to offset the costs incurred by Wasco County and local governments for hazardous materials and debris cleanup caused by the 2025 Rowena wildfire.

Analysis: In June 2025, a 3,700-acre fire caused severe damage to the unincorporated community of Rowena, Oregon, destroying 70 homes, vehicles, and other structures that left behind hazardous debris. The damage was spread across federal, state, tribal and private lands in the Columbia Gorge, leaving extensive cleanup requirements for hazardous waste and wildfire ash. While both county and state emergency declarations were made, the costs associated with the fire did not meet the threshold for a federal presidential major disaster declaration. As a result, Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) funds were not available to assist with the costs incurred.

The debris management activities for the fire are organized in two phases: 1) the initial household hazardous waste cleanup completed by the Oregon Department of Environmental Quality on July 18, 2025, and 2) the remaining wildfire ash and debris removal that falls primarily to Wasco County, supported by state funds, in accordance with a signed Intergovernmental Agreement with the Oregon Department of Emergency Management (ODEM).

With no federal resources available or state agencies able to provide support through existing budgets, ODEM is requesting funds be disbursed from the \$150 million special purpose appropriation for the state's natural disaster prevention, preparedness, response and recovery appropriated to the Emergency Board in HB 5006 (2025).

Recommendation: The Legislative Fiscal Office recommends that the Emergency Board allocate \$2,500,000 General Fund from the special purpose appropriation made to the Emergency Board for the state's natural disaster prevention, preparedness, response and recovery, to the Department of Emergency Management, to offset the costs incurred by Wasco County and local governments for hazardous materials and debris cleanup caused by the 2025 Rowena wildfire.

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Oregon Department of Emergency Management
Daniel

Request: Allocate \$2,500,000 from the special purpose appropriation (SPA) made to the Emergency Board for natural disaster prevention, preparedness, response, and recovery to support removal of wildfire related debris from personal property in Wasco County following the Rowena fire in June 2025.

Recommendation: Approve the request.

Discussion: The Oregon Department of Emergency Management (OEM) requests \$2.5 million from the natural disaster prevention, preparedness, response, and recovery SPA for anticipated disaster response and recovery costs related to cleanup of personal property in Wasco County following the Rowena Fire.

In June 2025, the Rowena Fire burned 3,700 acres across federal, state, tribal, and private lands in the Columbia River Gorge. Approximately 70 homes were damaged or destroyed along with various other personal property items, leaving behind widespread hazardous debris. Wasco County declared a local state of emergency on June 18, and Governor Kotek declared a statewide emergency on June 20; however, the incident did not meet the federal threshold for a presidential major disaster declaration, preventing the state from utilizing FEMA assistance.

Cleanup for the Rowena Fire is organized into two phases:

- Phase 1 included removing hazardous household materials from affected properties and was completed on June 18.
- Phase 2 involves removing all remaining ash and debris.

Phase 2 efforts will be completed through a partnership between the state of Oregon and Wasco County, with the county leading local response and the state supplementing financial resources. To prevent further delays in the community's recovery, OEM will administer a \$2.5 million grant to Wasco County on a one-time basis to provide financial and technical support for debris removal operations.

Legal Reference: Allocate \$2,500,000 from the special purpose appropriation made to the Emergency Board by Chapter 628, section 5(1), Oregon Laws 2025 to supplement the appropriation made by Chapter 423, section 1(3), Oregon Laws 2025, for the Oregon Department of Emergency Management Mitigation and Recovery for the 2025-27 biennium.



Oregon

Tina Kotek, Governor

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November 3, 2025

The Honorable Senator Rob Wagner, Co-Chair
The Honorable Representative Julie Fahey, Co-Chair
Joint Emergency Board
900 Court Street NE, H-178
Salem, OR 97301

Dear Co-Chairs:

Nature of the Request

The Oregon Department of Emergency Management (OEM) requests allocation of \$2.5 million General Fund for anticipated disaster response and recovery costs to support removal of wildfire-related debris from personal property in Wasco County following the Rowena fire in June 2025. OEM requests this allocation from the natural disaster prevention, preparedness, response and recovery Special Purpose Appropriation (SPA) made to the Emergency Fund . per Oregon Laws 2025, Chapter 628 (House Bill 5006), Section 5.

Background:

In June 2025, the unincorporated community of Rowena suffered extensive damage from the Rowena Fire, which ignited on June 11 and ultimately burned 3,700 acres across federal, state, tribal, and private lands in the Columbia River Gorge. The wildfire destroyed or damaged approximately 70 homes, numerous vehicles, RVs, and outbuildings, and left behind widespread hazardous debris.

Wasco County declared a local state of emergency on June 18, 2025, followed by a statewide emergency declaration issued by Governor Kotek on June 20, 2025. Despite the severity of the damage, the incident did not meet the federal threshold for a presidential major disaster declaration, leaving the community without FEMA assistance.

To address recovery needs, the OEM plans to administer \$2.5 million to support Wasco County's efforts to clear wildfire debris from residential properties, enabling residents to rebuild. The one-time grant provides financial and technical support for debris removal operations, carried out under

county management. This state–county partnership is designed to mitigate public health and environmental risks, accelerate community recovery, and reinforce the principle that disaster response is led locally, with state resources supplementing—not replacing—county authority.

Debris management activities for the Rowena Fire are being organized into two phases.

Phase #1: Household Hazardous Waste (HHW) Cleanup -- The Oregon Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) was assigned project management of Phase #1. Phase #1 was completed by DEQ on July 18; they have not been reimbursed for their cost.

Phase #2 Wildfire Ash and Debris Removal -- Wasco County will assume primary responsibility for this effort, supported by state funds, in accordance with a signed Intergovernmental Agreement.

Agency Actions:

Wasco County and the State of Oregon declared a state of emergency in response to the devastating impacts of the Rowena Fire, which damaged or destroyed homes, vehicles, and other structures throughout the community. Local recovery efforts have included strong coordination with residents, utility providers, non-profit organizations, and neighboring partners. However, for this rural community, there are insufficient financial resources to support residents and businesses in covering the costs of necessary wildfire debris removal. As a result, the recovery process has been significantly delayed. No state or federal programs are currently available to provide these recovery resources.

Action Requested:

Allocate \$2.5 million from the natural disaster prevention, preparedness, response and recovery SPA made to the Emergency Board to support removal of wildfire related debris from personal property following the Rowena fire in June 2025.

Legislation Affected: Oregon Laws 2025, Chapter 423, Section 1(3); Oregon Laws 2025, Chapter 628, Section 5

Sincerely,



Erin McMahon, Director