

Chair Jama, Vice-Chair Bonham, and members of the Senate Rules Committee:

My name is Kate McMichael. I am a small woodland owner in Lane County. I am offering this written testimony in profound opposition to SB 1051.

In 2019, my wife and I poured our retirement savings into the purchase of 39 acres of healthy forest in Vida. In 2020, it burned, along with many other properties, during the Holiday Farm Fire. If the purchase of a woodland property had encouraged us to undertake the learning curve of transforming our care “about” forests into the web of knowledge and skills involved in actually caring “for” a forest, the fire exponentially steepened that curve. (The fire also propelled us into the public arena of forest policy in Oregon—its own long story—where I also testified in opposition to a bill eerily similar to this one, SB 335, in 2021.)

What does my personal long journey into forest literacy have to do with the appointment of Oregon’s State Forester and/or the qualifications for this position? A lot. Caring about Oregon’s forests isn’t enough for our State Forester—or for the agency he or she leads. Our State Forester needs to be, first and foremost, a forester. Not to be unduly flippant, but that qualification is pretty self-evident in the title itself.

Forests are complex ecosystems; caring for them—especially as our climate changes and stand-replacing disturbance—from fire to ice to wind to drought—becomes more consistent and more catastrophic every year. In the fraught and divided (and divisive) public space that Oregon forest policy currently occupies, even considering robbing the Department of Forestry of forestry-qualified leadership at the top risks the credibility of the Department at best; at worst, it risks the health and resilience of Oregon’s forests. What do Oregon’s forests need? The best science, the best practices, the best tools—and the best (and best-trained) people to wield them. Oregon’s forests—public, state, private—face enough challenges without creating new ones. In the midst of the cacophony of those who care about Oregon’s forests without having the slightest idea of what it means to care for a forest, the Department of Forestry needs leadership with both the skillset—and the credibility—that comes from actual forestry knowledge.

Given that members of the Board of Forestry are already Governor-appointed, it seems a vote of no-confidence in them, as well as a bit redundant, to also make the State Forester a Governor-appointed position. Yes, the Department needs strong and credible leadership—but that leadership needs the credibility of more than a title; that leadership needs forestry knowledge. If the Department also needs strong administrative leadership, that is a different thing—and perhaps a different position. Our forests and forest policy don’t need to be further politicized by turning the State Forester into a political figurehead.

On a very personal level, our experience of struggling to reforest post-fire is part of why I want someone with experience leading ODF. I want to know that the leadership of the Department is someone who knows more than I do, someone who *isn't* “doing it wrong so you don’t have to” (our ironic motto as we look back on these past years of very slow fire recovery and all of the missteps, both ours and those of well-meaning, non-forestry-trained natural resource agencies); someone who knows the back-breaking work of planting seedlings or vegetation management, the heart-swell of bud-break in spring, the heartbreak of trees lost to invasive pests or disease or drought or heat domes; someone who understands forest management and its myriad choices and trade-offs; someone who can see beyond this moment, on forest-time rather than our current culture’s fixation with quick fixes and bumper-sticker solutions. What I don’t want is a political appointee whose primary skillset, forestry-wise, is “loving the forest.” Been there, done that—and know that forestry experience and forestry education is needed in the woods, not just heart.

Please, please, for the sake of Oregon's forests keep our State Forester a forester. Please do not move forward with this iteration of SB 1051.

Thank you.