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Oregon House Passes Legislation to Modernize Emergency Management Systems

House Bill 2927 creates the Oregon Department of Emergency Management to streamline Oregon's emergency response systems

SALEM, OR—Today the House passed House Bill 2927, which would strengthen the state's response to natural disasters and future catastrophic events, following a year of wildfires and ice storms.

The bill will streamline Oregon's response and recovery programs and systems by consolidating them under the new Oregon Department of Emergency Management (ODEM), which will coordinate emergency response year-round.

“This past year has shown that we need to rethink how we prioritize and plan for emergency response,” said Rep. Paul Evans (D-Monmouth), one of the bill's chief sponsors. “Creating a separate agency and giving them the resources they need to focus on this work year-round allows us to be proactive and mitigate the impact of future disasters, like wildfires. We cannot afford to just be responding to disasters, we need to do what we can to get out in front of them.”

The legislation also establishes the Oregon State Fire Marshal (OSFM) as an independent agency, focusing on local investments for improved resiliency and fire defense.

During the 2020 wildfire season, over 1.2 million acres of land were burned, and over 3,000 buildings were destroyed by the fires. The fires were exacerbated by high wind speeds, higher than average temperatures, and reduced rainfall.

“For many in my community, last year's wildfires took everything,” said Rep. David Gomberg (D-Central Coast). “I saw that devastation first-hand. We have a responsibility to the people of Oregon to ensure that we are doing everything in our power to prevent that tragedy from occurring again, not only in future wildfires, but during the Cascadia Subduction Zone

earthquake when that comes. Having all of our emergency response programs under one department will not only improve coordination, it will save lives.”

HB 2927 creates a local government advisory board to ensure that local governments are able to effectively communicate the needs of their communities to ODEM.

“This legislation is a great next step in ensuring that Oregon has the necessary flexibility to respond to emergencies or catastrophic events,” said Rep. Mark Meek (D-Oregon City). “This took a lot of coordination between agencies, stakeholders, and legislators. I am so thankful that we could pass HB 2927 and begin this necessary work.”

“I serve as a firefighter on the front lines of Oregon’s wildfires and have worked for years in disaster planning as an emergency manager. We cannot wait for the next natural disaster to take action,” said Rep. Dacia Grayber (D-Tigard), a chief co-sponsor of the bill. “Having both an independent ODEM and OSFM with adequate funding and staffing is a gamechanger that will give Oregon the flexibility, independence, and nimbleness to be on the leading edge of best response and outcomes.”

HB 2927, which passed with unanimous support, now moves to the Senate for consideration.

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