

Date: August 18, 2004

From: Rick Allen, Mayor
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TO: Honorable Greg Walden
Forest and Forests Health Subcommittee

**RE: Aftermath of Catastrophic Events: Restoring and Protection
Communities, Water, Wildlife and Forests - Hearing**

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the broad range of issues that arise from a catastrophic fire from a local government, small business person and summer home land owner perspective. I own several small businesses, own a summer cabin that has been evacuated several times in the past few years and have served as a county commissioner and most recently Mayor of a small town in Oregon. My comments will center around the effects these events have on the tourism industry.

First I want to thank the hard work and courageous effort that the BLM, Forest Service and local fire departments put into the initial attack and suppression of our wildfires. I have seen them in action, they truly work hard at what they do. It's unfortunate to some degree that their skills and abilities are limited by the politics of the day.

It's important to fully understand the far reaching effect a fire has while it's burning and how long it takes to fully recover. While there can be a short term gain when a fire initially starts, it is soon replaced by outside contractors, lost tourism business and a bureaucracy that is slow to respond. In Central Oregon once the news of a large fire spreads the loss of tourism is wide spread. People do not care to recreate in the area with smoke filled valleys and vistas. They simply stay at home or make plans to visit other areas. This loss of tourism can be 50-100 miles in any direction the smoke infiltrates. In recent fires like the Eyerly, B & B or even the Biscuit fires in Southern Oregon, people will simply cancel plans to visit areas affected by the fire.

Unfortunately it's not just during the initial fire emergency. It takes weeks or months for the general public to understand an area has reopened after the fire. From what I have witnessed, a fire that affects an area directly for 5-10 days, the net effect of those impacts can be the entire season. When the Eyerly fire erupted west of Madras three years ago, the balance of the season was dramatically affected. People did not come to the lakes, campgrounds or their summer homes. They simply take the course of least resistance. They expect certainly of what they want to see, places they want to visit and access to their properties.

Another area we need to make sure is at the top of the list for federal land managers are the effects of their action on the following tourist season. It's imperative that all areas are reopened to the public for hiking, camping and road access. This cannot be used as an excuse by any groups to limit access to public lands. Recently I went into the B and B complex fire area and noticed signs that talked about detours, road closures and other items. While some of this is to be expected, it's important to keep it at a minimum. Here is an example (attached photo) of what tourists see more than a year after the fire. Again, I'm not saying this is not necessary, we just need to make sure it's only used where and when absolutely required.

You can see the effect is clearly longer than the two or three weeks a fire burns. A year or two later it effects travel and access to our public lands. The resources necessary to open and clear all access points is important or the economic impacts are exaggerated.

If the logs cannot be salvaged quickly enough to make them marketable and the roads, campgrounds and trails not reopened, the impacts from a catastrophic fire truly are far greater than initially thought. We need to have the laws, policies and institutional mind set in place to respond quickly to the issues on the ground. We are lucky to be in a region where people like Bill Anthony (Sister Ranger), Kristen Bails (Grasslands Ranger), Larry Timchak (Ochoco Forest Supervisor), Baron Bails (BLM District Manager) and Leslie Weldon (Deschutes Forest Supervisor) all understand this. Its hope that you Congressman Walden along with your colleagues can institute a system that allows these fine public stewards to react in the ways they know they need too. None of this is simple, there are many thoughts about how to best handle all of this. There must be a system in place that allows action, you can not be afraid of your shadow. If the logs have rotted on the ground and the small communities near our public lands have suffered, than it's too late. The federal agencies need to manage the forests, sometimes stop looking over their shoulder for every little group that might not like it, just move forward. They remind of somebody drowning when there is a life ring next to them, they get so caught up in what ifs and concern over litigation that nothing moves forward or in my example they just drown.

In closing there is one thought I have wondered about? Have we allowed the pendulum to swing too far so that fires are not being battled anymore. This is a touchy subject, however one I think needs more review, maybe from a "Blue Ribbon Task Force" outside the agencies. I have many personal friends that are fire ground leaders, strike team leaders and incident commanders and I sense some frustration. It's too hot during the day to fight fire, its too dangerous at night and the air attack planes have been grounded or reduced. At some point any fire can become large if nothing is done to prevent it. We have reduced our initial attack fire crews within the Forest Service and BLM. Much of our suppression has gone to private contractors with sketchy records or experience. I have this gut feeling that not enough critical analysis has been done to see if the new policies that have been implemented in the past few years have led to this dramatic increase in catastrophic fires. There are many factors, but

something tells me there is more to this, but not something most people on the inside will discuss due to political correctness, relationships and institutional structure.

I appreciate the opportunity to comment of this topic that is of great interest to the people of Oregon and the west. If you have questions or comments please do not hesitate to contact me. We in rural Oregon are fortunate to have somebody like Congressman Greg Walden working for us.

