

October 21, 2020

The Honorable Jeff Merkley  
313 Hart Senate Office Building  
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Ron Wyden  
221 Dirksen Senate Office Building  
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Maria Cantwell  
511 Hart Senate Office Building  
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Patricia Murray  
173 Russell Senate Office Building  
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Kamala Harris  
112 Hart Senate Office Building  
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Dianne Feinstein  
331 Hart Senate Office Building  
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senators,

Grief lies heavy as smoke on the west coast of the United States. In a short span of time, numerous lives have been lost, thousands of homes have burned and entire communities have vanished from the landscape. The unprecedented toll on California, Oregon and Washington State from intense, climate-driven fires leaves people at all levels of government, from town councils to the U.S. Senate, in shock and sorrow asking: where do we go from here?

This question may have many answers, but one thing is clear: this is a humanitarian crisis and must be addressed as such. The government response must focus on supporting community resiliency first and foremost rather than squander time and resources logging land miles away from homes. Effective wildfire preparedness includes making homes more fire resistant, creating defensible space around structures, and creating smoke shelters and other resources that support our most vulnerable community members in wildfire seasons to come.

To this end, **we encourage you to support S. 2882/H.R. 5091, the Wildfire Defense Act, which has a common sense, community-centered approach to increasing resilience in preparation for future fires.** The Wildfire Defense Act was developed with and for communities whose lives have been severely disrupted by fire. It contains effective solutions to known problems and, if implemented, would ensure that communities are better prepared to meet the fires of the future.

Specifically, the Wildfire Defense Act will invest \$1 billion annually for a variety of community resiliency measures, including establishing guidelines for new Community

Wildfire Defense Plans (CWDP) developed in coordination with community members, first responders, and relevant state agencies. CWDPs will focus on implementing strategies and activities relating to:

- Improving evacuations and access for first responders
- Addressing vulnerable populations, including the elderly, those with disabilities, and the homeless
- Hardening critical infrastructure and homes
- Applying defensible space projects to create a buffer between communities and the forest
- Building local capacity to implement and oversee the plan
- Deploying distributed energy resources like microgrids with battery storage
- Coordinating with existing wildfire plans like a Community Wildfire Protection Plan

The Wildfire Defense Act would provide grants of up to \$250,000 to develop a CWDP and grants of up to \$10 million to implement a CWDP, prioritizing low-income communities that are in a wildfire hazard area and communities recently impacted by a major wildfire. The Wildfire Defense Act would also ensure better coordination between all federal authorities and programs to protect communities from wildfires and improve emergency radio communications across departments and agencies.

In direct contrast to the common sense, community-focused Wildfire Defense Act, S.4431/H.R. 7879, the ill-named Emergency Wildfire and Public Safety Act of 2020, promotes logging national forests many miles from communities while undermining environmental laws and fails to do anything effective to promote public safety.

The Emergency Wildfire and Public Safety Act focuses on logging and fuel breaks as the primary method of managing wildland fire. However, logging trees and removing native vegetation in our public forests will not protect communities from weather-driven fires, especially those fires which are started in and around towns and communities, such as fires this year started by powerlines, accidents, or arson.

As written, the provisions of the Emergency Wildfire and Public Safety Act would not have mitigated the devastating impact of these fires on communities. This is because all of the fires were driven by extreme weather, pushing them to burn through anything that was flammable, including invasive weeds, native grasses, chaparral, forests, crops, as well as homes and other structures. Fire is a natural part of our native western ecosystems and the land will recover, but houses do not regrow. In many places, the most impacted were those

who are already the most vulnerable and, again, directing resources to increase logging does nothing to help these devastated communities recover or adapt.

The Emergency Wildfire and Public Safety Act would also lift the export ban on unprocessed timber from federal lands in California. Not only does this provision have nothing to do with fire management and public safety, allowing the export of raw logs could result in increased logging of biologically valuable, carbon rich, trees, and further increase carbon emissions by shipping whole logs across the ocean. Simply put, S.4431 reads more like a give away to the timber industry than a good faith approach to increasing public safety and community resiliency to fire. It would be disrespectful to all those who have suffered losses from these fires for the government's response to be wholly disconnected from actual fire safety issues, and wholly unable to provide actual solutions.

Two other federal bills include some provisions that could complement the Wildfire Defense Act:

- S.4625, the National Prescribed Fire Act, would provide \$300 million to federal agencies to do prescribed burns on federal, state, and private lands. We strongly support wildland fire use, which unfortunately is not included in this legislation, as well as controlled cultural fire use with Indigenous people and Tribal government on their ancestral lands. However, it is imperative that this bill ensure that prescribed fire is only carried out within appropriate areas but will be most effective if done within the home defense zone so that ecological impacts can be avoided and community safety maximized.
- S. 3684/ H.R. 7264, The 21st Century CCC bill could help fund forest restoration, but its focus on removing trees and vegetation (almost \$4 billion dollars) without proper safeguards to ensure against harm to our forest ecosystems is troubling. A jobs program that is focused on hardening homes (currently only \$100 million out of \$22.8 billion is earmarked in this bill for such work); decommissioning roads that can lead to human ignitions, replacing culverts to protect against erosion and other activities which prioritize community protection while limiting or remedying human impacts to our forests would be a better path forward.

While there are aspects of S. 4625 and 3684/H.R. 7264 we support, we want to underscore that the congressional response needs to first and foremost focus on home defense and community preparedness--not more logging in forests in the backcountry. Bills that create jobs and restore the landscape may complement this work but should not be the sole nor immediate focus of governmental time and resources. Our communities need real solutions now.

It is time for effective measures that address the humanitarian crisis created when fire rips through a town. It is time to support better planning and better emergency responses. It is time to appropriate funding for hardening homes and creating defensible space, for ensuring that our most vulnerable populations can breathe.

2020 is a year of reckoning. With the interrelated crises of the coronavirus pandemic, systemic racism and climate change, we are reckoning with years of government denial, inaction and policies that exacerbated the adverse impacts of all these crises. Moving forward, we cannot rely on approaches that seldom worked in the past and that we have no assurance will work in the changing climate.

This issue hits home for many of us – we are evacuees, our families and friends have lost homes, our offices have burned down. We want to talk with you about the impact of these fires on communities throughout the West Coast and connect you to those at the frontlines of this struggle. These won't be the last fires in the West, but with your leadership, we can prepare and adapt to ensure that all communities are more resilient when the next ones come. We look forward to working with you.

Signed,

Timothy Ingalsbee  
Executive Director  
**Firefighters United for Safety, Ethics,  
and Ecology (FUSEE)**

Brenna Bell  
Policy Coordinator & Staff Attorney  
**Bark**

Dylan Plummer  
Grassroots Organizer  
**Cascadia Wildlands**

Steve Pedery  
Conservation Director  
**Oregon Wild**

Joseph Vaile

Climate Director  
**Klamath-Siskiyou Wildlands Center**

Kayla Soren  
Executive Director  
**International Student Environmental  
Coalition**

Monica Bond  
Principal Scientist  
**Wild Nature Institute**

Adriana Miranda  
Executive Director  
**Causa Oregon**

Penn Diehl  
Communications Team Member

**Sunrise Movement San Diego**

Gary Hughes  
California Policy Monitor

**Biofuelwatch**

Molly Whitney  
Executive Director

**Cascade Forest Conservancy**

Larry Glass  
Executive Director

**Safe Alternatives for our Forest  
Environment &**

Board President

**Northcoast Environmental Center**

Mary Gutierrez  
Director

**Earth Ethics, Inc.**

Judy Todd  
Member

**NatureConnectNW &**

**Great Old Broads for Wilderness**

Mike Garrity  
Executive Director

**Alliance for the Wild Rockies**

Doug Moore  
Executive Director

**Oregon League of Conservation Voters**

Cristina Hubbard  
Executive Director

**Forest Web**

Ann Vileisis  
President

**Kalmiopsis Audubon Society**

Richenda Fairhurst  
Co-chair

**Southwestern Oregon Chapter of The  
Climate Reality Project**

Darilyn Parry Brown  
Executive Director

**Greater Hells Canyon Council**

Cheryl Bruner  
Secretary

**Williams Community Forest Project**

Bianca Ballara  
Southern Oregon Organizer

**Beyond Toxics**

Courtney Kaltenbach  
Co-Director

**University of Oregon Climate Justice  
League**

Pedro Evenezer  
Hub Coordinator

**Sunrise Beaverton**

Morgan Gratz-Weiser  
Legislative Director

**Oregon Environmental Council**

Anthony Diaz  
Co-founder

**Newark Water Coalition**

Deborah Ferrer  
Chairperson

**The Dalles Indivisible**

Gregory Bennett  
Field Biologist

**Siskiyou Research Group**

Elizabeth Gilbert  
Environmental Justice Coordinator

**Florida Student Power Network**

Lluvia Merello  
Energy Justice Organizer

**Oregon Physicians for Social  
Responsibility**

Danny Noonan  
Program Officer – Climate Justice  
**Breach Collective**

Allie Rosenbluth  
Campaigns Director  
**Rogue Climate**

Linda Kelley  
Coordinator  
**350 Eugene**

Felice Kelly  
Organizer  
**350 Portland**