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**ENERGY AND COMMERCE**

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**Congress of the United States**  
**House of Representatives**

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Mr. Jerome Perez  
State Director  
BLM Oregon  
333 S.W. 1<sup>st</sup> Avenue  
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Mr. Kent Connaughton  
Regional Forester  
U.S. Forest Service, Region 6  
P.O. Box 3623  
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Dear Mr. Perez and Mr. Connaughton:

With over 1.2 million acres of range and forest land burned last year, Oregon experienced some of the worst wildfires in its history. Affected rural communities struggle to recover as they face drought and the likelihood of yet another active fire season. I am asking you to build on the lessons learned last year. To that end, below are several themes which developed out of the Long Draw, Miller Homestead, Barry Point, and other fires throughout eastern Oregon in 2012 which should be used as learning opportunities to create better response from our federal agencies.

When drought conditions exist, extinguishing wildfires as quickly as possible to minimize loss of plant cover is important, particularly because of the impacts on livestock operations, timber resources, and wildlife such as sage grouse. The most important management strategy in these incredibly dry conditions is to prevent remaining large tracks of habitat and resources from catastrophically burning. Good communication between federal agencies and local communities can help to accomplish that.

Unfortunately, far too often attempts at communicating and building relationships between local residents and federal agency staff are made in the midst of fighting a fire – a time too emotionally charged to effectively accomplish either goal. Misunderstandings between both parties in the heat of the moment lead to frustrations, disagreements, and often, costly mistakes. Establishing a local community liaison(s) now, prior to the start of fire season, which could be brought in as a resource to enhance communication between the agency, the communities, and private land owners would dramatically increase productive communication.

The liaison would also provide a conduit for information, a way for the agency to provide the local community with information on expected fire behavior, and fire suppression plans. Similarly, it is a clear way for local knowledge, input, and concerns to be included in firefighting decisions – helping improve the effectiveness of suppression efforts. This effort would help reduce the chance for heat-of-the-moment misunderstandings and mistakes on both sides.

We know that we will have fires, and ground permitted for livestock use will be lost. Now is the time when our federal land managers should define and establish additional grazing opportunities for livestock impacted by wildfire. In many cases, these types of grass-bank areas become critical to the long-term viability of a livestock operation, helping them weather an unforeseen natural event. Accomplishing this takes flexibility and clear communications on the part of your agencies working with impacted producers. Greater flexibility and rapid response to livestock producers regarding access to federal lands in fire-affected areas enables them to make important short and long-term business decisions.

With the current national focus regarding the federal budget deficit, there is an important need to reduce federal spending, and private wildland firefighting businesses are providing important best-value resources for wildfire suppression activities. As I understand, private businesses are able to engage in suppression activities at a lower percentage of the cost as compared to other government resources when the total cost of those government resources are taken into account. In addition, private businesses have increased their coverage areas, cut response times, and arrive as self-contained emergency responders. As we work to be as efficient as possible with taxpayer dollars, I hope that you are taking greater advantage of these private businesses' services both for initial and extended attack operations.

In December, a report was completed for Oregon Governor John Kitzhaber and members of the Oregon legislature titled the "National Forest Health Restoration - An Economic Assessment of Forest Restoration on Oregon's Eastside National Forests" which contains some remarkable and telling facts about the current ecological and economic conditions of forest lands and communities in eastern, central and southern Oregon. The study area concluded that approximately 9.2 million acres of federal forest ground in the study area is available for management or, in other words, not excluded by congressional action from forest management activities. A key fact in the Governor's report is that 78 percent of these 9.2 million acres are at significant risk of crown fire, one of the most devastating types of wildfire. The report also highlighted that federal agencies are conducting forest management activities – commercial timber harvest, stewardship contracts, watershed restoration, hand piling, etc. – on only 1.4 percent of the entire 9.2 million acres— just 129,000 acres each year. This is a remarkably small amount of management given the huge need. If more aggressive actions are not taken in the management of our forests, we will continue to lose them to catastrophic wildfire.

The current ecological health of our forests is not good, and the economic picture in Oregon's rural forested communities is just as bad. According to the Oregon Employment Department, of the 14 forested counties I represent, 10 currently face double digit unemployment. These counties are dominated by the public lands you manage. If this wasn't shocking enough, eight of these same counties have had an average poverty level of 14 percent or greater over the last five years. Consider this, Harney County in 1989 had three operating mills and a poverty rate of 10.6 percent. Fast forward to today, the county no longer has a single mill, and the poverty rate has jumped to 18.6 percent. According to the Oregon Department of Education, nearly 60 percent of school children in the county qualify for free and reduced lunch. Harney County has seen the effects of one large catastrophic wildfire after another. Residents have suffered a total loss of their mill infrastructure, while hundreds of thousands of acres of forest surrounding them are in desperate need of treatment, and hundreds of people in the community are in desperate need of good, family wage jobs.

In closing, the current drought conditions across Oregon create the possibility for numerous large wildfires this summer impacting rural communities, timber and range managers, and a large numbers of livestock producers. The concerns in each area of my district will be very similar – the need for more forest management through timber harvest, the need for more jobs and less poverty, the need for quick involvement of landowners and local government officials when disaster strikes, the need for more communication, the need to act quickly to protect habitat and resources, and the need for alternative sources of grazing. With what is likely to be a very active fire season approaching, I trust your federal agencies will consider my thoughts and seek input now and throughout fire session from local communities on improving the effectiveness of fire suppression efforts.

Best regards,



Greg Walden  
U. S. Representative  
Oregon's Second District