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Contact: Dru Draper

dru.draper@oregonlegislature.gov

Senate Urges Federal Government To Take Responsibility For Decades of Forest Mismanagement

SALEM, Ore. – Today the Senate approved [SJM 3](#), a memorial calling on the federal government to reimburse property owners for property damage that resulted from a fire that started on mismanaged federal forestlands. The memorial urges Congress to establish a program to give property owners this redress.

The federal government manages 60% of Oregon’s forestland. These federal lands are burning more land at a greater frequency. From 2000 to 2019, 15 of the 16 megafires in Oregon started on federally managed lands. In the last decade, 86% of burned forestland acres have been federal land. United States Forest Service Lands burn at nearly five times the rate of private and state lands.

Under state law, if a spark from your barbeque started a fire on your property and spread to federal land, you would be on the hook for the cost of the damage to federal land. If the fire starts on mismanaged federal forestland and destroys your property, there is no requirement for the federal government to compensate private landowners for damages. SJM 3 brings accountability to the federal government who currently has no incentive to manage forests in a way that will decrease wildfire.

“This legislation recognizes that the federal government’s mismanagement of Oregon forestland has set the conditions for catastrophic wildfires,” Senate Republican Leader Fred Girod (R-Lyons) and author of the legislation said. “Republicans have been fighting for responsible management of our forests for decades. Unfortunately, this legislative effort comes after people have died and beautiful forests have been destroyed because of mismanagement. We must turn our focus to prevention. Without active forest management, catastrophic fires will continue to happen.”

In 2020, wildfires in Oregon burned more than 1.2 million acres. The impact on communities across the state was devastating. More than 5,000 homes and commercial structures were destroyed. The 2020 wildfires threatened lives, businesses, homes, displaced thousands of Oregonians, and blanketed the state in dangerously high smoke levels.

In 2020 alone, the cost to fight the fires was at least \$354 million. The total cost was even higher. FEMA has estimated that the cost of wildfire/wind damage, response, and debris removal is about \$1.15 billion. As of January, Oregon has only received \$32.2 million in FEMA Individual Assistance payments to Oregonians.

“The federal government needs to have some skin in the game when it comes to managing our forests responsibly. Oregonians also need to have redress when bad management takes their homes, property, and livelihoods,” Girod added. “I urge Congress to provide and fund an expedient and efficient system to fully reimburse state and local government property owners and especially private property owners for the damage that results from wildfires that start on federal land,” Girod added.

SJM 3 passed the Senate on a 29-1 vote and now moves to the House of Representatives for consideration.

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