

Salem Report

By Representative Brad Witt



During the week of February 11 in Columbia County, snowmelt and nearly five inches of rain combined to create extreme

flooding conditions forcing Rainier Mayor Jerry Cole to declare a State of Emergency for the city. The community response was tremendous, with emergency responders from Columbia and Multnomah counties, along with personnel from the communities of St. Helens, Scappoose, Rainier, Clatskanie, Columbia City, and Vernonia all working on disaster response.

My office reached out to Governor Brown's office, the Oregon Office of Emergency Management, and the Oregon Department of Transportation, and I was very pleased with their support and assistance during the crisis.

But more than that, community organizations and individuals stepped up to help each other. For instance, the Columbia River PUD crews, unable to drive through a slide area, took their gear and traveled on foot to restore power. The Columbia County Fairgrounds opened their stables for horses to get them out of flood prone areas. Students from the Columbia County Education Campus filled sandbags to shore up buildings and properties. These are just a few examples of the many people that reached out to help their neighbors.

Thankfully the flood waters receded. Now recovery begins with damage repair, and some repairs will be more difficult and time consuming than others. For instance, a culvert on Gable Road completely failed, causing significant road damage. Engineers are looking at repairs, the County is allowing local traffic, but through travel on Gable Road will be restricted for at least a month. Rocky Point Road also started developing a significant crack, and Multnomah County Public Works will be assessing the damage to determine the landslide risk before reopening the roadway. Fox Creek in Rainier needs daylighting, an engineering solution, to move higher volumes of water flow.

There is flood damage to public and private property. If you suffered property damage caused by this flooding, you may apply for property tax pro-ration. To qualify, damage must drop the real market value below the assessed value, and the pro-ration amount

is based on the number of months the property is damaged. Calculations are determined by the Columbia County Assessor's office, you can contact them at (503) 397-2240 to speak with an assessor.

Drivers should use caution and be alert for falling trees, landslides, and areas of standing water. Motorists should never drive through standing water, because it is impossible to determine how deep the water is, and what damage may be hidden from sight.

Climate change, and the trend for warmer, dryer summers is putting Oregon Forestlands at risk of more extreme wildfires. Recently my House Natural Resources Committee heard from State Forester Peter Daugherty who shared some dire information.

Half of Oregon's land base, or 30 million acres, is forested. The Oregon Department of Forestry (ODF) provides fire protection on 16 million acres, and over the years, the length of the fire season has been increasing, along with the intensity of the damaging fires.

The ten-year average of fire-fighting costs alone has more than tripled in the past decade, with gross large fire costs rising from \$8 million to over \$35 million. But this is just a fraction of the actual costs to the forest economic sector, higher occurrence of wildfires increases the threat to firefighter safety, loss of forest resources and property, and compromises the economics of working forestland. Wildfire smoke imperils public health and the economy. In 2017, Oregon had a 65 percent increase in unhealthy air quality readings and a loss of over \$50 million in visitor spending.

As State Forester, Daugherty oversees ODF which manages 730,000 acres of Board of Forestry lands to secure the greatest permanent value by providing healthy, productive and sustainable forests that provide a full range of social, economic, and environmental benefits for Oregonians. Lands are managed to provide timber revenue to the state, local schools and communities, and local taxing districts.

The good news is that Oregon State Forests are providing all kinds of increasing benefits for Oregonians. Harvest levels are up 22 percent over the past five-year average, generating nearly \$80 million in revenue distribution to the counties. Use of recreational

opportunities including camping, hunting, hiking, and off-road vehicle use has increased, and there has been a record number of visitors to the Tillamook Forest Center. All improvements were achieved while providing high quality habitat for native fish, and terrestrial species such as owls and marbled murrelets.

ODF continues to work with private and federal forest operators enhancing resource protection and forest restoration. Since the 2017 Legislative Session we have been funding work with federal land managers to increase the pace, scale, and quality of restoration on Oregon's federal forests, creating additional harvest opportunities and putting more Oregonians back to work while generating millions of dollars of revenue. According to State Forester Daugherty, ODF has agreements in place for project work on 10 of the 11 National Forests in Oregon. For these, federal funds are used to pay ODF to implement projects on federal lands which Daugherty says is the future of our Federal Forest Restoration Program; much of the proposed project work would not happen without ODF stepping up to perform the work.

So, while we need to be careful to protect our forestlands, I believe the Department of Forestry is on the right track with their approach to forestland management... protecting Oregonians' \$60 billion dollar forestland assets for a host of social, environmental, and economic benefits for all of us.



reflecting the spirit of our community

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